

Long-term Solution

I heard the throaty rumble of the plane before I saw it, instantly dropped under a dogwood bush and tugged the hood of my grey sweatshirt over my cap of blond hair. My legs and feet thanked me. I'd been running and hiding all day.

I ran out of water hours ago, tossed the empty bottle, then jogged back and picked it up. They'd be close behind, best to not leave a trail of clues. But I'd managed to out-manuever them, Now it was just me and the plane.

I only needed to stay alive a few more minutes. The tower was right over this hill. But I needed to get closer. I'd only get one chance.

The plane canted to the right and began to turn in a large, slow circle. When it was facing away from me, I bolted from the bush, ran in a crouch up the hill. I was fully exposed, but it couldn't be helped.

The roar of the Cessna was deafening, the updraft caught my short hair and whipped it around my face. I looked up. The plane was so low to the ground that the pilot and I made eye contact.

The plane had had no FAA registry numbers, but I knew who it belonged to.

The weeping willow tree wasn't the best hiding place, but I had run so hard and so long that I couldn't have gone another step. I dove into its umbrella of low-hanging branches—my lungs burned and my legs were weak as rubber bands.

The pilot's job was done. He turned, tipped the wing in a sort of ironic salute, and flew up, then off into the clouds. My time was up. I wondered how it would go down—a tiny red dot crawling up my chest, parking on the center of my forehead? A car

bomb? No, too messy.

It was no good without Darin anyway.

I scanned the hillside—no movement yet—then pushed the button on my iPad, praying for reception. Social media, something I once despised, might be the only way to end this madness.

I waited for the iPad to boot up and my hands shook—Darin’s smiling face stared at me from the screen. I couldn’t pinpoint exactly when it had all gone so very wrong, or if there was anything we could have done differently. But the thought-tape ran in an endless loop through my mind.

Darin’s job had required that he be able to pass a stringent annual physical. He was, after all, an airline pilot. Random urine tests were no problem—the worst narcotic in our medicine cabinet was a box of cold tablets.

As a nutrition consultant for a major insurance company chain, I had to at least appear healthy, so hospital CEOs didn’t doubt I knew what I was talking about. I hit the hotel workout room every night.

“We travel together,” Darin used to joke, “except that she’s on land and I’m in the air.”

We were apart a lot—more than most couples. But we managed. Because we had a dream—retirement—when finally we could be together full-time.

A white box opened on my iPad, warning that my battery was low. I wiped sweat off my

forehead and whispered a silent prayer that it would last just a little longer.

Like a lot of airlines, CloudWorld had been on a financial nosedive. After four years of cut flights, raised rates, and reduced salaries, CloudWorld filed for bankruptcy. The employees were assured their pensions were safe.

Somewhere on a small tropical island is a sniveling coward of a man worth millions in raided pension funds.

“Soon we’ll only have your retirement and our Social Security to live on,” Darin said.

“And our love,” I amended.

My sweet Darin took any job he could find to help pay the bills—a janitor in a nursing home and a security guard in the airport. But the housing market had tanked, stocks were plummeting. Even the Social Security Administration was threatening a shutdown.

So we revised our retirement plans, sold our house and moved to our one-bedroom lake cabin.

Finally, on his sixty-fifth birthday, with little fanfare, he punched the time clock for the last time. I would retire in fourteen months.

We were healthy and we had a home that was paid for. It was all good.

And even better, there was a new president of the Social Security Administration, Jim Whitmeyer. He was the perfect spokesperson for the retired population with his jet-black hair graying at the temples, laugh lines around his chocolate-brown eyes. He’d performed a miracle by overhauling the system, getting it back in the black. In a brash

move, he combined Social Security and Medicare, slashing administration costs. He'd established SSA/Medicare hospital/clinics to serve all the needs of the retired class, saving the government trillions.

Whitmeyer had definitely earned his bonus, but was not without his critics, suspicious of his cost-saving methods.

With a flick of his bejeweled hand, Whitmeyer dismissed those concerns in a CNN interview: "Conspiracy theorists."

We believed him. What choice did we have?

It was all good.

And then it wasn't.

I came home after a particularly grueling week to find Darin sitting at our kitchen table, scratching his head over a mountain of forms.

"Applying for Social Security," he said, without me asking. "I need to have a physical before I'm eligible—bureaucracy in action. Can you believe that?"

Three days later he was laughing about it. "Easiest exam I've ever had. They pulled a vial of blood, listened to my heart, and looked in my ears."

And a mere three days after that, the SSA/Medicare doctor called Darin to tell him he'd found a small hernia that would need to be repaired before he could approve Darin's application. "A hernia? Are you sure?" The doctor explained that it would only be an overnight hospital stay.

Darin never came home.

Complications from the anesthesia, they said.

I believed them. What choice did I have?

The grief support group eventually helped me leave behind the dark, empty place in which I'd lived for almost a year. But when I stepped out of the vacuum where the numbness had protected me, I entered a red room of rage. Darin and I had played by the rules—diet, exercise, no smoking. We'd worked hard and invested wisely. And for what?

It wasn't fair. It wasn't right.

The support group couldn't help me deal with my anger—it was always bubbling beneath the surface—but when I finally lifted my head from my hands and listened to the other members, something started to click.

Their stories were my story.

Some sobbed while they told of sitting at bedsides, wishing their loved ones could die and be free of the pain, while at the same time never wanting to say goodbye.

But it was the ones who had been blindsided, who had lost their loved ones unexpectedly, I could most relate to.

“My wife wasn't sick a day in her life,” one man, Leo, exaggerated. “I thought I'd be the first one to go, what with my bad heart and all. But she had what the doctors called an embolism and—” Tears pooled in his eyes and he brushed them away with a calloused and shaking hand.

At home I mulled over Leo's words. At the next meeting I cornered him during the coffee break. “Leo, I'm curious about something—how did your wife have an embolism? Had she been complaining of pain or anything?”

He shook his head, slowly back and forth, then swallowed. “She used to love her morning walks with our old dog—two, three miles. But she had a bunion and it got to

hurting so bad that she went in to get it fixed. I was in the waiting room,” his voice quavered, “at the Medicare Hospital, reading Sports Illustrated when the doctor walked in. He said, ‘She’s gone,’ real casual, like there was nothing unusual about it. ‘Where’d she go?’ I asked the doctor. I thought maybe her bunion surgery had gone so well that she’d decided to walk home. How stupid I was.” His shoulders shook and tears streaked down his wrinkled cheeks.

At the next meeting, Belle, who pulled a green oxygen tank behind her, shared her story. After her wife, Nettie, died, she’d had to move in with her daughter. “She don’t want me there,” she wheezed. “But I got nowhere to go. Medicare says I’m in too good a shape for assisted living. Nettie did everything for me. She was the strong one. I miss her so much. Every day I think about joining her.”

“How did Nettie die, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“She was having some trouble with menopause—hot flashes, sleepless nights, severe headaches. So she went to the Medicare doctor who said she needed hysterectomy. She just,” Belle struggled to suck air in through her cannula. “I guess she just bled out, right there on the operating table.”

“How old was she?”

“She was sixty-six. We are,” wheeze, “were—the same age.”

A week later, Belle did join Nettie, with the help of a handful of sleeping pills.

I talked to more people and I researched, spending hours on the Internet until I found what I needed.

I should have been more discreet.

I’ll be sixty-five in July. I just had my physical. Like Darin said—easy peasy.

You stick your index finger in a small glass tube. You barely feel the prick as DNA-loaded blood tattles your story to the computer. There's no faking the results.

The doctor called me back to his office. "You're in perfect health." His voice was almost sad. Years ago such news would have been delivered with a smile.

I could live to be a hundred, collecting a check every single month. But I won't.

They won't let me.

A copy of the lab results—not mine—is loaded into my iPad. As the drone passes silently overhead, a white cloud squirts from the underbelly, settling over the weeping willow tree, drifting down onto my head. It smells like vinegar and sulfuric acid.

I look up and smile, then back down at the five pretty bars glowing brightly in the upper left-hand corner of the screen. I hit the send button—releasing the bloodwork of Jim Whitmeyer—age sixty-five, and in excellent health—into cyberspace.