

Plans Interrupted

When Margie climbed out of the bath, the phone rang. She barely had time to dry off and make it to her cell. She answered on the sixth ring.

“Hello,” she gasped, pulling the white towel around her as best she could with one hand.

“Margaret?”

“Mom?” Her mother never called her ‘Margaret’ unless she was in trouble or something was wrong. “Mom, are you alright?”

There was silence on the other end of the line.

“Mom?” Margie repeated, worried now.

“Yes, I’m here,” her mother said. “You need to come.”

“I can barely hear you, do we have a bad connection? Maybe I should call you back—”

“No, we don’t have a bad connection. I’m...I’m sorry Margaret, but you need to come home. Something’s happened and you need to come home.”

“Mom, are you crying? What’s happened? Is it Dad?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“Just come home.” There was a slight pause and then: “Please.”

“Is it Susan?” For the past few days, Margie had been feeling slightly out of sorts, as if she forgot to do something important but couldn’t remember what it was. The feeling had been getting stronger, and today it was kicking and scratching in the pit of her stomach. The phone call wasn’t a complete surprise.

“Yes,” was all her mother said.

That one word slapped Margie so hard, she almost dropped the phone. The hand holding up the towel dropped to her side; the towel slid to her feet. She stood naked and still in her bedroom, like a statue in a nudist colony.

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It was over ten hours from Seattle to Eureka by car and Margie hadn't made the trip in over two years. The last time she had visited her parents was when Jack had left. At the time, she had crumbled like a poorly made cake; she couldn't work, couldn't sleep, didn't eat – she just didn't function for the first few weeks after her husband was gone. It was a miracle that she even made the drive to California without killing herself or anyone else.

She had come home early from work on a Thursday, feeling annoyed and irritated at her boss for the unreasonable demands made upon her time. Preoccupied with work stuff, Margie had entered the two-story home in the gated community without noticing the Camry parked next to the curb in front of the house. She opened the door and there, in the middle of the living room floor of all places, on her expensive throw, was the backside of a naked woman, who was riding her husband like some teenager riding a mechanical bull. Margie noticed tiny droplets of sweat on the woman's back. *What a strange thing to notice. And when was the last time I rode my husband like that?*

When he saw his wife, Jack had sat up, pushing the woman off as if she were some used up toy ready to be discarded. “What...what are you doing here?” he gasped, still apparently out of breath from his mid- afternoon workout.

“I live here,” was all she could think to say, her whole body going numb. She looked at Jack, who had grabbed his clothes and was hurriedly dressing himself while the woman just sat on the floor next to the couch, her arms covering her breasts, her eyes staring at the floor.

Margie didn't know this person. *Didn't most married men fuck woman their wives knew? Like best friends or secretaries or neighbor women?*

Shaking her head, trying to rid herself of these crazy thoughts, Margie had looked at her husband, who was now fully clothed, and said, “Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?” And then she had laughed hysterically.

“Oh God Marge, I'm so...I'm so,” Jack started, shaking his head.

“You're so what?” Margie said in a voice that wasn't her own. She sounded a little crazy. But then some sanity returned and, before she did something she would regret, Margaret Thayer left her house, got in her car and drove away. At first she had no idea where she was going. She just knew she had to get out of the situation and out of that house. She ended up at the local Barnes and Noble. She got a coffee from the in-store Starbucks and sat in one of the chairs, thumbing through magazines, passing time until she could figure out what to do. She stayed for almost three hours before returning home.

When she had returned, the Camry was gone but so was Jack's truck. There was a note on the kitchen table that simply said: *I'm so sorry you had to find out this way. I was going to tell you soon. I went with Tanya. You can have the house Margie, I will take care of the divorce papers and the lawyers. Should be a simple process since there are no kids involved. Jack.*

That's it? That's how her marriage of three years was going to end? With a note that had less emotion than a shopping list?

She had paced around the house crying before finally falling asleep on the couch, exhausted and drained. When she woke the next morning, eyes crusted over with sleep, head pounding as if she had stayed out all night drinking, she had called her parents and asked to come home. She had taken vacation time and driven to Eureka in an amnesia-like state, arriving two days later. After a week with her parents berating her soon to be ex-husband and the support of her twin sister Susan, Margie had slowly regained the confidence that had previously alluded her. She came to realize Jack had actually controlled her and stifled her and being away from his influence was actually good for her mental state and for her soul. After two weeks, she had returned to Seattle ready for a fresh start.

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Now, standing in the middle of her bedroom, naked and in a mild state of shock, Margie told her mother that she would be there as quickly as she could make the arrangements at work. “Should be there by Thursday Mom,” she said.

“It’s Wednesday evening, how are you going to make it by tomorrow?”

“W-What day is...what day is it?”

“Wednesday honey,” her mom replied, “perhaps you shouldn’t drive.”

“Uh...I’ll be okay. I just need to clear my head. I’ll leave in the morning, right after I let work know what’s going on. By the way, Mom, what *is* going on?”

“Please Margaret, just wait until you get here and we can talk face-to-face.”

Margie sighed and agreed, then terminated the call. She picked up the towel that lay at her feet and finished drying off. She put on a nightshirt and turned on the computer. She Googled

flights from Seattle to Eureka. The more she thought about it, the more she realized Mom was probably right – she shouldn't drive. Although the cost of flying was twice as much as driving, she went ahead and booked a flight anyway. She would rent a car once she arrived in Eureka or use her parent's vehicle if she needed to drive anywhere.

The flight was uneventful. She tried to sleep on the way to San Francisco, where she would change planes and have an hour layover, but like the previous night, she didn't sleep much. When she landed at SFO, she grabbed a bite to eat and bought a Nora Roberts paperback to pass the time. She tried to read, but found her mind drifting to her sister Susan. After reading the same paragraph three times, she finally gave up. She sat on the hard plastic seat in the airport terminal, watching people come and go, trying to guess what was happening in their lives, until the second leg of her flight was finally called for boarding.

At nine-thirty Friday evening, Margaret Thayer's flight landed at the Arcata-Eureka airport in McKinleyville. Margie disembarked and made her way to baggage claim, where she found her father sitting quietly, reading *The New Yorker*. Her mother wasn't with him. With an ever-widening grin, Margie surreptitiously snuck up behind her dad. She quickly covered his eyes. "Guess who?" She tried to disguise her voice by raising it a few octaves, but what came out sounded more like the squeal of a trapped animal than a human being.

Her normally good-natured dad dropped his reading material and clasped his hands over hers. "Um, let me see. Could it be...could it be....Sally?" He sounded tired and the words seemed forced, as if he didn't want to play this game.

"It's just me Dad."

Her father stood and turned around. He smiled, opened his arms and hugged her tight - a little too tight. Margie could feel the difference in him, as if something had sucked part of the joy

from the marrow of his bones. She knew that was silly, but it was something she also knew to be true.

“Where’s Mom?” she asked, pushing him back to arm’s length so she could get a good look at him. He seemed much older than sixty-two. His cheeks were sallow, the skin under his eyes sagged and he looked like he had lost weight.

“Your mother is at home.”

“At home? Why isn’t—?”

“Glad you came Margie,” he said, giving her a superficial smile. “Shouldn’t we be on the lookout for your bag?”

“Bags. Plural. I have two.”

“Good – so you’re planning on staying?”

She tilted her head and stared at her father. “What’s happened Dad? And why isn’t Mom here?”

He shuffled over to the baggage carousel without a word. He stood there, his back to his daughter, staring at the conveyor, waiting for Margie’s luggage. She walked over, grabbed her father and turned him around. “Barry Thayer, what the hell is going on and what is wrong with you?” she demanded in a stern voice that she reserved for unruly children and incompetent, uncaring store clerks. Her father raised his head and looked in her eyes.

“Your sister is sick, honey. Really, really sick.”

Margie stood there feeling the weight of those words pushing down on her chest, trying to crush her. “How sick Dad?” she whispered.

“She doesn’t have too long. I’m told the only thing we can do is try to make her comfortable and help her enjoy the time she has left.” Water welled up in his eyes and, with a lot of effort, he blinked the tears back and turned to the conveyor, his lips quivering.

“What is it? Cancer?”

He shook his head.

“What then?”

“Tumor.”

“What? I can’t hear you Dad! Speak up!”

The other passengers waiting on their luggage looked in their direction and fidgeted uncomfortably.

Her father’s sullen features turned angry. “A tumor goddamn it! A brain tumor that is eating away at her. Such a wonderful person, a great human being and she gets a fucking tumor while the felons and drug addicts run around hurting people, stealing and fighting, and live long lives! It isn’t fair!”

And then the tears did come; his whole body began to shake. Margie put an arm around him. She led him to the hard plastic seats and helped him sit before he collapsed. Margie sat down beside him and laid her head on his shoulder. It was damp with his tears.

They sat that way for a long time. Margie watched numbly as people gathered their belongings and headed home, she assumed, to their *healthy* families. Her father never said a word, but she could feel his heart thumping through his jacket. After everyone had left, they sat in silence and watched her luggage poke out from under the rubber strips in the small doorway, go around the moving oval like some spinning roulette wheel, disappearing again into some

hidden luggage graveyard, only to return a few moments later. Finally, after four revolutions, Margie raised her head. “We need to get home. And I need to see my sister.”

Her parents still lived in the same house where she had grown up. They had moved into the twelve-hundred square foot rambler in 1962, when Margie was nine months old. As they pulled into the driveway, the glow of the streetlamps revealed a garden where the Willow tree used to stand. She had loved that tree – it had added privacy and beauty to the home; she used to sit under it with Susie and play for hours. The house had recently been painted bright yellow with white trim and flower boxes hung under each window.

She found her mother sitting at the kitchen table staring at a cup of steeping tea. “I made up your room honey,” her mother said, slowly turning in her chair. Margie’s mom had always been the strong one. When Susan was five and had broken her arm on the playground, the bone poking out through muscle and skin like an escaped convict, Mom had been the one who stayed calm and took action. When her father had the car accident and ended up in emergency with a fractured pelvis and a concussion, Mom had once more taken charge. When Russell, the neighbor kid, had punched Margie in the stomach, Mom had grabbed the boy and marched him home, admonishing the kids’ parents on proper upbringing.

All throughout her childhood, Margie remembered Mom as the strong one, the person she could count on in any situation.

But now, sitting at the small table with the yellowed Formica top, she looked weak and sickly. It was as if all the years of strength had finally drained the life from her.

“Thanks Mom,” Margie said, leaning down and wrapping her arms around the woman. “I love you,” she whispered. “Where’s Susan?”

“Hospital, we’ll see her tomorrow. Now go with your father, get settled. You need to get some sleep and so do I.” She patted Margie’s arm as she pushed back from the table.

“Where’s Rachael and Devon?”

“They’re staying over at Aunt Cynthia’s for a few days,” her father said, “until we can figure out where they...” he trailed off, his Adams apple bobbing up and down. “Come on Margie, let’s get you settled.”

A suitcase in each hand, Barry motioned for Margie to follow him. She said goodnight to her mom and went down the narrow hallway to the last room on the left. Growing up, Margie had shared this room with her twin sister Susan. And now, when she opened the door, the first thing she noticed was the picture on the nightstand. It was of the two of them as high school cheerleaders, taken over twenty years ago. They were fifteen then and, because of the uniforms, they looked identical. Most of the time Margie would make sure that at least something was different— maybe a change in hairstyle or different colored outfits so people could tell them apart. Unless, of course, they were teasing some boy or screwing with the teachers.

Without bothering to get undressed, Margie jumped on the bed and took the picture off the nightstand. She held it to her chest like a child holding a teddy bear. Exhausted, she fell asleep that way - on top of the comforter, clutching the twenty-year old picture of two young high school cheerleaders.

The next morning the three of them drove to St. Joseph’s Hospital. They parked in the underground garage and took the elevator to the fourth floor. As they walked down the freshly-waxed hallway, Margie reflected on how quickly life could change and dreams were tossed out like some rotten piece of fruit.

Stopping at the entrance to room 427, they looked at each other. “Well?” Barry said with a tired shrug. “Shall we go see how our Susie is doing? Can’t stand out in the hall all day.” He started for the door, but Vicki grabbed him by the arm.

“Let Margie go and talk with her first Barry. She hasn’t seen Susie for a while, maybe we should let the two of them talk for a bit. We can go down to the cafeteria and get some coffee or something.” She turned to Margie and said, “Why don’t you visit with your sister without us? I’m sure you have a lot of catching up to do.” Barry nodded in agreement and linked arms with his wife.

Margie watched her parents head back to the bank of elevators. Once they were inside and the doors closed, Margie turned back to room 427, afraid to see what lay in wait for her on the other side.

Taking a deep breath, she turned the handle and pushed slightly on the door, poking her head through the crack like an inquisitive child. There were two beds, the one nearest the door vacant and freshly made up with white hospital linen. In the other bed, the one farthest from the door, lay her sister. As far as Margie could tell from where she stood, her sister was asleep. Her eyes were closed but the heart monitor and respirator confirmed that she was alive. Margie leaned against the heavy wooden door with a sigh; her weight carried her the rest of the way into the dimly lit room. The harsh smell of bleach and other chemicals she couldn’t identify assaulted her senses as she made her way to her sisters’ bedside. The only sound in the room was the incessant hissing of the respirator and the continual *beep, beep, beep* of the heart monitor. Margie watched the little dot go up and down like some quirky video game.

The woman in the bed suddenly opened her eyes. “Bout time you made it Sis! I thought you wouldn’t be here until the funeral! Geez!” She sat up and thrust out both arms. “Well, don’t just stand there like you don’t know what to do, give me a hug!”

Margie leaned down and hugged her sister. “Oh God, I’m so, so sorry Susie,” Margie whispered, clinging to her like a leech.

Susie pushed her back and brushed the hair out of her eyes. “Be strong. I need you to be strong for the both of us Margie, please. You know Dad and Mom aren’t going to be helping much in that department, so I need you to pick up the slack. Remember when Rick died and you were the strong one? How you helped the kids adjust to the idea that their daddy wasn’t ever coming home again? And how you helped me through my grief?”

“Yeah.”

“I need that woman again.”

Margie looked at her sister – it was like looking in a mirror, only the reflection looking back was confident, strong and at peace, while she felt none of those things. “How...how can you be so upbeat, so positive?”

“Drugs, I guess,” Susan replied with a laugh. “But seriously Margie, I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything.”

“Take me out of here, away from all this death and depression and...and...sickness. I only have a short time and I’m not going to die in this bed, in this room like some withered old lady hooked up to a bunch of machines. I need to feel the sun on my face, play with my children and—”

What about your kids, Susan? What's going to become of Rachael and Devon? They've already lost their father and now they're losing their mother too? Mom and Dad are way too old to handle a nine-year-old and seven-year old. And I—"

"Margaret, stop talking. Please. Right now you need to get me out of here."

"The doctors won't let you leave, will they?"

"They can't stop me. Last time I checked, this was still a free country and I can make my own decisions. I do believe I'm old enough." She smiled again. "I will be leaving this hospital AMA."

"AMA?"

"Against Medical Advice."

"Oh. Right."

"Now come on, let's get going. I could be dead before you move that cute ass of yours," Susan said with a grin. "My clothes are in the cupboard over there." She nodded toward the wooden cabinet next to the stainless steel sink. "I'll get dressed while you go get Mom and Dad and tell them I'm leaving."

"I-I don't know if you should be doing this Susie. What if it becomes real painful and you need to be medicated?" Margie got her sister's clothes and set them on the adjacent bed.

"Ever hear of booze? Greatest pain reliever of all time. In fact, at one time, that was the medical professions number one choice for pain. Jack Daniels, I believe."

"You've watched way too many old Westerns."

"Maybe. But if I have pain, I'll send you to the liquor store. No prescription required and it's always readily available."

Margie smiled. “Yeah, okay. And this time I’m of age and I won’t have to sleep with anyone to get them to buy it for us.”

“It’s great to have you here. I love our weekly talks on the phone, but having you here in person is so much better. Now please go get Mom and Dad. I’ll get dressed.”

“Are you sure? I can—”

“Go!” Susan pointed at the door.

Margie turned and left the room in search of her parents. She found them in the cafeteria sitting at a large table with a half-drunk cup of cold coffee in front of them. She sat down across from her mother and took her hands. “Susan’s leaving the hospital. She’s getting dressed right now. We need to take her home.”

“No,” her mother said shaking her head. “No.”

“Mom, it’s her wish. She doesn’t want to die in here....would you? Besides, what are we going to do? We can’t force her to stay and I don’t think it would be the best for her or the kids. She wants to live out her last days with them. And with us.”

Her parents just looked at her, saying nothing.

“Just stay here while I go find the doctor. I’ll let you know when we’re ready to go.”

Margie left her parents sitting in a zombie-like state, in the bowels of the hospital, while she went to find the doctor.

With the help of a friendly nurse, Margie found Dr. Strickland in his office doing paperwork. She conferred with him for almost ten minutes. He informed Margie there was nothing else to be done for her sister. The tumor was located too deep and had surrounded numerous vital blood vessels within the brain tissue. The only thing they could do now was keep her comfortable.

“You mean drugged, don’t you?”

“Look, I understand how hard this must be, but it’s in her best interests to stay in the hospital where we can monitor her and help to alleviate the pain.”

“What about the quality of her life? What about her children? They shouldn’t they have to come into this gloomy hospital to usher their mom out of this world. They should be out playing, watching the sun rise above the ocean and roasting marshmallows over an open fire with the woman that brought them into this world.” Dr. Strickland started to speak, but before he could, Margie continued: “We’re leaving...thank you for all you’ve done.”

She held out her hand and, with a smile, Dr. Strickland stood and took it in his. “Susan is very lucky to have a sister like you.”

“Yes she is. But I’m even luckier to have her.” As she turned to walk out of the office, Dr. Strickland called after her:

“Wait. Please. There’s something you need to know.”

Margie stopped. “Yes?”

“Cases like this are very unpredictable and your sister might...well, at times she might not act like your sister.”

“What do you mean?”

“As the tumor grows and cuts off more blood supply to the brain tissue, Susan could start having hallucinations, fits of rage, crying jags, all sorts of things.”

“We’ll deal with it. Thank you.”

Dr. Strickland sighed. “I wish you all the best, but I do not recommend removing your sister from this hospital.”

“Yes, I know. AMA.” Margie smiled and went to get her family.

On the drive home, Vickie Thayer turned to her daughter Susan and said, “Do you really think what you’re doing is best? What if they can do something else, maybe they can—”

“Mom, enough. You know that the doctors can’t do anything. Please accept the fact that I’m dying and let it be. I have.” Everyone was silent for a few minutes, staring out the windows and watching the world rush by. Susan continued, “Hey, let’s enjoy the time we have left together. And stop feeling sorry for me. How is that going to help anything?”

“What about Rachael and Devon?” her mother asked. “What’s going to happen to them? You’re father and I are...well, it would be hard on us for sure.”

“Mom, let’s talk about this later. Right now I just want to go home and take a shower and get my children.”

“We love you honey.... just let us know what we can do,” her father said in a weak voice.

“Thanks Dad. I love you too – you’ll be okay. *Please* tell me you’ll be okay.”

“I guess...uh, yeah, we’ll...we’ll make it through.” He looked at his wife, who was staring at her hands.

“I’m going to spend the night over at Susan’s,” Margie said.

“Good idea,” her father said.

When they arrived at her parent’s home, Margie ran inside and got a few necessities and pecked her parents on the cheek. “Call you in the morning,” she said over her shoulder as she hurried out of the house and ran around back to where Susan had stashed her BMW coupe.

“Thank goodness for the nice settlement,” Margie said as she stared at the silver Beemer.

“You can’t replace someone’s life with money, Margie.”

“No, of course not. I just meant...Rick’s company treated you good after the accident though, right?”

“Yes. Yes they did.”

“Good. I’ll drive.”

“Uh, no. This is my car and I’ll drive.”

“What if you have a seizure or something? Do you really want to put us in danger?”

“Oh, I didn’t think of that. You’re right.” Susan handed her the keys. “Shit, so I guess I can’t drive now.”

“Nope. Guess not. Not safe.”

On the drive they talked about past boyfriends, their high school days, and the love they both shared for the outdoors. And then Margie started to cry. Soft, quiet tears.

“Hey Margie.”

“Yeah?”

“I need you to take Devon and Rachael.”

“*What?*” Her voice was wet and thick.

“Don’t you see?” Susan said “You’re the logical choice, the *only* choice. Mom and Dad can’t take the kids, they can barely take care of themselves. And we don’t have any other family.”

Margie’s voice was barely audible. “What about Aunt Cynthia?”

“She’s older than Mom, she can barely handle them. They’d kill her.”

“Oh my god Susan, you can’t... I don’t...I don’t—”

“You’ve always wanted kids, right? Sorry it didn’t work out with that bastard Jack but he liked other women. And let’s face it, you’re not young anymore.”

“That’s just fucking mean.”

“Maybe so, but it’s true. Come on Margie, think about it. You would have two lovely children and every day they would look at you and see me.”

“But I’m not you Susan.”

“Well of course not. But they would look at you and see my face too. So they don’t forget.”

“How could they forget?”

“Time has a way of changing things, memory fades.”

“They could never forget their mother....and what about my job?”

“Quit – you told me you hate that job anyway.”

“Sure, quit just like that, change my whole life—”

“The money from the settlement will help to raise the kids. There’s still a few hundred thousand left. And you can have the house – it’s paid off. Financially you’ll be fine. Hell, you probably won’t have to work until the kids are all grown up.”

“I don’t know Susan, I wasn’t, I don’t...this is happening too fast.”

“Take your time. Just let me know before dinner,” Susan said with a wink. “Who knows how long it will be before I can’t cook anymore.”

“Jesus.” Margie closed her eyes and leaned back in her seat. They were silent for the rest of the drive.

At her sister’s, Margie made up the sleeper sofa while Susan showered and changed. “Mom and Dad are going to need you more than ever now Margie,” Susan said, “they aren’t as strong as they used to be.”

“I’m going to get some sleep, I’m so tired. Goodnight Susie.”

Susan nodded. “Yeah, goodnight.”

The next morning Susan made a breakfast of eggs, toast, sausage, fresh fruit and steaming Bavarian coffee. She poured her sister a cup of the freshly brewed beverage. “Well?”

“Well what?” Margie replied.

“You know exactly what.”

Margie sucked in as much air as she could and held it. She let it out in a rush. “Oh my goodness. Oh shit. Okay. I’ll do it...for you...for them. Oh...god...I’m so scared.”

Susan got up and hugged her sister, tears streaming down her face. “Now I can go in peace knowing that you will raise my children. *Our* children.”

“Don’t go Susie – not for a long time. Please.”

“Hopefully we can raise them together for a little while at least. Who knows?”

Margie nodded and hugged her sister.

“Let’s have some of this delicious food and then go get the kids. Maybe we should go to the zoo today – it is summer vacation after all.”

Margie nodded. “Yeah okay. I’ll call work and let them know I’m not coming back. Wow, this sure smells good. And I just love the zoo.”

“Yeah me too.” Susie smiled and poured herself a cup of coffee.

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