

The Quick Fix

The low thrum of the Cessna grows closer, and I dive under some straggly bushes and tug my gray hood over my cap of unruly blond hair.

I've been running and hiding all day. My lungs burn. My muscles ache. Yet I managed to out-maneuver the trackers. Now it's just me and the plane.

I only need a few more minutes—ten at most. I can see the top of the tower on the other side of this hill, but I must get closer. I'll only get one chance.

When the plane begins to turn in a large circle, I bolt from my cover, run in a crouch, fully exposed, then lay on my belly in the tall grass, my iPad held out in front of me.

The plane swings around, drops lower, and the thrum becomes a deafening roar. As it passes overhead, the updraft catches my hair and whips it around my face, flattens the long grass. I look up. And make eye contact with the unsmiling pilot.

There are no FAA registry numbers on the tail, but I know who it belongs to.

The pilot's job is done. He turns, tips the wing in an ironic salute, and flies up, then off into the clouds. I wonder how it will go down—a tiny red dot crawling up my chest, parking on the center of my forehead? A hand grenade?

I don't care. It's no good without Darin anyway.

As I crawl through the tangled grass I scan the hillside—no movement yet—then push the button on my iPad, praying for reception. As I wait for it to boot up, my hands shake—then Darin's face smiles at me from the screen. "I miss you so much," I whisper, kissing the glass surface.

It's hard to pinpoint exactly when it had all gone wrong, or if there was anything we

could have done differently. But the thought-tape runs in an endless loop around and around in my mind.

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

As a nutrition consultant for a major insurance company, I had to at least look healthy and I hit the hotel workout room every night that I was on the road.

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

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

A white box opens on my iPad, warning me that the battery is low. I wipe sweat off my forehead and mumble a clumsy prayer.

Like a lot of airlines, CloudWorld had been on a financial nosedive, and after four years of cut flights, raised rates, and reduced salaries, the company finally 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.

Darin handled the news far better than I. He wrapped his strong arms around me

and held me until my hiccupping sobs finally quit. “We’ll just have to live on your retirement and our combined Social Security,” he whispered into my hair.

“And our love,” I amended.

After he was laid off, my sweet Darin took the only job he could find—a janitor in a nursing home.

The recession KO’d the country with a one-two punch. The housing markets tanked and stocks plummeted. Even the Social Security Administration was threatening to cut benefits.

Once again, we revised our retirement plan, sold our house for far less than it was worth, and moved to our one-bedroom mountain cabin. There was no internet which, for us, was more a blessing than a curse.

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 our tiny home was paid for. It was all good.

Then things finally started looking up. The new president of the Social Security Administration, Jim Whitmeyer, promised big changes ahead. “We Gray Panthers will finally get all that we deserve and have worked so hard for,” he declared with a giant grin. He was the perfect spokesperson for the retired population with his salt and pepper hair, and the crinkles around his bright blue eyes.

True to his word, in less than a year he’d performed a miracle by overhauling the system, getting it back in the black. He combined Social Security and Medicare, slashing administration costs and established SSA/Medicare hospital/clinics to serve all the needs of the retired class, saving the government billions.

Retirees who found a six percent raise in their monthly check praised Whitmeyer, saying he'd earned his hefty bonus. Yet, he was not without his detractors declared it impossible that a system that had suffered decades of shortfalls could be turned around so quickly.

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 at the end of a long week to find Darin sitting at the table, pouring 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."

Ten days later he was laughing about it. "Easiest exam I've ever had. They pulled a vial of blood, listened to my heart and did a chest x-ray. That was it. A complete waste of my time and the government's money."

But the next day, the SSA/Medicare doctor called Darin to say he'd found a small hernia that had to be repaired before he could approve Darin's application. He'd stay overnight in the hospital and on bedrest for several days.

"Hernia? You never told me you had a hernia."

"I didn't know."

"Have you had any pain?"

"Not a bit."

I checked his stomach, ran my fingers around his abdomen, pushing and prodding.

“Anything?”

He shook his head.

I drove him to the hospital. He never came home.

Complications from the anesthesia, they said.

I believed them. After all, what choice did I have?

I spilled his ashes in the woods behind our cabin because I could not afford a funeral—Whitmeyer had discontinued the Social Security survivor benefits.

The grief support group helped me crawl out of the dark, black place where I'd lived for more than a year. But when I stepped out of the vacuum where the numbness had buffered me, I entered a red room of rage. Darin and I had played by the rules—diet, exercise, no smoking. We worked hard and lived frugally. And for what?

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

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

Their stories were my story.

They would sit in a circle, tissue boxes on every available surface and take turns exposing their pain. I never shared. They told me that it would happen, that one day it would all come rushing out. But I held back. Talking about it would make it real. Keeping silent let me go on believing that this was all a very bad dream.

Guilt, sadness, remorse, fear, and loneliness poured out into that room like floodwaters from a storm drain. Some told of sitting at bedsides, wishing their loved ones would die and be

free of the agony, while at the same time never wanting to say goodbye.

Others talked of losing an estranged parent or child. “We fought over something trivial, so unimportant. And now it’s too late to fix it. I’ll never get the chance to make it right.”

While their tales were gut-wrenching, it was the ones who had been blindsided, who’d lost their loved ones unexpectedly, that I could most relate to.

“My wife wasn’t sick a day in her life,” Leo exaggerated. “I thought I’d be first to go, what with my bad heart and all. But she had what the surgeon called a pulmonary embolism and the next thing I knew, she was gone.” 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. “Leo, I’m curious about your wife’s embolism. Had she been complaining of pain anywhere? Her legs? Her lungs?”

He shook his head and swallowed. “She used to love her morning walks with the dog—two, three miles. But her bunion got to hurting so bad that she went in to get it fixed. It was supposed to be an outpatient procedure.” He blew his nose on a crusty handkerchief. “I was in the waiting room,” his voice quavered, “at the Medicare Hospital, reading Sports Illustrated when the doctor walked in. He said, ‘We lost her,’ real casual. ‘I’ll help look,’ I said, thinking that maybe her surgery had gone so well she’d decided to walk to the bathroom or to the cafeteria. How stupid I was.” His shoulders shook and tears streaked down his wrinkled cheeks. “That’s when he said she had a p-p-pulmon—” I wrapped an arm around him and led him to a chair.

At the next meeting, Belle, who shuffled in each week pulling a green oxygen

tank behind her like a traveler in an airport, raised her hand. “I guess I gotta find another place to live. After my wife, Nettie died, I had to move in with my daughter, but she’s having another baby and needs the room,” she wheezed. “Only thing is, I got nowhere to go. Medicare says I’m in too good a shape for assisted living.” She shook her head and reached for the tissue box. “Nettie did everything for me. She was the strong one. I miss her so much. Every day I just wanna be with her.”

“How did Nettie die, if you don’t mind my asking?” The members of the group turned and stared at me. Mine was a voice they rarely heard.

“Menopause—wheeze—gave her migraines. The doc said she had to have a hysterectomy. She just,” Belle struggled to suck air through the cannula, “bled out, right there on the operating table.”

“How old was she?”

“Sixty-six. We are,” wheeze, “were—the same age.”

That night, Belle got her wish to join her beloved Nettie, thanks to a handful of prescription sleeping pills.

Over the following weeks, I listened to the stories. I asked questions. And I spent hours on the Internet in coffee houses and the library. What I discovered was macabre, almost unbelievable. The death rate among healthy Americans aged 64 to 66 was increasing exponentially. Numbers too vast to be coincidental.

I should have been more discreet.

I’ll be sixty-five in July. I just had my physical. Like Darin said—easy peasy. You barely feel the prick as the DNA-loaded blood tattles your story to the computer. There’s no faking the results.

The doctor called me to his office. “You’re in perfect health.” His voice sounded 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. I had to do some dastardly things to get it, had to spend every dime I had, sell our cabin. But it’s worth it.

I should have been more discreet.

As the drone passes silently overhead, a white cloud squirts from the underbelly, settling over the yellow grass, 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 into cyberspace all the statistics, all the stories and, most importantly, the bloodwork of Jim Whitmeyer—age sixty-five, and in excellent health.