

Spinning

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“Wednesday,” Judy orients herself. She grabs her running shoes from the shelf. “First stop, the gym.”

It is five a.m. and Judy Sorenson pivots to look in the mirror, corralling her unruly shoulder-length brunette hair with a rubber band and checking that her workout clothes have effectively smoothed out the places that benefit from smoothing. Petite and energetic at 46 (the same age at which her mother died), she could pass for someone much younger. Judy keeps in shape and is vigilant with her diet. It has been fifteen years, though, since she was carded.

She plots out the morning. She will be in the saddle at her spin class by 6:00 then head back home to see the kids off to school. Shower and then to the grocery store. Last night, Seth and Morgan delivered last-minute requests for food items of which they have been aware for days. Seth, the high school senior, who is playing drums in the pit orchestra for the musical, needs to bring treats for the cast party Saturday. (*“Please, Mom, no weird cookies this time. Maybe chocolate chip or something.”*) Her sophomore daughter, Morgan, without checking first, offered to host a “carbo-cram” for the entire JV volleyball team tomorrow. (*“No big deal, Mom! Just boil some water for the noodles. I’ll take care of the rest.”*) “Since when do fifteen-year-olds perform better after gorging on pasta?” Judy had asked. “For God’s sake, pizza, bread, and cold cereal are about all you eat willingly. How can you tell if you play better after stuffing yourself with spaghetti?” Judy envisions her route through the grocery store: organic vegetables, fresh oregano, parsley, whole wheat pasta, a bag of dark chocolate morsels, corn meal for fresh-baked Italian bread, and no-additive tomato sauce. She will back off on the garlic. Half the girls will pick out her fresh chopped peppers and mushrooms.

From the grocery store, she will continue her quest to buy socks for the family, probably ending up at a big-box retailer. She did find an online site that sells handmade artisanal socks made using sustainable, low-impact practices although the socks looked odd and cost \$38 a pair. She feels guilty whenever forced to shop at retail giants that treat their employees like dirt and routinely exploit Third World laborers. “I’m surprised Nicholas Kristof hasn’t written about the sock industry.”

She trots downstairs to the kitchen and flips on the TV. She grabs the container of sandwich-making supplies from the refrigerator and scrounges for lettuce. Four slices of whole grain bread from a family-run bakery, some locally-sourced sandwich spread, low-fat cheese, leftover free-range chicken slices, and pepper rings. She pulls out farmer’s market apples, some baby carrots (*“How do they make those things, anyhow?”*), and grapes from which she has tried to expunge the pesticides. Although she will remind them, she

resigns herself to the knowledge that her kids will not buy skim milk to accompany their lunches.

She is half-way through the sandwich-assembly process when the News Center 11's "*Time to Get Moving, Eddington!*" transitions from a segment plugging a reality show to a live report from an accident scene north of town on Highway 78. A motorcyclist crashed overnight in the storm and the ambulance is taking him to Eddington Memorial. The rider's condition is unknown. Judy perks up at the mention of the hospital where she has worked for fifteen years. She stacks the chicken carefully then pulls out wax paper, wrapping each sandwich neatly, tucking the edges underneath.

A man's voice comes on the TV. She looks up and stares at the screen.

"I saw him lying on the road. I pulled my rig onto the shoulder and ran back to see if I could help."

"Oh, my God!" Judy presses her palms to the countertop and watches Channel 11's drenched, empathic young reporter nod sympathetically as she interviews, "*Hiram Gates, Witness to Motorcycle Accident.*" Judy has not seen her father in almost thirty years and here he is, being interviewed on morning television. "He looks small and unhappy." He clearly does not want to be talking to this reporter.

"Tell us what happened next."

"By the time I got to him, there were cars coming over the hill. I pulled him off the road just as a pickup flew by. It all happened so fast. Next thing I know, lots of cops showed up. Then an ambulance arrived and took him away."

"You're a hero, Mr. Gates! Are you aware of that? What are you going to do now?"

"I'm no hero, Ma'am. I was just trying to help, that's all. I have to take my truck to the distribution center and stop by the hospital."

"Oh," the reporter says. "You want to check on the victim?"

"No, ma'am. My coat. They used my coat to stabilize his neck. I need to pick it up."

The reporter steps away from Hiram, finishes her live feed, and signs off. Judy watches her father fade into the darkness. "No, come back!" she calls out. But the scene shifts back to the studio and then to a commercial.

For years, Judy has waited for her father to take the first step toward some kind of reconciliation. A phone call, a letter, a message sent through a family member, maybe. Anything at all. The silence wore on her. Now, today, he appears. "He looks terrible," she thinks. Old and vulnerable. "Mom would have said this is some kind of sign," she thinks. "Maybe I should reach out to him. Maybe today is the day."

Judy knows that stretch of Highway 78 well and calculates how long it will take him to get from the crash scene to the distribution center then to the hospital; she figures an hour or so. "Well, even though I wasn't supposed to go to work today, it looks like I will." She checks her purse for her photo ID labeled with "Judy S. – Nurse Manager." She finishes assembling the lunches, packs them in recycled paper bags, and sticks them in the refrigerator. She heads back upstairs. She is peeling off her workout clothes as she walks through the bedroom.

Richard is sitting up in bed, reading. "Aren't you going to the gym?"

"I saw my dad on TV. He witnessed a motorcycle accident on 78," she says as she disappears into the bathroom. Richard hops out of bed and follows her.

"What do you mean? Your dad? Really? Are you certain it was him?"

Judy stares at him. "*Of course*, I know it was him. It was weird. Check and see if there's more information."

Richard steps back into the bedroom and flips on the television, scanning through the stations to search for updates. "Nothing yet," he calls out.

She climbs into the shower. "Get the kids ready and out the door, would you? My father said he was heading to Eddington Memorial. I'm going to the hospital to see if I can find him."

"Maybe I should come along," Richard says through the shower curtain. "Are you certain you want to do this?"

She isn't certain. "No. I probably won't find him and I have no idea what will come out of my mouth if I do." She pauses. "I gotta do this. He looked old, Rich. He's not going to live forever. If they ask, tell the kids I had to go to work."

She finishes her shower and dresses in jeans and a sweater. *What do you wear to talk to your father for the first time in twenty-eight years? Maybe we'll end up spending the day together.* She puts on her comfortable shoes. *Maybe he still likes long walks.*

On the drive to the hospital, her fingers drum on the steering wheel and while she rehearses. "Hi, Dad! I missed you! Time to catch up a bit!" *Too bright and sunny.* "Would you like to see pictures of your grandchildren? Morgan looks exactly like Mom." *Too risky.* "Hello, Father. It's me, Judy. Remember? The child you abandoned?" *No, too accusatory.* The more she thinks about it, the more exasperated she becomes about how Hiram had just walked away when her mother, Libby, developed cancer. Taking care of Mom immediately fell to Judy – a big deal for an eighteen-year-old. That experience though – and the chance to feel valued while her mother recovered – was a big part in Judy's choice to go into nursing. Mom had been so proud when Judy graduated. Five years later, Judy's training had

been crucial when the cancer recurred and Judy became part daughter and part palliative care nurse.

By the time she works up the nerve to stop by the waiting room of the emergency department, it is 8:20. Sure enough, there he is, sitting in a plastic chair with his back to her, hands clasped, staring at the floor. Hiram looks even smaller than he did on TV.

In her head, she runs through her speech. "Hiram Gates? Perhaps you have something you need to say." She repeats it to herself as she walks up behind him. She opens her mouth but nothing comes out. She tries again. Nothing.

She rests her hand on his shoulder. She feels the thinness of the skin overlying the bones. She senses the chill working its way through the still damp shirt. She smells the dried blood and the overnight storm on his clothes. Her voice returns.

"Dad?" she says. "I saw you on the news."

She feels him startle and then deflate beneath her hand. She fears he might dissolve.

"Dad?"

She continues. "Can we talk?"

He looks up. His eyes reveal nothing. "I'm picking up my coat and need to meet my ride at the front door soon." He stares at the name badge hanging from her neck. "You work here?"

"Not today. I wanted to see you, Dad. I just came to see you."

He sighs. The woman at the desk calls Hiram over and hands him the coat. It is wet and dirty, speckled with blood. He holds it up, shakes it out, then tucks it under his arm. The woman smiles past Hiram. "Morning, Judy."

"Morning, Lisa."

Hiram looks at Judy. "I guess if you're willing to give me a lift later, I'll tell my ride to take off. Then we can talk."

Judy buys two cups of coffee and they find a corner of the cafeteria. She employs every open-ended interviewing technique she learned in nursing school but Hiram reveals little. He drives a truck for a food company and lives a couple of hours north. Yes, he is sorry about the pain he caused. He doesn't know why he didn't come back. He considered showing up for Libby's funeral. Yes, his folks had told him Judy was a nurse. His grandchildren sound like good kids but, no, he doesn't think meeting them would be a great idea. Maybe someday. Sure, maybe he and Judy could meet again someday. He asks not a

single question about her, her husband, her children, or her life. "Can we be done? I'm tired and need to get home," he says. "It was a long night." They walk to the parking lot.

She gives him a ride to the distribution center. Judy offers to drive him all the way home but he refuses, holding up a weathered hand. "Nah, too far. I'll catch a ride on one of the trucks heading to the processing plant. My car's there." Thanks for the offer. Good to see you. Yes, indeed. Thanks.

He walks away, giving her a small wave as he turns. His shoulders have a familiar hunch and she thinks she notices a limp. He coughs. They had spent all of 45 minutes together.

She checks her phone and decides there is time to get to the 10:00 spin class. Within minutes, she is back in her workout clothes, drowning in the music, lost in concentration, and punishing the bike.

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