

In the Waiting Room of a Podiatry Clinic in Downtown Reno

Gladys looks up from today's crossword puzzle in the *Reno Gazette* and points to a tiny Christmas tree in a corner of the crowded room, one of the few reminders of the upcoming holiday along with golden tinsel above the registration desk and a boombox belting out carols. The place could certainly use some more holiday flair—anything to relieve the doldrums of ailing feet. Scented candles and one of those electric heaters with the flickering glow of a real wood stove would do just fine. Maybe a basket of candy canes too.

“Remember that skimpy tree from *A Charlie Brown Christmas*?” she asks her twenty-year-old son, Danny, sitting by her side. “This tree looks exactly the same.”

Danny massages his temples. He has a headache. Too much noise makes him wince and clench eyes. “Can't remember,” he says.

“*A Charlie Brown Christmas*? It was your favorite.” She pops a lemon drop in her mouth. “Want one?”

“No.”

She turns her attention back to the crossword. “How about this clue. *Absent sense*, seven letters.”

Danny stares at the dull gray linoleum floor and says nothing. His phone rings or rather vibrates—on silent mode—from inside his winter jacket, which hangs off his seat back. He makes no move to answer it.

“Aren't you going to answer?” Gladys asks.

“No.”

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There's a scent of fried garlic and smoky oil emanating from the Chinese restaurant next door. This sparks Gladys' appetite though she's not yet ready to make up her mind about lunch. That's when *anosmia* strikes her—the word, not the true absence of smell. It's one her late husband, Daniel Sr., would have been impressed by. He'd note the *feat*, no pun intended, of never going to college but knowing a word like anosmia. She pencils it in and says hurrah.

She leans toward Danny. “Here's another clue. *Greatest humbug of all*, two letters. Ideas?”

“None,” Danny says. He unfolds a *Rolling Stone* as his phone rings again.

“If you're not going to answer it, I will. He's not going to stop, you know.”

Danny's eyes are dilated and he's having trouble reading the magazine. “I'll handle it.”

Gladys chews on her pencil. “What would you say to Harrah's Casino?”

Danny yawns and fidgets. “How many letters?”

“No. Not for a clue. For lunch.”

“Didn't we have enough to eat for breakfast?”

Gladys sighs. She remembers they went to Harrah's three years ago almost to the day, meaning that it was Christmastime as well. The buffet was pricey, \$29.99 a head, but worth every penny. There was buttery snow crab, rice pilaf, casseroles gurgling with cheesy sauce, and tempura-battered vegetables. The best part, though, wasn't the food but her husband and son enjoying holiday cheer, everyone dressed up. Shortly thereafter, Daniel Sr. fell ill with cancer and nothing was ever the same again.

“Harrah’s is right across the street,” Gladys says. “It’s nearly the same word as hurrah. And being Christmas, we should honor your father with a festive meal. Aren’t those good enough reasons to go after your podiatry appointment?”

Danny wipes sweat from his brow. “What’s Christmas to do with it?”

“Seriously? Are you silly?”

The phone rings a third time.

“I’ll talk to him,” Gladys says. “You know, he’s not going to stop—

“—Mom.”

She notes the thick stubble on his face. Daniel Sr. would have shaved each day including weekends. “Your father’s electric Norelco is in a cabinet back home,” she says. “Just saying. He’d be happy if you used it. May he rest in peace.” She looks up at the ceiling.

“I have a razor,” Danny says.

“And since we’re on the topic—”

“—What?”

“New clothes.” Gladys surveys Danny’s paint-splattered T-shirt and torn jeans. Danny Sr. would have dressed up for a doctor’s appointment, even if it were just for a prescription. “Maybe we can go to the mall after lunch.”

“Nope.” Danny rolls up his sleeves to cool off, his hands shaky. He can’t sit still.

“Why not?”

He points to his left ankle.

Gladys marvels at the irony. They're here for Danny's feet, or rather plantar fasciitis, a painful ailment that comes and goes with mysterious irregularity, but it's really all about the ankle or rather what's wrapped around it—the thing that keeps Danny from going places unless special permission is granted.

“Well, he's called three times,” she says. “You would've had a chance to ask for permission if you'd—”

“—I asked already.”

Gladys looks confused.

“I asked for permission to come to the podiatry clinic this morning.”

“But that's before we discussed going to Harrah's and the mall.”

“I'm not answering the phone here, surrounded—” Danny cuts himself off as he looks around the room, everyone cocking an ear to hear what others are saying.

“Just saying,” says Gladys.

“Say whatever you want,” Danny murmurs.

Gladys knows that *he*—the one calling, whom Danny won't talk to—is neither God nor the DA nor even a judge. He's a lowly officer, a bureaucrat, with the Washoe County Department of Corrections named Joey Johnson and his role is to track people via electronic devices (ankle bracelets). Though she loathes him, it's really the job she despises. He likely has a family to support. Sins can be forgiven.

“Well, if you ask for permission kindly,” she says, “he'll say yes. Then we'll go for lunch and shop for new clothes. How about that?”

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Danny flips the magazine page.

What's the harm, she thinks. Joey, despite the bravado and officiousness, surely must know that Danny would never do wrong. He never did wrong anyway.

The history is that two years ago—to Gladys it seems way longer—Danny was driving to a Wendy's restaurant. He might have been speeding, admittedly. And the cop who stopped him could have just written a ticket. But there was a fracas about bloodshot eyes. Danny, Gladys remembers, had been up all night working on college applications, plus he was grieving his father who'd only recently passed. The cop didn't care. He saw bloodshot eyes. That could only mean one thing from his viewpoint. He whisked Danny to the hospital for a drug test which came back positive for opiates. Because Danny could not produce evidence of a prescription, or at least a doctor's order, the judge sentenced him to house arrest. That's where Joey Johnson came in—to monitor Danny, occasionally order a drug test, and if Danny ever used again without a corresponding prescription, to send him direct to jail.

“Maybe you could—” Gladys extends an arm to pull up his drooping sock.

“—Don't,” Danny says.

He bobs up and down, causing the sock to slip further. The entire ankle bracelet is now exposed. It's a black plastic tumor called the Sentinel.

“So be it,” Gladys says, resuming her puzzle and popping another lemon drop into her mouth. “It could be Scrooge, but we need two letters. A two-letter humbug.”

Danny flips through the magazine while she corkscrews her pencil into a portable sharpener, blowing wood shavings onto the floor. The phone rings for a fourth time.

“Danny, just let me talk to him.”

“He’s not *your* correctional officer, Mom.”

“We need permission.”

The nurse enters and beckons a ruddy-faced man to follow her into an exam room. A green-haired girl next to him says she’ll wait outside, then winks at Danny.

Gladys catches the wink and is reminded of her own courtship. On their first date, they lay in the bed of a pickup truck, staring at the night sky. Her partner named constellations. Then he became her beau. Then her husband. Then a father. Gladys can’t imagine how time flies. She’d do it all over again, even with the knowledge that Daniel Sr. would never make it to forty-five. It’s the quality of life that counts, not the quantity.

Danny now stands.

“Where’re you going?” Gladys asks.

“Bathroom.”

“Don’t be late. Can’t miss your appointment.”

Danny ambles off without the well-rehearsed limp—something to work on, she notes.

Ten minutes go by. Gladys asks the person next to her to guard their seats and walks to the bathroom to make sure Danny’s okay. There’s no answer when she knocks. She spies an exit at the end of the hallway cracked open and suspects he went outside to see the girl with emerald hair. Imagine—at least Gladys imagines—romance conceived in the waiting room of a podiatry clinic in downtown Reno. It’s potentially romantic even without the requisite holiday flair.

She passes into a parking lot. A gust of wind shuts the door behind her, locking her out.

“Fiddlesticks,” she growls.

Gladys scampers through the alley between the clinic and Chinese restaurant, arms crossed because it’s cold, calling *Danny*. At the sidewalk, she pauses to gaze at Harrah’s across the street, imagining red-leather booths, starched tablecloths, shiny silverware. Maybe the green-haired girl and father would like to join them. Would Daniel Sr. mind? She looks up at the sky. All she sees are clouds.

The girl stands alone in front of the clinic. Gladys asks if Danny’s come by.

She shakes her head. “But I know him.”

Gladys looks surprised.

“From a couple years back. I’m Jessica, by the way. Sagittarius.”

“Pleased,” Gladys says, shivering, extending a hand.

The girl, it turns out, was in the class below Danny’s at Reno High. She remembers—out loud—his arrest, publicized on the front page of the school newspaper. “Didn’t it spoil his chances for Stanford?”

“It was a citation, not an arrest,” says Gladys. “They were Danny’s own meds. He’s still going to go to college. Just needs time, you know.” She points to her feet. “He’s got a minor health condition.”

“My dad has bunions. We’d call him Paul Bunyan but he’s actually George.”

Gladys nods. “Danny suffers plantar fasciitis. Ten out of ten pain.”

Jessica lights a clove cigarette. “He might consider the Mystic Shoppe on Route 80. We have tinctures and crystals for pain. And I do readings. Fifty percent off, first timers.”

New-age medicine, Gladys thinks. Daniel Sr. never touched the stuff, only regular medicine, meaning pills from a pharmacy. Same as Danny. It’s a matter of convincing your doctor to prescribe the right ones, and if they don’t, there are recourses. Danny Sr., she remembers, suffered hip, knee, and neck pain ever since a high school football injury. (Went to Reno High too.) His pain pills didn’t always come from a doctor, but pain is pain. It should be treated. What’s the harm?

“Button up,” she says to the girl. “Winter storm coming. Brrr.” Gladys turns and reenters the clinic as the father exits.

The morning crowd has cleared and the waiting room is empty aside from the receptionist. Gladys takes a seat, expecting her son to return any moment.

When Danny appears, he’s no longer pale, tremulous, sweaty. He seems refreshed, back to baseline, though with pinpoint pupils. She asks to see the prescription. He mentions that he hasn’t seen the podiatrist yet. He was in the bathroom the whole time.

“But I knocked,” says Gladys.

“I didn’t hear you knock.”

His right sleeve is rolled up and his left is fully extended with a penny-sized maroon stain over the forearm. Gladys diverts her gaze from the stain. She does say that both sleeves should be equal length and then she reminds Danny not to scoot off again. No doubt he’s next to be seen. He’s the only patient left.

Danny unfurls the right sleeve and buttons the cuff. “Maybe we can go to Harrah’s after all,” he says softly.

Gladys nods. “But we still need permission for Harrah’s and then the mall.”

The nurse appears and gestures for Danny to follow her. Gladys watches her son hobble away. At least he’s remembering to limp now, she sees.

She paces the empty room, limping herself (just for kicks) and settles into the chair next to the tree. The pine scent reminds her of an outing to a Christmas tree farm when Danny was six. He cried when they bought something smaller than he wished. Yet it all worked out in the end, just like in *Charlie Brown*. The splendor of Christmas has nothing to do with tree size.

Danny’s phone vibrates again. This time Gladys bolts to extract it from the winter jacket, which still hangs from the seat back.

“Hello, officer,” she says. “Don’t hang up. It’s Danny’s mom, *Gladys*, G-L-A-D-Y-S.”

Joey Johnson asks where Danny is.

“With the podiatrist,” Gladys says. “Now, after the appointment, we’re off to Harrah’s and then the mall ... Yes, of course we need to ask permission... That’s why I’m glad you called... May I call you Joey?”

Joey warns that house arrest doesn’t mean going anywhere you please.

“Yes, but we need lunch. And Danny needs new clothes. Dress for success, right? There will be no alcohol or gambling. I can assure you.”

Joey eventually relents: After the appointment, Danny will be permitted to accompany Gladys to Harrah’s and the mall, but tomorrow—Christmas Eve—he must come to the

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Department of Corrections for a drug test. He points out that any controlled substance detected in Danny's system without a corresponding prescription means jailtime for abusing drugs.

Gladys laughs. "Officer, Danny's in pain. He has his own pain meds."

They hang up and she stares at the phone. How can someone abuse a drug? Drugs don't have feelings; they can't be hurt. It's nonsense, how people talk.

She sets the phone down on Danny's chair and picks up the puzzle again. *Joey* would be the perfect *humbug* were it not four letters. She needs two-letters. Unfortunately, her pencil is missing. She reaches into her purse for another and ends up with an eyeliner cartridge. More searching yields a compact cosmetic mirror. She concentrates on applying makeup.

Danny returns to the waiting room.

"May I see it now?" Gladys asks.

He hands her the prescription and then points to his phone lying on the seat. "Why's that out?"

"It rang," she says. "I answered. Just forgot to put it back in your coat."

"That's *my* phone, Mom."

She smiles. "We can go to Harrah's and then the mall. We just need to visit the DOC tomorrow for a test. You can show Joey the prescription or rather the pill bottle because we're going to fill it today, right?" She shoves the prescription into her purse.

"Can I have that back?" Danny asks.

“Don’t want it leap-frogging out of your pocket, do we? Daniel Sr. lost one once. What a pickle. Oh, my.”

“Oh my,” Danny echoes.

They exit the clinic which ordinarily shuts down for lunch. The receptionist locks the door behind them and places a handwritten sign in the window: *Due to storm, afternoon appointments are hereby cancelled.*

All this fuss about Norco, thinks Gladys as they head up the street to the crosswalk. It’s a pill that can be prescribed—or not. Doctors eventually made Daniel Sr. switch to intravenous morphine as his leukemia pain worsened. Yet he, Daniel Sr., had hoped to stay on Norco till the end. He feared injections would cloud his mind and slur words. As far as Gladys knows, he was right. He’d always been clearer on Norco. Happier too. Doctors think they have all the answers.

They wait by the traffic light to cross to Harrah’s. She knows they’d never shut down the casino on account of a storm. She also knows that doctors can make mistakes. For example, there was the failure to cancel Daniel Sr.’s Norco at the pharmacy after he was switched to morphine. This, coupled with the fact that some neighborhood pharmacists trust kids to pick up their parents’ pills, enabled Danny to have a stash. But let’s not forget that a kid can be in pain too. Having a father die is never easy, especially for a son as young and sensitive as Danny.

“For the record,” she announces as they step into the crosswalk, “Your father never wanted an injection or an IV. He was fine with a pill. In fact—”

“—Mom—”

“—Daniel, listen to me for once. You might be twenty but I’m still your mom.” She deepens her voice and pauses halfway across the street. “Your father, rest in peace, believed that injections are bad. They turn your brain into Swiss cheese. If you have a pill, there’s no need to melt it and...” She gulps and trails off. How do you say *shooting up* without exactly saying it. There’s *slamming, chasing, gunning, banging, jabbing* but none of these words fit. It’s like a crossword-puzzle challenge.

“We’re standing in the middle of the street,” says Danny.

She looks at her son, the spitting image of his father despite the stubble and shabby clothes. He could stand to gain a few pounds. She grabs his hand and they continue walking.

“Is that fresh eyeshadow?” Danny asks.

“Liner.”

“Looks nice,” he says.

“Thank you.”

He can be a gentleman too, she reminds herself, a chip off the old block.

Heavy snow starts—big, moist flakes. Gladys worries her makeup will run. Thankfully, they’re almost at Harrah’s. She takes a deep breath. “Danny, I just thought of something.”

He glances at her.

“*Norco* and *Norelco*,” she giggles. “Almost identical words and they both make you smooth.”

“Funny, Mom,” Danny says, deadpan. “You and your words.”

That's what Daniel Sr. would say, she imagines.

They approach Harrah's and Danny reaches for pocket change. There's a Santa ringing a brass bell for Salvation Army donations. That's when Gladys halts in her tracks.

"Oh gosh," she exclaims. "My crossword. I left it behind. And your magazine—"

"—I don't need my magazine."

"Well, I need my crossword."

Danny suggests they buy another one inside the casino. But that would require a whole new *Reno Gazette*, thinks Gladys—a waste of money and paper. Plus, they'd need to reenter words already penciled in. She tugs his arm. "C'mon, Danny. It'll take just a sec."

They head back to the clinic, which is now locked and dark.

Peering through the window, Gladys scans the empty waiting room, faintly illuminated by the blinking tree. She bets the podiatrist is still inside. Why else would they leave the tree on?

"Danny, can I see your phone?"

He insists on holding onto it but offers to make the call. Gladys rummages through her purse. There's a number on the prescription. She's certain it's a direct line to the podiatrist. She pulls it out and recites digits. Unfortunately, the roar of traffic drowns out her words. She holds up the paper for Danny to read. He manages to punch in the number right before a gust of wind from a speeding tour bus plucks the script from her hand. Danny sprints to the curb. The script has disappeared into traffic and slush. He curses. Gladys scratches her head.

"Let me talk to Joey," she says. "I'll explain things. He'll understand."

Danny turns his back on his mom and waits for the call to go through. “Officer,” he says frantically when Joey picks up. “We’ve had a hiccup.”

“Let me say a word,” Gladys says.

Danny spins around, red faced. “No.”

She points to his shoes. He looks down. She seizes the phone.

“Joey?” Gladys says. “It’s Danny’s mother again, G-L-A-D-Y-S...Now, you won’t believe this—”

Danny grabs the phone back. “Officer, I know you wanted to confirm that I have a prescription, but—”

“—Tell him what really happened,” Gladys interjects. “It was like a twister. It tore the prescription from my hands. Quite remarkable, really.”

That word *twister* blinks in her mind. It means something. She feels that she may be on the verge of a breakthrough. And then it comes like a hop, skip, and jump: *Twister* implies *The Wizard of Oz* which implies Oz, a two-letter humbug.

“My goodness,” she exclaims, “the greatest humbug of all.”

“We’re trying to get inside the clinic,” Danny tells Joey. “But if we can’t—”

“—In front of our noses the whole time,” yells Gladys. “It’s Oz, Danny. Oz.”

Danny wedges the phone in an armpit to prevent their conversation from being overheard by Joey Johnson. “Mom—”

“—*Mom* what?”

Snow piles onto his hair. Gladys tries clearing it away but he steps back to avoid her swipe.

“I’m on the phone, Mom,” Danny says. “Can you leave me be?”

“You want to look like Frosty the Snowman?” she chuckles. She peers into the waiting room again. Her *Gazette* must be beneath a chair—the pencil too. Despite the dim light, she discerns Danny’s jacket still hanging from the seatback. That’s when she realizes he’s just wearing a shirt—a shirt in this weather. No jacket. “Danny,” she cries, “you’ll freeze.”

He raises the phone to his ear. “Officer Johnson, can you still hear me?”

There’s no sound from the other end of the line.

“What does Joey expect?” asks Gladys. “That we’ll traipse around town for another script, which means another clinic, in this weather?”

Danny puts the phone down. “He hung up.”

“Well, good riddance.”

Yet she’s confident Joey Johnson will grant them a reprieve. It will be too snowy tomorrow to drive to the Department of Corrections. And even if he makes Danny come in for a test, it will be the day before Christmas. He’ll be in a generous mood. The last thing you do is throw a kid, a good kid, a bound-for-college-kind-of kid, in jail right before Christmas.

“We’ll be fine,” Gladys says to Danny. “Joey will understand. Just because he’s a bureaucrat doesn’t mean he’s a bad person.”

Danny’s face gets redder.

Gladys blows her nose. “For now, we’ll buy another *Reno Gazette* at Harrah’s. It *was* your idea in the first place. We can finish the puzzle over dessert. Maybe—here’s my idea—with eggnog and a nip of brandy. Joey doesn’t need to know. A little nip to finish the crossword.”

She pictures all the words penciled in—words that would have impressed Daniel Sr. She’d love to explain to him that she and Danny finished the puzzle by themselves but they could have used his help. Collectively, they might have figured out Oz sooner.

“He was an addict,” Danny says abruptly, glaring at Gladys, melted snow streaming down his face like tears. He rubs his eyes. “Even if he preferred pills. The only difference is he never got caught. Never had to deal with a Joey Johnson or this.” He points to his ankle.

Gladys blinks. The cold must be getting to Danny’s head. Either that or he’s hangry. In the crossword-puzzle world, the clue for *Addict* would be *Word that doesn’t make sense*. She’s about to ask him to pick another word to say what he’s truly saying but he walks off.

“Where’re you going?” she asks.

He doesn’t turn around. There’s a trail of powdery footprints behind him on the sidewalk.

Gladys cups both hands around her mouth and shouts, “Lunch is only served till two.” She doesn’t know this for sure, but she’s heard it said of other restaurants. “Danny, can you hear me? We’ll miss the buffet. We need to eat. Then we’re off to the mall.”

Already her hands and feet are numb. She can’t imagine what her son must be feeling without his winter jacket.