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table. It too showed 11:10. She stretched under the down comforter before emerging for a quick visit to the bathroom and a trip to the kitchen alcove to serve Noodle a tiny can of Feline Feast and some fresh water. The view from the window next to her tiny dining table showed a courtyard worthy of a postcard photo with sparkling snow and ice-trimmed shrubs. No one had tromped through to the parking lot yet that morning. Carolina looked at the clock on the microwave – 11:10. Though the details didn't add up, she speculated a brief power outage in the previous night's storm.

During national morning talk shows, the TV scrolled local weather and news of schools and businesses that would open later or even be closed for the day. Carolina knew the mall would be "business as usual." When the New York announcer proclaimed 7:45 a.m., Carolina moved to reset the microwave to 6:45, Central Time. As soon as she pressed "Enter," the display showed 11:10. She shook her head and returned to the still-warm comforter. She reached for her clock radio and reset the time. Rolling over, she did not see it return to the insistent 11:10.

The next time Carolina awoke, pale winter light illuminated the parchment blinds. When she stretched, her empty stomach pulled toward her backbone. She remembered she had not eaten since lunch the day before. She thought about pancakes, or an omelet, and wondered if she still had time for a big breakfast and a couple of errands on the way to work. She turned to the radio and saw 11:10, again. She growled at the stubborn appliance, rousing Noodle from his nap on the

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neighboring pillow. Quick-dial to her assistant manager was number four on her phone.

“Lisa, what time is it anyway? All my clocks are screwed up. Maybe the storm or something.”

“Hey, Carolina. Yeah, it’s crazy out there. It took me forty-five minutes to get here this morning when it’s usually a fifteen-minute drive. The streets are like ice, but at least the salt trucks have been out. The loop is actually less slick than the side streets.”

“Yeah, but what time is it? I’m supposed to come in this afternoon and I don’t know how much time I’ve got left here.”

“Oh, you’re fine. It’s only 10:30. School kids are already starting to show up to cruise the mall, though. Any time they get a free day from school.... Listen! The awfulest thing happened! When I finally got here this morning, there was an ambulance and some police cars in the south lot, near where we usually park. I had to go to the west lot. I asked one of the security guards about it when he walked by a few minutes ago.”

While Lisa talked, Carolina stared, unfocused, at her clock radio, but as she listened, the display seemed to grow brighter and burn into her consciousness. She knew the significance of the numbers before Lisa finished her story.

“Some old guy just crumpled over in the parking lot and froze to death in the storm. The manager of the pretzel place got here first and called 911. They don’t even know who he is yet.”

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“What time?”

“It’s about 10:35. You’ve got plenty of time. You should allow an extra fifteen minutes or so, just in case, but it’s okay if you don’t get here right at 1:00.”

“No, I mean what time did he...did the guy...? Do they know...?”

“Well, it had to be late. I mean nobody saw him until this morning. He wasn’t there when you left, right?”

“I didn’t see him.” Carolina’s voice was husky. She clicked “End.” Let Lisa think the signal had been lost.

“What was I supposed to do?” Carolina asked over and over, her voice rising in volume with the anguish. She gathered the down comforter around her body with desperate clawing gestures. The green numbers stared at her relentlessly from the clock radio: 11:10.

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## Time for a Change

The wind ruffled her hair. Patricia thought it was a breeze from an oscillating fan in the corner of the workout room, but then she heard the sweet, robust call of a Carolina wren. What had been a stationary bicycle in the women's fitness center, Feminine Form, was whizzing down Highway 171 under Patricia's pedal power. She rode past WalMart and the mobile home sales lot, too shocked to feel frightened by the amazing occurrence. The breeze was just enough to keep her from sweating and the light was amazing on the spring shades of green beside the road. She almost reached the Keithville post office before she decided she'd better figure out how to return. With an instinctive, quick back-pedal motion she was in the workout space at Feminine Form again, pumping her stationary bike like a Tour de France cyclist.

Patricia usually tried to arrive for her workout about ten in the morning. The early group would be gone, or going, and the lunch break patrons wouldn't be in yet. She liked it that way. Patricia wasn't antisocial, exactly. If there were other women working out who wanted to talk, she could chit-chat, make polite noises and smile at appropriate times. She was careful to greet the attendant and other customers when she arrived and to say goodbye when she left. She made a point of playing the weekly games to earn "bonus bucks" and

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generally fit in as much as she could without really getting to know anyone.

Patricia expected other women probably commented about how quiet and focused she was, if anyone else happened to be in the workout room when she left. The idea of herself “focused” on exercise was funny to Patricia. She hated it. She’d been working out in some format or other for the last five years, but never learned to like it. Never had any “burst of energy” or “felt better” because of it. She did it because she was almost sixty and knew she needed some sort of regular physical activity to maintain strength and flexibility, especially now that she was retired and not walking around a classroom all day. Patricia knew she was a little overweight but had no interest in dieting. The only thing she liked about exercise was feeling proud of herself for doing it regularly when she hated it so much. She’d rather sit with a book and a cup of coffee.

Instead, Patricia drove five minutes to Feminine Form three times a week and made the rounds of the various exercise machines and the springy dance boards spaced in between them for aerobic activity. She was well aware that regular walking of the half-mile distance, instead of driving, would be a no-cost activity and probably yield at least as good returns in physical fitness as the time she spent at Feminine Form. But the bank-drafted membership was part of what pulled her up off the couch to exercise, so it was worth it. And she often combined trips to Feminine Form with shopping or recycling, taking clothes to the cleaners or getting a haircut, so there wasn’t much additional fuel cost.

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It was a particularly beautiful late-April Wednesday in Shreveport when Patricia began her cycling adventures. The sky was Wedgewood blue with only a few cameo clouds. The azaleas were spent but oaks and maples had leafed out to join the evergreen pines and magnolias. Even drastically pruned crape myrtles were bushing out with greenery. Patricia drove to Feminine Form with windows down to enjoy the morning air.

Only Marlena was in the workout room, hula-hooping for her cool-down activity and gossiping with Bonnie, the attendant. She was gone before Patricia finished a quarter of her first rotation on the machines. Some women liked the attendant to stand around and chat while they exercised if there was no one else to talk to, but Bonnie had figured out Patricia didn't really care for that. She was glad to be able to finish some paperwork, make a few phone calls and play computer solitaire while Patricia worked her way around the circle of machines, moving from the leg press to the rower to the bicep/tricep apparatus, and so on, whenever the perky recorded voice called through the music, "It's time for a change!"

Another thing Patricia liked about arriving when no one else was working out was avoiding the awkwardness of crowding up on another woman if she decided to skip a certain machine on the circuit, or of someone else crowding up on her if she wanted to take longer at a particular station. The stationary bike was one she liked to linger on. Sometimes she closed her eyes and pedaled through several rounds of the voice announcing, "It's time for a change."

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And so, that beautiful April morning, Patricia cycled right out of Feminine Form and south on Highway 171 on the heretofore-stationary bike. When she reversed pedaling and found herself back in the workout room, Patricia felt as if she had just awakened from a vivid dream, that slightly disoriented state when you try to act as if you haven't been asleep at all, as if you are quite alert, thank you, to anyone who might be watching. But no one was watching. Bonnie was on the phone with a prospective client and didn't even glance at Patricia.

"It's time for a change," the voice announced, and for once Patricia agreed. She moved from the stationary bike to the cushioned dance pad to her left and started doing jumping jacks. She wondered how many "times for a change" she had pedaled through while tripping down Highway 171. Patricia tried to remember when she had first arrived and was surprised to discover she'd only been on the premises fifteen minutes. She managed to complete two more circuits of the workout equipment, but skipped the stationary bike when she came to it, both times.

On the way home, Patricia concentrated on what she would make for Jonathan's supper and how many loads of laundry she still needed to do that afternoon. She didn't have any frame of reference for thinking about what had happened to her that morning, except maybe the biblical story of Philip, who went running on an errand and then was suddenly at his destination. But she hadn't been planning to go south on Highway 171, and couldn't imagine why she would have suddenly been tooling along there on a bicycle, never mind how

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she could have been traveling on a stationary bike. It was safer to treat it as a daydream.

Friday, Patricia didn't go to Feminine Form. She wasn't avoiding the location, just marshaling her energy for mowing the lawn and pruning some shrubbery. Yard work was plenty of exercise. The following Monday, she returned to her routine and arrived at Feminine Form at 10:10. Once again, by the time she was half-way through her first circuit, she was the only customer.

When Patricia came to the stationary bike, she blew out a sharp breath, as if steeling herself for a difficult task, and hopped on. She pedaled slowly at first, then picked up speed. She didn't close her eyes for a bit, but after the cheerful voice assured her, "It's time for a change," two times, she began to relax against the back support and closed her eyes.

Almost immediately, Patricia noticed a change in the quality of light through her eyelids. Honeysuckle scented the air and the wind rushed past. She pedaled on. When she opened her eyes, she was once again traveling south on Highway 171. What was it about that road? She didn't even know anyone who lived out that way.

Patricia kept traveling past the point she had returned from on her first trip out. Spring is a sublime season in northwest Louisiana and she decided just to enjoy the day. Since the situation was quite surreal, Patricia didn't concern herself with other traffic and was frankly not paying much attention when she approached the blinking light near Mansfield School. She noted afterward that the scene really did unfold in

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slow motion, as she had heard accident victims say, and as if she were watching it all from outside herself, perhaps from the top of the hill that descends toward the traffic light when approaching from the north, the school on the southeast corner of the intersection and a convenience store on the southwest.

A young mother, carrying one child on her hip and holding the hand of a preschooler, was about to cross the highway from KwikMart to the school. They stood a few yards south of the actual intersection. An eighteen wheeler whizzed past the pedestrians, never slowing for the blinking yellow light. The mother then started across the four-lane highway, hitching the baby up on her hip and pulling the reluctant older child along. Because of the truck, she had not seen the SUV that pulled up from the east and that driver had not seen her. He was intent on entering the highway as quickly as possible and barely paused for his blinking red light and the passing truck.

Patricia approached the intersection faster than she could have pedaled on a regular bike. As the SUV turned south, already picking up speed, Patricia was also entering the intersection. The driver jerked his steering wheel hard left and ran onto the median, brakes screeching. Patricia was pretty sure he was cursing her and her bicycle as well. The pedestrians froze for a moment in the middle of the far right lane while the near collision played out in front of them. The mother pushed her preschooler back to the gravel shoulder and collapsed with him and the baby on the ground. They screamed and shook, with dry eyes and twisted mouths of belated fear.

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Patricia wondered later why she didn't start braking sooner, in reflexive self-protection, but she understood that her role had been to deflect the SUV from its trajectory of collision with the family crossing the highway. And, when she finally did reverse motion, she was instantly removed from the scene and back in the workout room at Feminine Form, pedaling backward with such urgency her legs ached.

This time, Bonnie noticed Patricia's wide eyes and asked, "Are you okay? Have you been checking your pulse rate?"

Patricia tried to smile. "It's time for a change," she whispered. "I think I'd better not do three circuits today."

This time, Patricia could not dismiss her cycling adventure as a daydream. It had been too intense. She replayed the incident in her mind throughout the afternoon. She couldn't make sense of it, but she tried to decide what to do next. Should she avoid the stationary bike whenever she visited Feminine Form? Were any of the other machines likely to start behaving strangely? She scanned the classified section of *The Times* to see if anyone had a three wheeled bike for sale – one with big, fat tires and a deep basket. Maybe she should just ride through the neighborhood for exercise.

Both options seemed safe but somehow unsatisfying to Patricia. She could scarcely admit to herself that a part of her, just a small part, thought it might be fun to see where the erstwhile-stationary bike might take her next time. Did the bike only travel down Highway 171? Would it always encounter the same

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near-accident? Or was this her chance to be a superhero, arriving in the nick of time at scenes around the area, preventing various tragedies? The thought intrigued Patricia enough that she spent some time imagining news stories that would ensue, and made serious plans to upgrade her workout clothing.

Patricia didn't think there would be photographs of her in the media. It had seemed very clear that her presence on Highway 171 was needed only for the seconds necessary to divert the SUV from its original course. But she thought it would be a good idea to look her best while she was out and about, so people at the scene would have something stylish, and memorable, to describe in interviews when they recalled the mysterious woman on a bicycle who appeared out of nowhere and just as quickly disappeared.

When Patricia was finally able to leave this line of fantasy, another thought occurred to her. What about the first time, when she back-pedaled out of the scene before anything happened? Had there been an accident that day, that she was supposed to avert but didn't because she abandoned a cosmic assignment? If she didn't return to Feminine Form and her adventures on the stationary bike, would people die that she was supposed to save? Patricia's breathing quickened. She whispered I didn't sign up for this.

Patricia didn't sleep well Monday night. Jonathan had a difficult project going on at work and she didn't bother him with the strange story of her trip down Highway 171. She puttered in the yard on Tuesday. In the afternoon, she called her son Mitchell on the pretext

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of needing help programming the digital video recorder. She thought she might be able to talk to him about the cycling incident, but she could tell from his voice he was preoccupied with something at work, too, so she didn't pursue the topic. She went to bed early Tuesday night and slept better than she expected to.

By Wednesday morning, Patricia had decided to return to Feminine Form, work the circuit fearlessly and take whatever adventure the stationary bike might offer. She felt her hero complex had abated but she took care with her hair and even put on a little mascara. She chose a new pink tee shirt to wear with her old workout pants.

Bonnie noticed the new shirt immediately and remarked how well it complimented Patricia's coloring. They began a conversation about hair and makeup that lasted longer than their usual pleasantries. Patricia worked her way through an entire circuit, including the stationary bike, while talking with Bonnie. A client Patricia hadn't met before came in half-way through that first round and they included her in the discussion, which had progressed to some skin-care issues that were not strictly cosmetic. Bonnie had some scarring on her legs related to an old auto accident and Patricia promised to bring her some information about a product which could minimize scar tissue. The remainder of her workout, Patricia spent in getting-to-know-you conversation with the new client. There was no time to close her eyes during turns on the bike.

Friday, Patricia brought the pamphlet on Scarase to Feminine Form. Bonnie thanked her but was working

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on end-of-the-month reports and not as inclined to chat as on Wednesday. Three other women Patricia knew slightly were working out and discussing family trips to Disney World, but all finished their workouts and left before Patricia reached the stationary bike for the third time in her routine.

The music accompanying the insistent calls of “It’s time for a change” that day was odd arrangements of classic rock songs, not Patricia’s favorite track. If only they had some classical, instrumental tracks, she thought, so much more pleasant. She wasn’t really expecting much in the way of adventure when she sat down at the stationary bike. It was late in her routine, the other clients’ vacation stories were stuck in her head and the music was distracting. But, sure enough, she began to pedal rapidly, closed her eyes, and soon felt a change in the air around her. It was already hot – one of those unseasonable spring days that reminds you how miserable you’re going to be in July, so you’d better make the most of any mild days left.

Patricia was interested to note she was not headed south on Highway 171 today. Instead, the bicycle was taking her east, along the industrial loop, toward a large city park. It had not occurred to her on previous trips out to wonder if she had any control over steering the bicycle. She decided to experiment a bit and quickly discovered she had no input in the movement of the bicycle other than providing leg power. The bicycle turned into the park near the tennis center and started down a path that meandered through the wooded acreage. There were a few runners on the path but Patricia didn’t see any other cyclists. She reduced the

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intensity of her pedaling whenever she came up behind a runner. The bicycle slowed at her touch and carefully steered itself around the person.

The apex of the park path provided a view down across most of the grounds, including a children's play area. As in the incident with the eighteen-wheeler on Highway 171, from the hilltop view Patricia felt the world slowing down as she took in the scene below and ahead of her. The swimming pool, which would be crowded in another month, once school was out, wasn't open. Along the pool area fence, a young woman chased after a large black dog which trailed its leash and flapped its red tongue happily, like a laughing cartoon animal. The swings and slide were empty but a toddler played alone in the gravel around and under them. Frowning, Patricia looked for the child's absent caregiver. When a man got out of a non-descript car parked near the playground, Patricia thought for a second perhaps he was the child's grandfather. But the way he looked around as he moved toward the child roused a feeling of dread in Patricia. He was looking to see if anyone were watching him. And he was looking toward the woman running after the dog – the child's mother, Patricia understood in a flash.

The bicycle had been moving deliberately while Patricia assessed the situation. She increased the speed of her pedaling as soon as she saw where the bicycle wanted to take her. She whooshed down the path toward the play area, past the man's car with its engine idling and door opened wide. The bicycle ran between the man and the boxed gravel pit around the swings where the little girl, Patricia saw now it was a

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little girl, played. The man stepped back just in time to avoid being knocked off his feet. Patricia stared hard at him as she rode past. She wanted him to know I see you; I'm memorizing your face.

Patricia kept pedaling and the bike kept moving, past the play area. She tried again to steer the bike, to turn around and make another pass, to make sure the man wasn't still moving toward the child. She certainly wasn't ready to go back to Feminine Form. As the bicycle continued down the park path, ready to start a second lap, Patricia was able to turn and look over her shoulder. The man had returned to his car and closed the door. The woman was running to the playground behind her leashed dog. Patricia sighed and slowed her pedaling before making the deliberate back-pedal she knew would take her back to the workout room.

Another client had started her workout while Patricia was averting an abduction at the park. The new woman was staring at her when she opened her eyes. "Boy, you really ride that thing hard!"

"You'll never know," Patricia responded with a wink. She completed her routine with the prescribed stretches and left Feminine Form humming "You Ain't Nothin' but a Hound Dog." On the way home she mused about her adventures and realized there would never be any media coverage. The people she helped would mostly never even know they had been helped. She could live with that.

The next time Patricia arrived for a workout, Bonnie was talking with one of the older clients, Millie, whom Patricia saw in the workout room once or twice a month.

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Bonnie was commiserating with Millie over difficulties in coordinating car repairs and a doctor's appointment. "I'd take you myself," Bonnie was saying, "if I weren't stuck here all day."

"What do you need?" Patricia heard herself asking. It was not like her to ask personal questions, even of people she knew well, never mind those who were only nodding acquaintances. Her decision to be open to "assignments" on the mysterious stationary bike seemed to have made her more open in other situations the past few days. Why, she even had a bit of conversation with the clerk at the dry cleaners and helped a man looking for soup mixes in the grocery store. Patricia offered to meet Millie that afternoon, follow her to the mechanic's shop, then take her to the doctor's office.

"You'd do that for me?" Millie asked. "Oh, you're a real life saver!"

Patricia finished her workout but she was so busy thinking about arranging afternoon errands around her favor to Millie that she forgot about riding out to save the world when she came to the stationary bike. Another day.

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# Doxology

Christopher's ears were from the same template as those of HRH, the Prince of Wales. He knew this, of course, from the taunts of other kids at school. The fierce love of his mother kept the comments from damaging him too deeply, but if he could have seen himself seated at the old pump organ, pedaling air through the bellows while he played the hymns his mother loved, he might have wondered himself why he did not take flight on the nearly-flapping wings attached to his head. And then, Christopher's older brothers all had the same sort of ears, in varying degrees of cantilever. It was all their father had left them.

Well, the pump organ came from that side of the family, too, and the musical talent. Great-grandmother Swift had been the organist at her country church for over forty years when the congregation finally disbanded. Two remaining deacons oversaw the sale of pews and hymnals and odd lots of Sunday School chairs. They allowed Ardella Swift to buy the organ for a widow's mite, in honor of her long years of service, and because almost no one wanted a pump organ anymore, anyway.

The organ took up a place of pride in Ardella's parlor and she often hosted hymn sings for her neighbors on summer Sunday evenings. Ardella's son, Homer,

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Christopher's grandfather, was already gone from home when she acquired the organ. After the War, he worked as a traveling salesman and took his music with him in a harmonica case. He finally married and set up housekeeping with his bride Annie a few years before Ardella died, so there was a home for the organ to go to.

Homer and Annie raised three children, but lost a fourth to polio. They gave all the children piano lessons with Mrs. Swanson, who wasn't thrilled about their having only the old pump organ to practice on. Even so, it was clear the Swift children had musical talent. Some folks joked about their big ears – said that was the reason all three children could pick out songs “by ear” from an early age. Harmon, the oldest, could play along with songs on the radio by the time he was ten or twelve.

Harmon was Christopher's father. Harmon and Betsy married young and had two boys, Jeff and Michael, right away. After long days in the steel plant, in the evenings Harmon made music on a guitar, a fiddle, his father's old harmonica, and a stand-up bass when he could find one. He taught the boys to play guitar and harmonica and the family enjoyed making music together. Betsy sang. Jeff and Michael were in high school band when Harmon's reserve unit was called to Vietnam. Christopher was conceived in Hawaii, where Betsy met Harmon for R&R the month before his death in an incident of “friendly fire,” a few weeks before the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam.

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