

Diane's Choice

by James Lynn Smith

She reached for another anti-anxiety pill. After taking so many different medications, she couldn't remember the names anymore. The bottles on the first row in her medicine cabinet were the most recent prescriptions. That was the way she ordered her life. Never dealing with the old, but piling each layer over the last. The rapid throb of her pulse echoed her panic. It was like falling into in a deep hole of sadness and fear. What do you do when the object of this fear is fear itself? Years ago, she could identify an upsetting problem and plan some way to deal with it. Now the problem had no face. It was an insidious weight pressing the breath out of her. A malevolence that no one else could see or dispel. She struggled alone with the nameless terror in her head.

Diane brought the glass of water to her lips and gulped the pill down. Looking in the mirror, she saw it was time for another dye job. The brown hair showed a little gray near the roots. Still, she knew she was attractive. Middle age had been gentle on her figure and her lips still had some fullness.

But it didn't matter. Even the most homely of women seemed superior to her. She envied their control over moods and how they carried on with life. These women could fulfill daily responsibilities without self-doubt and the terror of feelings that may engulf them at any moment. She, on the other hand, had become afraid of her own mind.

In time her panic subsided, and Diane felt some measure of comfort. There was that dullness, however. And dry mouth. The medicine was a combination of antidepressant and anti-anxiety agents. Side effects were bothersome, but not as

bad as the terrors that woke her in the night.

She stared at an unopened letter on the table from her cousin John and finally tore it open to see the huge salutation “Dear Diane.” She recalled his being exuberant in letters and wished she could be the same way. It was a simple letter, a note actually. He had been on vacation and sent a few lines with a photo of him and his wife in front of a charter boat. She laid it down and remembered their last phone call.

“You’ve got to get out, Diane. What you’re feeling is not abnormal. You’re reluctance to socialize is the very thing that’s creating the fear of being around others. Everybody needs friends.”

“I’ve gone online to see what clubs and activities are around and there isn’t anything that interests me. I don’t have children, so I don’t have that in common with others. I’m divorced, but don’t want to date guys with a charging libido when I feel washed out.”

“How about church? Some singles groups are not only about pairing up.”

“I don’t want someone trying to convert me. I’m not into traditional religion. It makes me feel worse when someone tries to save me. Like I’m some monster that eats babies.”

“You *must* be exaggerating. To me, salvation is about living here and now. Having a reason to hope for something. Sharing life with others.”

“That’s the problem, this hope. Don’t feel it. I used to have friends that I enjoyed being with, but they’re all gone now. Died or married and moved on.”

“There are others to replace them.”

“But they’re not the same. Nothing clicks now.”

Her cousin took a deep breath and sighed. “Diane, your attitude is handicapping you. It seeks the negative, reasons why something won’t work.”

“That’s not it. I have this problem others don’t have. I can sit all day and tell

myself things that are positive, but it doesn't help."

"What do you have to feel depressed about? You've got an income from alimony and a cashed-in insurance policy, and you're not sickly or homeless."

"Something in the emotional part of my brain is scaring the wits out of me. It's not normal, and medicine doesn't help much."

John remained quiet for a while and the only sound she heard was his breathing. Then he continued. "Depression is like a living being that feeds by sucking the joy out of you. It may start out as an uncompromising lifestyle. Everyone needs to be discerning, but eventually it becomes an entity in itself that tells you, 'This or that is not right for you. You feel sad but little or nothing will fix it. Only an earth shattering event can change it. Any suitable friend must be perfect, but you'll never find him.' You have to understand that depression is a great deceiver, telling you the very thing that would dissolve it cannot possibly work. You have to force it sometimes. Get moving, take control of your life and start making decisions. Nothing can bring on apathy and sadness more than being unable to make decisions."

"You don't understand, John. I know you want to help, but what works for you doesn't for me."

"Do you remember when I suggested you write down problems you have on one side of a piece of paper and on the opposite side write down all the reasons why they are not bad? The positive aspects. Have you done it?"

"No, that sort of thing—"

"Case in point. You're habitually discounting the positive. It's a mental behavior that fosters depression. Over time it might even cause a chemical imbalance."

Diane almost felt anger, but mostly disgust at his blaming her thoughts for the feelings she had. There was nothing wrong with her thinking. Somewhere she

read that many famous and important people had severe depressions: Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Edgar Allan Poe, and others. They weren't crazy. She remembered tactfully closing the conversation.

Pulling herself back to the present, she put John's letter aside and went about her bleak, lonely day in the large suburban home.

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She sprang from bed with racing heart as fear coursed through her mind and body. Another night terror. No one could hear or understand her inner scream. It was her personal monster and it was getting worse. Looking at the clock, it was 3:00 AM. Diane knew the remaining dark hours would be spent pacing the floor, trying to read sections of the day-old newspaper or looking at inane, ad-polluted TV. She went to the bathroom to take another anti-anxiety pill. She scrambled for the pill bottle and put a little water in her glass.

Somehow an alert from deep in her gray mindset rose to block the habit. Propping hands on the lavatory counter she leaned over the sink and dropped her head. At first it was a whimper. Then a loud scream ending as a guttural howl erupted from her. She grabbed her glass and threw it forcefully against the tiled wall. Water and glass shards scattered over the floor.

"Take that, monster," she yelled. "Come on, kill me. Take it all. Do your worst." She raised her head and felt the tears course down her face. Long restrained pain poured from her like a burst dam.

After a time, she looked in the mirror, expecting a horrible, defeated face. But she did not see that. What she saw in its place was a strangely beautiful countenance, a tear-stained, legitimate, real person. A hint of long-forgotten feelings mystified her. Memories flashed before her: sprawling in a lounge chair for Saturday morning TV cartoons, glimpses of her mother in the kitchen, her brother locking her briefly in the closet, then letting her out while pretending he

didn't know her, and being cautioned by her over-protective father. Though her feelings at the time were variable, it now seemed those things were meant to be. Part of some inexplicable purpose.

Diane would remember this as the closest she had ever come to a mystic experience. Later, returning to a more usual state of mind, she cleaned up the mess she had made. Somehow she felt tomorrow would be different.

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The next morning, after two hours sleep, Diane trudged to the kitchen and fixed her coffee, cereal, and a microwaved sausage patty to eat with toast. Her mood was gray as usual, though not as much. She thought about her cousin's advice to go on-line *again* and find an event where she might have some social outlet, but it did not feel natural. *Sometimes you have to force it.* Diane mused on what would motivate her. She had read "to get something, act as though you already have it." *How can that work here?* After a few minutes she headed toward her cosmetics ensemble in the bathroom. She hadn't used makeup for days, but now chose to pretend she had a date. An image of her mother came to mind saying, "Wait. Before we go out I've got to get my face out of the jar."

Managing a weak smile, Diane sat on the stool, brought the lighted magnifying mirror toward her and began her art: washing, moisturizing, and application of a light foundation followed by the makeup magic that could change appearance. She started with eyeliner over her brown eyes. *Mother created a thin curved arc over each of her eyes. Gave the impression of surprise.* But Diane barely touched her own brows. They were dark and already had the tapered arch look that was in vogue currently. Finishing with eye shadow, mascara, and blush, she declared the job done and went to her closet where an abundance of seldom worn clothes awaited.

She chose a lightweight sundress, purple with white swirls. Looking in the

dressing mirror confirmed that she might still be able to turn a head.

The dreaded internet search would be time-consuming. *But sometimes you have to force it.* After two hours, Diane saw something that caused her to pause.

The owner of a website dealing with pet exchange services announced a “get-together” that very afternoon at her ranch just outside town. Diane looked over the site blogs and found that activities were not related to the SPCA, but similar. The owner, apparently an eccentric woman, housed animals temporarily for minimum charge, took some in and gave others away. She had a place for horses, cats, canines, and currently kept a recovering goat. There was an associated club with little or no pressure to join.

That suited Diane. If she wasn’t comfortable, she could claim allergies to pet dander or else simply leave with no regrets. What could be disastrous about failing to connect with such a small, informal group?

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The white, two-story house sat on a large, grassy estate. She drove through an open gate and followed a long driveway to a large paved loop in front of the house. Only six cars were parked on it, probably all there would be since Diane was a little late. She mounted the brick steps to the front door and rang the doorbell. During the wait, she began to have misgivings. *What if I feel out of place? Is this really right for me?* She had already decided on a departure tactic: a forgotten appointment suddenly remembered.

The door swung open and a tall, older woman gazed down at Diane. She wore a colorful blouse and faded jeans barely encompassing her bulky hips and thighs. Diane noticed her eyebrows were drawn over skin, not real brows. Her hair was an orange, medium length chaos. She wore bright red lipstick, not entirely well placed.

“Well, who is this?” she asked with a southwestern drawl and wide grin. “A

visitor to our little meeting today?”

“My name is Diane. I saw your website invitation and was curious. Hope you don’t mind.”

“No, darling, not at all. Come in. My, you are a pretty one. I like that sundress.”

“Thank you. I don’t get out much so it’s had little wear.” Diane stepped into the Foyer.

“I’m Doreen. Come meet our club members and a few freeloaders. We’re having iced tea and punch. The punch contains wine, and you’re welcome to add more. I personally like it a bit stiff. We also have chips and dip.” She led Diane into a large dining room. Chairs had been set back against the wall so guests could mingle around the table. Doreen introduced Diane to the other women and a few men. “Darling, if you can’t remember names, just make something up. Like Butch Miller here, just call him fat boy, and you’ve got his attention.”

Butch grinned. “Good to meet you, Diane.” He then scooped a hefty serving of dip on a large corn chip and shoved it into his mouth.

Doreen dinged her fork against a glass for attention. “Okay folks, it’s time to sit down and get our little business meeting going before I have my fifth libation and zonk out. Will the secretary read the minutes, please?”

After the treasurer’s report, the remainder of the meeting was efficient and amicable, dealing with inexpensive sources for pet food, medicines, and suburban sites where animal shelters were begging for relief. Several members opted to take a kitten or dog and Doreen said she could board a pony for one of the members while away on a long trip.

When the meeting concluded, Diane saw some members leaving while others gathered around the punch bowl and wine. Although not interacting, she didn’t feel her usual compulsion to leave. *I want to know more about Doreen.*

Soon, remaining members and guests were heading for the front door, Butch Miller being the last to leave the table. On the way to the Foyer to say her goodbyes, Doreen passed by Diane. “Stay a little while, darling. Let’s chat.”

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Leading Diane outside, Doreen gave a quick tour of her barn, a small kennel, and cages where she kept two cats to keep them from being harmed by those free to roam about. Pens for the goat and sundry animals finished the rounds. “Hang on while I give these horses some feed. Mostly sweetened oats and corn, but very little because I want them to eat pasture grass like their ancestors.”

“Do you ride the horses?”

“Lands no. Only board ‘em. Used to ride horseback, but now I’d split my britches trying to get on. That’s not a scene an older woman wants on display.”

Diane bit her lip. “Are all your club members as interested in animals as you?”

“Not all, but yes some. Butch Miller’s wife even sleeps with a pot bellied pig.”

“She keeps swine as pets?”

“No, I’m talking about Butch.”

Diane chortled unexpectedly, feeling unrealized tension in her chest relax. She followed as Doreen put away the feed bucket and led the way back to the rear patio.

Doreen indicated a chair and both women sat. “My husband passed on years ago. We were both fond of animals so I still fool with ‘em.” She looked out over the pastures and buildings behind her house. “Paul was a good man. We had two boys, now grown and gone. I’m mostly alone in this big house, so I made a club out of my hobby so others can enjoy.”

“You stay alone at night?”

“Yes indeed. I have a guard dog I let of the kennel at night and sleep with a 38 nearby. Nobody wants a piece of me, that’s for sure.”

“There must be a lot to do here. I noticed feedbags and saddles in the barn. You move those things around?”

“Oh, no, sweetie. I don’t want hemorrhoids hanging to my knees. I’ve got a boy who does the heavy lifting. Young man’s name is Willy. Works a few days a week. The saddles are from days gone by. I keep ‘em because we might have a group of kids come for a ride again. We let ones with permission ride while Willy leads the pony around the corral. It’s a simple way to give a little joy.” She looked at Diane and tilted her head. “Tell me about yourself. What’s your story?”

“My story is boring. Middle class, college, married late to a physician from a wealthy family. Big mistake. I didn’t fit in with the social life expected of doctor’s wives. And, early on, my gynecologist told me I couldn’t have children. My husband wanted children. By the time medicine progressed to where there was hope, we’d drifted apart. Later we divorced and he married a nurse who is now providing him with the heirs he wanted.” Diane’s voice quavered. “Like you, I live alone but I’ve been bothered by...” Her eyes moistened.

“It’s okay, Honey. I don’t cave in at the sight of a tear or two. Might add a few of my own. What troubles you?”

“It’s silly to my cousin, John, but serious to me. I have this sadness I can’t shake, and panic attacks. I wake up with my heart pounding and feel like the walls are closing in on me. I’m afraid to commit to anything because an attack might happen while someone is depending on me. I can’t stand that thought.”

“Sounds familiar to me, Darling.”

“Have you—”

“Yes, still have ‘em sometimes. You need to know that failure at a commitment is a part of success. You need to fall flat on your face a few times to

prove you can survive it. Then fear can't overpower you."

"John believes the way I think is negative and rigid, that it leads to depression and fear."

"That can be true, honey, but men don't know how to talk to a woman. They should give examples and show they feel what you're saying. Paul would try to put my problems in a formula. If logic didn't work, he'd tune out."

"Sounds like my physician husband."

"Most men are handicapped, dear. They've got two parts to their brain, one empathy, one logic. But they're separated by a sliver that only takes commands from their dick. So the connection's rough going either way."

Diane suppressed a smile, but she knew Doreen saw it.

"Whatever my thoughts, I don't mince words. If Emily Post etiquette were law, I'd be in jail or confined to a zoo."

Diane felt interesting connections forming deep inside. A golden friendship might develop with Doreen, but no telling what could come from this woman's mouth. She looked at her wristwatch. "It's late. I'm sure I've overstayed my welcome."

"Not at all, darling. Get out some. Experiment with things that don't click right away. Go ahead and let yourself screw up a few times, and give me a call if you want to talk."

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The next morning Diane finished breakfast and sat at her PC. As before, she found several web sites facilitating dates and match making for young and middle aged alike. Many volunteer organizations with mixed membership formed sports, health goals, or political agendas. *Where to start?* She realized that planning should be her immediate goal. *First, what do I want?* Realizing she had no idea of what she wanted beyond feeling better, she stood and said aloud to the empty

room, “I need to want something, to have a purpose.” She’d been safe and secure for a long time and there was no reason to risk discomfort. Yet that blessing resulted in apathy and then depression. *Maybe that’s why the night terrors come. An impetus to make some change in my life.*

Diane went outside and strolled to the park adjacent to her home. Thoughts long suppressed under the blanket of depression began to appear. She felt guilty for an easy life without contributing to it. Looking upward into the canopy of trees, she saw the sun shimmering through as a gentle wind rustled the leaves. The beams radiated a sense of assurance that brought a smile to her face. *I have to make a decision. To choose life or waste away comfortably.*

When she entered her house, misgivings assailed her again. Then she remembered something. *You need to fall flat on your face a few times to prove you can survive it.*

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Weeks later, Doreen’s phone rang. “Hello, Doreen speaking.”

“This is Diane. I was at your house when—”

“Yes I remember. So how’re things going? Are you feeling better?”

“It’s up and down, but I’ve decided to work at it. I visited a book discussion group and was surprised to see three men there. Only one was married. The women know a lot more about literature than I do. I was assigned to report on the next book before we discuss it, and I am petrified. What if I sound like an ignoramus?”

“So? They’re elected to congress all the time. Where’s this meeting going to be?”

“It’s a room in the public library.”

“It always helps to go early and look the room over. Something about making the venue familiar helps. Also seeing people trickle in will beat coming to a roomful all at once.”

“That’s a good idea.” Diane then thought about her reluctance to let people see she was nervous.

As though reading her mind, Doreen said, “Now do you remember how successful people get over fear of failure?”

“Yes.” *They fall flat on their face a few times to prove they can survive it.*

“If things go okay, you’re ahead of the game. If not, you’re building confidence for the bigger payoff later.”

“You’ve been a big help, Doreen. I’ve never talked to anyone I just met about this kind of thing.”

“You’ll find others in time. I’ve got to go now. A group’s coming over and Butch is among them. He’ll suck up the last of the goodies I lay out. I think I’ll put sawdust and Pine-Sol in the bottom layer of dip.”

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The book report was an acceptable delivery with only a slight stumble or two. Diane received compliments on her willingness to contribute, being so new to the group. When the discussion group was over she rose to walk out and heard her name called.

One of the men approached her. “Diane, I’m Fred. I’m glad to see you active in the group. Not all new members are.”

“Thank you.” Diane noticed his coal black hair was tinged with white in the temples. His face had regular features except for the eyes. They were among the bluest she had ever seen. She guessed he was of average height for a male, but appeared exceptionally fit for a man approaching his middle years.

He opened the exit door for her but did not move on, as though he wanted to say something more.

Uh-oh, am I ready for this? She felt a knot in her stomach.

“I wonder if you would care to join me for a drink or maybe a cup of java?”

There's a café next door.”

Is he a predator, attracted to naive, socially awkward women, or am I paranoid? He seems nice. She remembered her way out if things became awkward: an urgent appointment suddenly remembered. “That would be nice.”

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When they were seated and ordered their coffee, Fred said, “I’ve only been in the discussion group for a few months myself. Do you like to read?”

“Well, yes and no. I take the newspaper and visit a bookstore from time to time, but don’t read as much as I did in my young single days.”

“I don’t see a ring now. Divorced?”

She nodded and looked away. *How much should I say?*

“I don’t mean to pry, just trying to gauge my boundaries. People have personal space and that’s okay with me.”

Maybe he’s not a dork. Or good at seeming he’s not. “Do you read much?”

“Not a lot of adult material. The discussion group motivates me to do that.”

“Why the emphasis ‘adult’ material?”

When coffee was served, he poured in a little cream and said, “I read children’s books to my daughter. She’s in elementary school and has dyslexia. Aside from formal assignments, I’ll read part of a story and then have her read a part of it too. I’m really her step dad. My wife, who was younger, passed away after an auto accident on her way to work three years ago.”

“That must have been awful for you two. I’m sorry.”

“We have managed. My daughter struggles, but with both a school specialist in learning disabilities and my work with her at home, she’s getting by.”

Diane had a sudden recollection of her pre-marriage teaching days, memories smothered for years under layers of negativity and forgetfulness. Aside from financial restraints, it was a time when she excelled. She loved the job and

had respect from both parents and children. Some students she especially helped were underprivileged and she was as proud of their successes as they were.

Looking at Fred, she asked, “Do *you* have a lot of time for this reading? What is your employment?”

“I’m an architect. Came up through architectural engineering but realized I was more into working with people than design details. Later became section manager but right now I’m between employments.”

Oh great, he’s laid off or, worse, fired. “That must be an interesting field. Do you have job prospects?”

“Working on it. We’re okay because I’ve saved up for times like this. No picnic, though. Looking for good work is a full time job.”

She felt a flicker of disappointment with the notion of impermanence. If Fred turned out to be a suitable person in her life, he may move away for work. “I can imagine how that is, even though I’m okay financially.” *Damn, did I say too much?* “However its continuance is fragile, and if I were without it, don’t know what I would do. For years I have been useless and moping.”

“I’m sure that’s not entirely true. I’m a pretty good judge of character and I think your moods are hiding recollections of competence and great experiences. For whatever reason, you’re beating yourself down.”

Another memory surfaced: her parents struggling with illness and finances yet not eligible for social security. Their small home was run down. Without being asked, she gladly joined her brother in sending money each month and spent her vacations repairing and painting. She remembered her father thanking her somberly as her mother’s eyes glistened with tears. How could she possibly have come to believe herself a useless nonentity? The mutually unsatisfying life with her husband and the arduous details of divorce had distorted her self-image. *Time to straighten up.* Looking at Fred she said, “I hear you. Thanks for that viewpoint.”

Diane stood and extended her hand. “It’s been good talking with you. I need to go now.”

He held her hand until she tugged slightly then he let go. “Would you like to continue our chat in the future? Maybe you could give me your—”

“It’s rather soon for that.” She turned away and began to leave. Then she paused and faced him again. *What the hell.* “On second thought...” She took his pen and scribbled her phone number on a napkin. “Bye now.”

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When she arrived home, Diane had a relapse. In nervous confusion, she put her purse in the refrigerator and dropped her keys in her shoe. *What am I doing? I’ve invited all kinds of uncertainty into my life.*

Picking up the phone, she called Doreen. By the eighth ring, the image of an unconscious, elderly woman laying supine on the floor popped in her head. Then that of the woman in a comfortable chair, sighing and wishing she would not be disturbed by other’s problems. By the fourteenth ring, she started to hang up.

“Hello, Doreen speaking.” She sounded out of breath.

“This is Diane. Did I wake you?”

“I was coming in from the barn and my machine couldn’t record the call. Sometimes I unplug the message recorder to use the outlet for my mixer and forget to turn it on again. You sound a bit upset. Something wrong?”

“I’m beside myself. I went to the book discussion group and stumbled through the report. Afterwards I met this man and we went to a nearby cafe...”

Diane told the details of her time with Fred and giving him her phone number.

“It’s just likely he’s attracted to you,” Doreen said. “He’s not a serial killer because he wanted your phone number. If you want to know if he’s legit, you can go online and get information. Some, like a resume, would be free. You may have to pay for details, like arrest records and the like.”

“That thought hasn’t occurred to me. I’m so befuddled I confuse myself by being confident and assertive one minute and cringing with dread the next.”

“It’s okay, darling. It’ll all settle out. What did you think while talking to him?”

“At first I figured he’d soon make a libido-driven move on me.”

“Dear, it’s like Robin Williams said: ‘God gave men a brain and a penis with only enough blood to operate one at a time.’”

“But he didn’t act untoward at all. Didn’t say I was pretty or a turn-on, all that stuff. He acted interested in *me*, the person.”

“Stereotypes aside, some men are just lonely, like us. Do that online search I mentioned and then call me back. Feeling better now?”

“Yes, calmer. You have a way of putting things in perspective.”

“At my age the only perspective my *things* have is straight down. But my blouse hangs low, so no problem.”

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Diane did due diligence online. She found a resume of Fred that confirmed his claims to be an architect. A thumbnail photo matched Fred’s appearance. She also found references to technical papers in his name. She looked up phrases with “dyslexia” and Fred’s name, getting blogs by him on the subject regarding his daughter. He appeared to be legit.

Now what about his financial state? She looked at his posted resume and it had few periods of unemployment. *Can I trust this information?* Realizing her thoughts were getting neurotic, she chastised herself at being so persnickety. What if someone were looking her up online? Wouldn’t they have some unanswered questions too? *At some point I have to trust my instincts.*

By bedtime Diane decided she was getting ahead of herself. She needed time for more emotional stability and finesse at real living again.

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Weeks went by and she thought about setting goals. Fred's dyslexic daughter came to mind and she coupled it with her memories of the classroom with underprivileged children.

One evening, she made a decision. She felt drawn to helping kids with learning disabilities because they were also underprivileged. It was both a contribution and something she could relate to. *This feels right. I could take some children on field trips out to Doreen's for horseback riding.* She let herself fantasize for a while.

However in researching and planning the next day, she was overwhelmed. She would need specialized training and certification. It might take two years to be fully employed, provided there was an opening then.

That night she dreamed she was in the classroom and a policeman came in.

"Ms. Diane Hughes? I need to see your certification."

"I don't have it with me. I was hired by the principal. She should have records."

"Who is the principal?"

Diane couldn't remember and stood there with open mouth.

"Ms. Hughes, you say you are the teacher. Then teach. I'll observe."

Her voice faltered and she couldn't remember what material she was going to cover. The children looked at her, their eyes cold and unfeeling.

Diane awoke shaking. *I'm falling flat on my face before starting.* She stayed up for two more hours before getting back to sleep.

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Doreen answered the phone. "Hello Diane."

"You knew who this was?"

"I don't have ESP, I just got one of those newfangled phones that has caller

ID. My grandson gave it to me as a birthday present and helped set it up. What's happening?"

"I've decided to go back to work and do something with handicapped children. But the time and laborious preparation required is giving me second thoughts."

"For a minute forget the difficulty angle. If there were none, would you truly want to do this?"

"With no difficulty, definitely. More than any other activity I can think of."

"Then do it. There is difficulty in everything. What's pushing you to do this all at once?"

"What do you mean?"

"You act as though it has to be done in a whisk or it won't get done. When someone can't see all the future issues in an important preparation, naturally they want it to zoom by to get the uncertainty over with. But that only adds to the distress."

"Yes, that's the way I feel. How does 'someone' handle that?"

"You accept that there will be snags and issues you haven't even considered yet. Let that be part of the challenge. Also life is *now*, not just the future job. Calm down, start taking steps and be proud you faced them. Think about the job as though you already have it. With your determination, you will."

"Doreen, you're my rock."

"That's what my husband used to say to me. I thought it was a compliment 'til I heard him yell that to our donkey." She took a deep breath. "By the way, dear, how's it going with your man friend at the library?"

"Fred? We've talked on the phone and at the discussions a few times, but no date. I've been too busy with my job research."

"You don't have to postpone living until everything is ideal. If he's a decent

sort, he'll give you the space, and hopefully the urge, to feel alive again. Darling, this is the way you find out if someone is right for you. He's not a book where you can read the last chapter to see what'll happen."

"Do you think I can judge *this* book by his cover? He hasn't been overly gushy with compliments, but the look in his eyes seems inviting."

"That look is good. You don't want someone phony. I remember my dating days where this one fella thought he could overcome me with doggerel. The guy turned my stomach saying my lips were like a cherry and my honey pot was the sweet nectar he lusted for. I said to him, 'That sounds better'n the real thing, bubba. So enjoy the fantasy, 'cause that s *all* you're gonna get.'"

Diane laughed. "You married Paul. What was his approach?"

"Paul had a more appealing come-on. He said I had an 'aura of mature sexuality.' Now imagine this young girl hearing those words. Lord, that fired up my chitlins, and I was his from that day forward."

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Diane began to realize the optimum life meant dealing with unfamiliar issues. She accepted dates with Fred but wondered if she grew closer to him, whether he would expect her to help his daughter, Alice, overcome dyslexia. She had met the little girl and felt a genuine connection, but in the near term had to stay focused on her career preparation.

There was yet another factor. She was strongly attracted to Fred, physically. Those stirrings had been dormant so long they now seemed primitive and overpowering. In his embrace, she felt a titillation spread downward like a liquid, warming the body that wanted what her mind questioned.

In time, she succumbed.

She plumped her pillow and rolled over to face him. "We need to discuss something, Fred."

“Like?”

“I’ve arrived at having a goal in life, and you are a part of my doing it. Enrolling in the university for a master’s in special education will commit me to a lot of work. Yet I feel I should be helping you deal with your daughter’s problem.”

He looked at her with his piercing blue eyes and cracked a slight one-sided smile. “I understand that you’ve found your *raison d’etre*. Alice likes you, but you’re under no obligation to—”

“I don’t think of it as obligation. The truth is I want to do it but don’t know where I would find the time.”

“I see how that would bother you. Let me think on this with you. Maybe it’s not such a show stopper. What’s the name of the dean at the university?”

“It’s Dr. Carl Singer.” She looked away. *Does he intend to say something about my situation?* Despite knowing Fred meant well, Diane felt concern whether it would help or hinder.

*

During the next week, Diane visited two local middle schools. One was where Fred’s daughter attended and another farther out in the county. She was encouraged by teachers to take the courses and get certified. Soon she filled out the necessary paperwork for enrollment in the master’s program for special education. Classes were still two weeks away and, having time, she decided to visit Doreen in person, rather than phoning.

“What a nice surprise,” Doreen drawled, a little slower than usual. “Come in, darling. We can visit in the garden room. Fans keep it cool there. I was about to make some spiced tea and spike it up with a little hooch. You like some?”

“That would be nice, but go easy on the spiking. I’m the sole designated driver.”

“We won’t go that wild with it. I have some cookies too, biscuits the British

call ‘em.” Doreen first led the way into the kitchen so Diane could stand observantly while water was heated, poured into cups, and followed by spoonfuls of an instant spiced tea mix. “Now here comes the interesting part.” She poured less than a finger of bourbon in her cup and not that much in Diane’s.

Diane noticed a slight tremor in Doreen’s hands. *Maybe that’s the reason her makeup is askew.* Taking her cup and the plate of cookies, she followed Doreen’s nod toward the garden room.

After sitting in the high-back wicker chairs around the coffee table, the women took sips from their cups.

“So tell me about...Fred, is it?” Doreen said. She put her cup on the coffee table slowly as if tedious effort were required.

“He’s wonderful. The most understanding and exciting man I’ve ever known. But these real-world issues intrude. He’s between jobs for one. Also I wonder if I have enough energy to deal with Fred’s needs, mainly his daughter’s dyslexia.”

Doreen pulled a tissue to her nose and sneezed. “Excuse the allergies. Used to visit my cousin on the Greyhound when Paul was out of town. Often I would get home before him and be out back when he arrived. Paul said he could always tell I was home by the little piles of wadded up tissues lying around. I told him I had political sinuses because they were always runnin’ for something.”

“If I find your sinuses on the next ballot, I’ll vote for them.”

Doreen chuckled, paused, then sneezed again followed by wheezing.

“Are you okay? Can I get something for you?”

After a slow inhalation, Doreen said, “Be all right in a minute. Can’t breathe deep and a sneeze takes my strength away.”

Diane’s brows knitted as she regarded her. *She’s not well. Here I’m airing my problems and she’s coping with something worse.*

“Well back to your story,” Doreen said. “From what you’ve said, Fred is a capable man. He’ll get the right job. And about his daughter, take it a day at the time. Your courses will teach you how to help kids like her. And maybe a few encouraging words could help her with the drills you teach her. Kids learn to practice on their own with a little boost to their morale.”

The older woman appeared to have recovered, but Diane felt she should avoid further discussion on her own issues. She inquired instead about Doreen’s sons and their families, learning there was much mutual love and admiration. After an hour and half, she said her goodbyes and drove off—a feeling of concern in the back of her mind.

*

Two days later Diane’s doorbell rang and she opened the front door. “Oh, it’s you, Fred. Come on in.”

“Hope this isn’t a bad time. Can we talk?”

“Yes, I was just putting dishes away. What is it?”

“Good news—if you like a possible arrangement, that is.”

“Let’s go sit on the living room sofa. Tell me about it.”

“I talked with Dean Singer at the university. He’s really nice. I explained your situation and he called in a faculty advisor from the School of Education. They worked out a scenario you might follow.”

Feeling a thumping in her chest, she said, “Go on.”

“Normally the last phase of your master’s program is practical work with a special needs child and documenting progress—equivalent to practice teaching for the bachelor’s. But because of your prior experience, it’s permissible to move it up earlier in the curriculum, even extend its length and get extra credits. I asked if my daughter could be selected as the child and they said yes, if she was enrolled as a special needs student, which she is.”

Diane scooted over and threw her arms around him. “That’s wonderful news,” she said, laughing. “What a relief. I get to do both things I wanted.”

“You mean a lot to me, Diane. I want to stay near you but I’m having difficulty getting a job position in this area. It may be some time yet.”

The edge of a dark cloud moved into her mind. She remembered thinking about this before jumping into the relationship. Now it appeared to be a real concern.

*

Diane became deeply involved in her master’s program at the university. Much she could do on-line, but for certain courses, she had to commute to the nearby campus. With her workload, she finally realized that she hadn’t talked to Fred for more than two weeks. The time since contact with Doreen had been even greater. She forced herself to reserve some time one night and call Fred.

After many rings the phone connected to the answering machine. She said, “This is Diane. I’ve not heard from you. Call me.” She hung up. *I guess it’s a bad time or he’s not there.*

Returning to her desk, she sensed a foreboding. The article she had been reading now seemed a page of meaningless characters. She stood and paced. *Probably nothing to be concerned about, but I’m calling again.* She punched “Redial.” Again there was no answer for several rings. However, this time she was connected.

After a long pause a somber voice said, “This is Fred.”

“Hey there, handsome, it’s been a while since we talked.”

Once more, the pause. “Alice is here. In her room...”

Diane noticed a listless quality and slight slur to his speech. “Fred, are you okay?”

“I’m sorry, Diane.” He took a breath. “It’s finally eating at me. The

economy is the pits for my local job search. My savings dwindle and I suck at projecting a rosy outlook for you and Alice.”

Fear washed over Diane. Fred and Doreen had been symbols of support. Now he was crashing and Doreen was ill. It was like being halfway over a ravine on a tightrope and seeing a badly frayed spot. After a moment she said, “It’s understandable you feel that way, Fred. Maybe we should talk when you feel better.”

After the call, Diane knew she was too dependent on the optimism of others, especially adults. With her students, a great boost, but adults were a more serious reflection of reality. She eschewed troubled people and was uncomfortable around moody individuals.

Her closing remarks to Fred had been “...we should talk when you feel better.” Moving to the bathroom mirror, she glared at her image. “Could I have been any more useless and self-absorbed? Just because he’s human I don’t have to avoid him.” She went to her desk, picked up a book and flung it against the wall.

Grabbing the phone, Diane hit redial and plopped in her desk chair. Several rings passed and the answering machine beeped. “Fred, you listen to me. You have too much going for you to wallow in despair like I have. Read the newspaper. Does it look like things never change? Opportunity moves around, but you don’t have to wait ‘til it grabs you. If you have to move somewhere else, do it. I admire you and somehow we can manage to keep what we have alive until we end up in the same place. It’s not simple, I know, but I have faith in us. Don’t feel depressed because it can’t be perfect for me. This gal may be tougher than either of us thought.”

Diane continued to pump words into the answering machine, saying she thought he was gorgeous, how she appreciated his help with the dean and her curriculum, and that it was admirable he was willing to assist Alice with voluntary mutual reading. “Also, Fred, this woman loves you whether the *world* gives you

what you deserve or not.” She heard a slight pop from the receiving end.

Then a voice, tight with emotion. “Diane...I can’t begin to say how much your words mean to me. A black cloud has been smothering me, and you’re pointing to an opening.” He swallowed. “I love you too, more than anything. My concern was how you would take my moving.”

“I’ve stated my attitude on that.”

“It could be complicated.”

“I know. Just continue with your job search, here and elsewhere. You’ve got what it takes.”

“Knowing you feel confidence lets the light of hope shine again.” He laughed.

“What is it?”

“The lady who needed my encouragement is now propping up *my* morale.”

*

Another week passed before Diane’s attempted calls to Doreen were answered.

An unfamiliar voice said, “Hello, Doreen Johnson’s residence.”

“Hi, is Doreen there?” She heard the answerer take a long breath, as if weary.

“This is Doreen’s son. We had her memorial service yesterday.”

“Memorial? My god, I had no idea. Diane felt dizzy. She had been so busy and, not knowing Doreen’s other friends or family, there was no reason they should have informed her. A wave of sadness passed through her as she pictured the face of her elderly friend, makeup awry, unkempt orange hair and that hint of a smile after one of her quips. “What happened?”

“Mom didn’t tell most folks, but she had an inoperable brain tumor. Wasn’t to the stage of extreme pain and disability yet, but it was coming. And she did have

trouble sleeping for other medical reasons. A few members of our family think she took too many pills, maybe on purpose. There was no clear evidence either way.”

“Was there an autopsy?”

“No reason. Her doctor knows the family and is familiar with her condition. He signed the death certificate.”

“Who found her?”

“A young man who works here part time found her still in bed one afternoon early last week. She had given him a key so he could come into the kitchen to make his lunch. He knew something was wrong after calling out and hearing no answer.

“This was a shock to us,” he continued. “We expected her decline, even to death, but thought she would ride it out longer. There were still things we wanted to say and do for—” His voice faltered.

Diane waited a moment then said, “Your mother told me how much she appreciated things you and your brother did for her. She was very proud of you. Whatever caused this to happen, it played out the way she intended. She was tough and full of love. Doreen didn’t want to be pitied.”

“She talked to you about us? You saw her strong character too?”

“Yes to both.”

“That perspective has a lot of comfort in it. Thanks so much for—By the way, I’m Dwayne; what’s your name?”

“Diane.”

“We found a very short letter that she wrote but hadn’t put in an envelope yet. It was addressed to a Diane, most likely you.”

“Will you read it, please?”

“Sure.” The phone went silent while he located the letter. Then he returned. “Still there? Here’s what it says: ‘My dear friend Diane, When we first met, you

were uncertain and needy. But over the months we've been in touch, you became a person of determination and spirit. I'm glad I could be a little part of that. You moved out of your comfort zone and found the effort worthwhile. You set your course on transformation. I feel things will work out for you, Fred, and his little girl. I said you once seemed needy. Don't be surprised if now people consider you the strong person who's needed. With loving thoughts, Doreen.”

Diane had the strange sensation that a timeless torch of vital influence had been handed down. She was becoming the type of person she had been drawn to. Doreen had played a positive role in a mystical process built into existence. Tears rolled down Diane's cheeks as she realized that process was love. And it had power.

She asked Dwayne to mail the note and wished his family well.

*

Feeling a need to share, Diane drove to Fred's house rather than call him. She rang the doorbell and prepared to wait, concerned that she was interrupting some activity.

Instead, he instantly opened the door as if expecting her, a big smile on his face.

“Fred, I—”

“Somehow I anticipated you would come or call. I've got good news.”

“Tell me.”

“I have a job. With the same company I resigned from.”

“Why? How does this happen? Wasn't it an economic issue?”

“Not altogether, a while ago the parent holding company wanted to increase profits and thought implanting a tough-ass supervisor in my department was the answer. His position more or less engulfed part of mine, and I could see him maneuvering to discredit me and get me fired. I resigned before he could smudge

my reputation. Afterwards our company saw this guy demoralizing our department and causing resignations of quality people. The local bigwigs had a powwow with the parent company and the super was recalled. Not knowing this, I bypassed HR and contacted our CEO to see if any other position had come open in the company. He instantly offered to rehire me as section manager, with a raise.”

“Fred, I’m so happy for you. We need to celebrate—now. Tomorrow I have a bucket load of work to do.”

*

That night Fred, Diane and Alice went to a fine restaurant.

Diane looked at Alice. “I can’t wait until I can work with you officially. Soon my coursework will reach the point where I learn techniques to connect with creative people like you. That’s so you can see things like we do, and then I want you to write me a story.”

“Can it be about anything?” Alice asked.

“Sure, what do you want to write?”

“A little bunny named Alice wondered into a forest. She saw the fairy godmother who told her that Princess Diane had been locked in a tower. And only the white knight could save her.”

“Ooh. And what is his name?”

“Sir Daddy,” Alice answered, giggling.

Fred raised his brows and looked at Diane. “Speech coming direct from her imagination is more coherent than that based on something she just read. On the second part, we’ve got our work cut out for us.”

“Glad to help,” Diane said. “Now let me tell you about my friend, Doreen...”

*

Four months later, Diane and Fred tied the knot. Alice was ecstatic. A

genuine family unit was formed and Diane was too busy for depression or anxiety. Of course, things were not perfect, but the caring glue of determination and commitment carried them over rough spots so they could see the genuine blessings they shared together.

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