

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 intensity of her pedaling whenever she came up behind a runner. The bicycle slowed 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 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 return her 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. 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?

Doxology

Christopher's ears were like small satellite dishes. He knew this from the taunts of 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 leather bellows while he played the hymns his mother loved, he might have wondered why his flapping ears did not propel him to flight. Christopher's two older brothers had the same sort of ears, in varying degrees of cantilever. It was almost all their father had left them.

The pump organ came from his father's 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.

The rosewood organ, taller than an upright piano but not as wide, took up a place of pride in Ardella's parlor and she often hosted hymn sings for her neighbors on summer Sunday evenings. She kept the rosewood cabinet

dusted, the leather bellows oiled, and the mirror over the keyboard polished until the day she died and the organ went to her son Homer and his bride Annie.

Homer and Annie gave all their 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 Swifts had musical talent. Some folks joked about their big ears – said that was the reason all the Swift children could pick out songs on the keyboard “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, Harmon made music on a guitar, a fiddle, his father's old harmonica, and a stand-up bass when a friend brought one by. 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 shipped out to Vietnam. Christopher was conceived in Hawaii, when Betsy met Harmon for R&R, a break from combat. It was only a month before Harmon's death in an incident of “friendly fire” and a few weeks before the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam.

Homer and Annie only lived another five or six years after Harmon died, and Betsy moved with the boys into their old house. Jeff and Michael had always loved playing the pump

organ when they visited their grandparents, and now they were the ones who taught little Christopher, as soon as his legs were long enough, how to prime the bellows and keep up a rhythmic pumping so the volume would be even. It was clear Christopher had inherited the family talent, the "ears" for music.

After high school, Jeff joined the Air Force and quickly earned a place in the band. The latest postcards from cities around the world where the band played were often propped in the music stand of the pump organ. Michael won a voice scholarship to the state university, then joined the opera company in Santa Fe. By the time Christopher was twelve, he and his mother were alone.

Betsy worried about Christopher, though he didn't seem to mind that he had few friends. He did well in school and brushed off the occasional teasing about his ears. Once in a while he went with another kid to watch TV after school, or even shoot baskets in the driveway, but mostly he was content to come home after school to read and play with the family terrier, Lucas.

Besides a rotating day schedule, Betsy worked late two evenings a week at Bluegem Drugs. She would have worked more hours if they had given them to her. For a while after Jeff and Michael left home, things got a little better, moneywise. It was cheaper to feed just herself and Christopher – and Lucas. But lately the station wagon had become unreliable and everything in the house seemed to be wearing out at the same time. Betsy felt she was wearing

out as well. Her legs and back often hurt and she knew it was owing to standing behind the register at Bluegem all day. She looked forward to settling into Harmon's old recliner at the end of a day and listening to Christopher play the pump organ. For both of them, the evening of music was often the best part of the day.

One Wednesday, after Betsy worked a twelve-hour shift, Christopher greeted her with the news, "Mom, we're out of dog food. I tried to feed Lucas but the bag is empty."

Betsy sighed. She was already buying off-brand dog food from a discount chain, but payday was still two days away and she'd have to put gas in the car in the morning. Maybe there was a can of something she and Christopher didn't like in the back of the cupboard, something that poor, uncomplaining Lucas could make a meal of. She sank into the recliner and said, "We'll look for something in a bit. How about some show tunes, tonight, Christopher?"

The boy slid onto the bench attached to the base of the pump organ and began pumping the bellows, his slim body rocking side to side and his satellite ears swiveling with the motion. Then he began to play a medley of music from *My Fair Lady* – "With a Little Bit of Luck," "Here on the Street Where You Live," and others, ending with "Wouldn't It Be Lovely?" A few extra notes sounded from the organ after Christopher's fingers left the keyboard. He frowned and cocked his head at the odd occurrence.

"It would be lovely, indeed," Betsy said in her best Cockney imitation when the music ended. "Have you had anything to eat?" she asked her son.

Christopher paused before answering. "There are some eggs. And a little bread. You could have scrambled eggs and toast." He thought of the stray notes that had followed the last song and picked out a silent melody with no air from the bellows to give it voice. G-G-F#-E.... The notes were familiar but he couldn't place them exactly.

Betsy looked hard at him and saw that he was avoiding her question. "But have you had anything to eat?"

"I'm okay. I ate a big lunch at school."

Betsy felt her stomach twist. She understood that not only was the dog food bag empty, the fridge and cabinets were nearly so and Christopher was offering her virtually the last meal in the house. She was guilty lately of trying not to think about the bare shelves in the kitchen, about how close to the edge they were living now. She had done the same thing two weeks ago just before payday – told Christopher to eat the last can of soup and a few crackers, because she had "a big lunch at work." She'd actually eaten a small container of very old chili from the back of the freezer and a stale hamburger bun for lunch. Betsy sighed and turned to the kitchen.

As Christopher had said, there were two eggs and two slices of bread in the refrigerator. An empty juice container and a jug with perhaps a

quarter cup of milk occupied the biggest shelf. In the cabinet left of the stove there was a box of oatmeal; even a few raisins. They had the makings of breakfast anyway. Reflexively, Betsy opened the cabinet on her right. "Christopher?" The boy arrived to his mother's summons. "What's this?" Betsy gestured to a large bag of dog food, two cans of hash, and a small bottle of ketchup.

Christopher stared at the unexpected items. "Where did that come from?"

"I asked you first," his mother said.

While Christopher filled a bowl for the grateful Lucas, Betsy scrambled the hash with eggs and made toast for herself and her son. They said a prayer of thanks for the food. Christopher ate heartily for someone who recently declared himself not in need of food. He was especially thankful for the ketchup. The second time he asked for it to be passed, Betsy said, "I guess you just overlooked the stuff in that cabinet, huh?"

Christopher looked at her strangely. "Mom, I know you brought that food home with you."

"No. I didn't." Neither of them wanted to argue the point, or even think about it very much. It was late. Betsy washed up their dishes and utensils. Christopher let Lucas out for his last survey of the yard and took a small sack of trash to the container in the alley. All three took to their beds gladly and fell asleep quickly.

In the morning, Christopher pumped out a few tunes from Oklahoma! while Betsy showered and dressed for work. "Oh, what a beautiful

morning!" she sang along. Betsy boiled water for oatmeal while Christopher set the table. He placed a full jug of milk on the table with the bowls and spoons. Betsy stared at the milk. If the boy noticed anything unusual, he wasn't commenting. When they finished eating, Betsy told Christopher to be sure to eat all his school lunch because they really might not have much for supper that night. The next day would be payday and they could make it one night without an evening meal. At least Lucas, who couldn't understand about paydays, still had plenty of food in the big bag that had appeared the night before.

Thursday evening, Christopher was doing homework when Betsy arrived about six. He finished an algebra problem while she sifted through the day's bills and junk mail. She had already let her magazine subscriptions go and the older boys didn't write often. Betsy leaned back in the recliner and said, "Let's have old gospel tunes tonight, Christopher." He smiled, knowing that was some of his mother's favorite music. He pumped the bellows like a bicycle racer to produce hand-clappers like "When We All Get to Heaven," and "I'll Fly Away," then slowed a little for "I Love to Tell the Story." He finished the concert with "Rock of Ages," and "His Eye is on the Sparrow."

Christopher's hands paused above the organ keys and his strong legs rested from their pumping. The old organ repeated the sequence of notes it had originated the night before, then sighed. Another faint whistling sound turned out

to be Betsy, snoring lightly in the recliner. Christopher slid quietly from the organ bench. Lucas had already been fed after school, but he padded into the kitchen hopefully.

Christopher opened the refrigerator, expecting to ration out some milk for himself and for his mother, leaving some for the next day's breakfast. He made various happy grimaces when he discovered a carton of orange juice next to the remaining milk. On the next shelf lay a pound of bacon, a loaf of bread, and a package of sliced cheese. There was a jar of mayonnaise in the door of the refrigerator, next to last night's ketchup, and lettuce and tomatoes in the crisper drawer. Christopher almost shouted before he remembered that his mother was sleeping. She must have been mixed up about the date she'd be paid.

Christopher felt even his toes were smiling, wiggling happily inside his sneakers. He decided to make sandwiches first and then wake his mom, but the aroma of bacon was a pleasant alarm. Betsy came into the kitchen blinking and sniffing. "What's going on here?"

"Thanks, Mom. You know BLTs are my favorite."

Betsy stared, still groggy from her half-nap. "Where did you get bacon?"

"From the fridge. It's okay...isn't it?" Christopher was suddenly afraid the food didn't belong to them, although he couldn't imagine who would be storing food in their refrigerator, or why. "I thought you weren't getting paid until tomorrow, but I was going to have a glass of

milk before bed...and I found all this stuff. I figured you got paid early."

Betsy opened the refrigerator and frowned at the orange juice. "Was the house locked when you got home from school?"

"Yeah. You think somebody put food in our fridge?"

"I don't know what I think." Betsy had discovered the lettuce and tomatoes, luxuries on her budget. Her voice was soft.

"Well, I fed Lucas when I got home from school and this stuff wasn't here then. That's why I figured you brought it, like last night."

"I didn't bring home anything last night either, Christopher." Mother and son held a long look, breaking their gaze to rescue the almost-overdone bacon from the skillet. Their prayer of thanks over the late supper was especially heart-felt.

When Betsy said "Amen," Christopher exclaimed, "That's it!" She waited to hear what he had discovered. "The music. The organ. It's the Doxology! da Da da Da, da Da da DAH," he sang. Betsy knew the song but didn't understand why the old hymn had so excited Christopher now.

Betsy and Christopher continued to find various items mysteriously supplied to the household when money was especially tight. Usually the provision was food, but there were times when over-the-counter medications were needed, oil for the aging station wagon, and once, new gym shorts when Christopher lost his on the way home. Mother and son didn't talk

about the amazing occurrences but Christopher began adding a favorite tune as a finale to every session of music-making at the organ. Betsy sang along, "Praise God from Whom all blessings flow."

About a year after the hash-and-eggs supper, Betsy found a job as receptionist for a small suite of offices. The hours and pay were both better than at BlueGem. She was able to replace the station wagon and a cracked bathroom sink. Unexpected foodstuffs gradually stopped appearing in the refrigerator and kitchen cupboards. The Doxology remained a fixture of Christopher's evening concerts.

Miss Truman's Travel Bag

Diesel exhaust always made Jeanne think of Europe and the year she and Tom traveled the continent by bus and train. That experience afforded plenty of adventure and contact with local people at a modest price. Five years later, the waiting room of the Abilene bus station held no romance, but Jeanne could not escape the evocative power of the exhaust fumes. Funny how smell is such a powerful trigger of memory.

It wasn't funny, though, to be reminded of Tom while trying to think of anything but. Jeanne recited her resumé silently, imagining the job she hoped to find and the life she would build apart from Tom. Mentally tallying her small savings again, she opened the creased and highlighted classified pages from Sunday's Dallas paper.

"Are you expecting anyone else here?" Jeanne looked up to see a grandmotherly woman gesturing at the place next to her.

Jeanne glanced at the many vacant seats in the terminal but her southern manners carried the day. "No, that's fine." She inched her backpack nearer her feet and drew in her shoulders imperceptibly.

The woman settled into the awkward chair like a contented hen, smoothing her printed rayon dress with almost audible clucks and

mutters. Jeanne noticed the woman carried a felt and leather handbag in a style at least fifty years old.

"There," the woman announced when comfortable. "I do enjoy traveling, don't you?" As Jeanne searched for a polite but impersonal reply, the woman continued, "Oh my, I'm sorry. I haven't even introduced myself. I'm Vera Truman, like the president, you know, from Silverton, the Silverton Trumans. And you are...?" She waited expectantly, smiling, her pleasant face covered with softly powdered wrinkles.

"Jeanne...Wilson," Jeanne heard herself say. Snap! I meant to start using my maiden name right away. She felt helpless as a fly in a fresh web, but this spider had come to her while she was minding her own business. As much as she'd like to, Jeanne could not summon the rudeness required to escape Vera Truman's instant chumminess. She waited warily for the interrogation to continue. Instead, Vera rummaged in her outmoded bag and pulled out a large sandwich wrapped in waxed paper. Diving in again, she produced some paper napkins.

"Here," she said, opening the packet, "why don't you eat half of this?" Jeanne's hungry eyes followed the sandwich. She'd had nothing since the bitter bus station coffee in Lubbock that morning. She planned to eat at the end of the day in Dallas, as a reward for reaching her goal. Polite protests remained in her mouth while Vera

placed the larger portion on her lap. By then, refusal seemed rude.

Jeanne managed to say, "Thank you, Mrs. ... Truman," before beginning to eat.

"Oh, it's Miss Truman, dear, Miss." Jeanne heard a wistfulness in her voice. "What about you, dear?"

"Yes," Jeanne replied, nodding. "This is wonderful roast beef; so moist," she added, moving further from Miss Truman's question. She had no intention of sharing her marital problems with any stranger, never mind an old maid.

Miss Truman explored her bag again and produced two small paper cups. "Would you like some water, dear?"

Jeanne wiped her mouth. "Yes, thank you. Let me get it." She laid the newspaper on her backpack and took the cups. When she returned, Miss Truman was reading the marked listings.

"Moving to Dallas, I see. How exciting!" Jeanne felt more than ever like a trapped fly. She sat down, searching for some part of the truth to share with this generous busybody. Miss Truman did not notice Jeanne's hesitance. She inclined her head and confided, "I wanted to live in Dallas when I was young."

Jeanne turned her wrist subtly to read the time. Forty-five minutes. Maybe I can just nod and smile and she'll do all the talking. She cleared her throat and Miss Truman reached into her bag.

"Would you like a mint for that cough, dear?" She offered a wrapped peppermint.

Jeanne couldn't resist a chuckle. "Is there anything you don't have in that bag?"

"Well, I ... I always seem to have what I need!" Miss Truman's voice rose with the statement as though she were discovering an amazing truth. She smiled brightly.

Jeanne gave up trying to protect herself and turned toward Miss Truman. "So, tell me, Miss Truman, where are you going today and why didn't you go to Dallas when you were young?" What was that saying about the best defense?

Miss Truman, clearly pleased to talk about herself, smoothed the folds of her dress while she spoke. "Well, my fiancé, Richard Allen, died in the War, in France." Miss Truman told the story of her lost love without self-pity. Richard's letters and her study of his last months led her to become quite a Francophile. In fact, she became a teacher of French and visited France every two or three years during her teaching career. Sometimes she traveled alone and sometimes with a group of students, but always she thought about what it would have been like to see the country with Richard. Miss Truman pulled a well-worn guidebook from her bag to illustrate some of her memories.

Jeanne thought again of Tom and their year in Europe. There had been the awful experience of having a miscarriage in that Greek village with a less-than-modern clinic. But, she had experienced what Miss Truman suspected: discovering things in the company of your

beloved made everything more wonderful. Maybe we just ran out of things to discover in Morton, Texas. Her mind wandered while Miss Truman described Versailles and the Louvre.

They went back to Morton to help Tom's mother with the family dry cleaners after his father's heart attack. It was supposed to be temporary. But then, Thomas, Sr. died, and Tom decided they needed to stay. His sister had plenty to do already with four children and helping with the farming. Tom and Jeanne promised each other they would get out and travel, go somewhere fun, every year, but apart from a few days in Austin, they hadn't been anywhere.

Tom and Jeanne wanted children, but it just hadn't happened. Jeanne sometimes wondered if she were being punished. She had been glad about the miscarriage, willed it to happen. They were so young and so far from home. She knew she might even have sought an abortion if she hadn't miscarried. It hardly seemed right to complain that she couldn't have a baby now, when it was convenient. She kept busy with bookkeeping for the business and some volunteer activities, but she felt her failure to produce a child made their position in the family and friendship with other couples increasingly awkward.

And it was her failure. They went to the fertility clinic in Lubbock for a long round of tests and treatments last year. Substandard care after the miscarriage had left Jeanne unable to bear a

child. Almost everyone in town knew the unfortunate details, thanks to Tom's mother.

Tom suggested they look into adoption but Jeanne declined. She decided she wasn't worthy to be a mother, though she never confided that to anyone, not even Tom. There were a couple of divorcees and at least one young widow in Morton who would be glad to have a husband who owned his own business. He won't have any trouble starting over.

Jeanne was surprised by the tears of anger, guilt and grief that welled up in her eyes. She thought she had let all that go when she stopped counting days and weeks and buying pregnancy tests. She sniffed and blotted the corner of one eye with a finger.

At the sight of Jeanne's tears, Miss Truman, pulled a packet of tissues from her bag. "No, you mustn't feel sorry for me, dear, I've had a wonderful life."

Jeanne managed to laugh and pointed to the handbag. "And everything you needed!"

"Oh, yes. Everything I needed." She patted Jeanne's leg. "I expect you'll find what you need, too, dear." She looked at the station clock. "Oh, my! We'll be leaving soon. I could watch your things while you go to the Ladies'. We could take turns."

"You go ahead," Jeanne offered. Miss Truman placed her handbag carefully in her seat and rustled away to the Ladies'.

Jeanne did not worry until the dispatcher announced the boarding of their bus. She gathered up Miss Truman's bag and her own