

Only Human

“That was my kid’s mother,” Randy explained as he slammed his cell phone shut. “She has to give a deposition today. I wish she would’ve waited ‘til I was there. Damn!”

The traffic light turned green and Eileen pressed on the accelerator. “Okay, I’ll bite,” she said to him. “Why does she have to give a deposition?”

Eileen was taking Randy to the airport so he could catch a plane back to New Jersey. He had been visiting for a week, and she was not sorry to see him go.

“Some kid attacked my kid at school,” Randy began. “My ex’s family is a bunch of lawyers. I’m gonna sue the kid, his mother and the school district. I’m gonna take ‘em for everything they got, and I got just the lawyer to do it.”

Eileen cringed. Randy was turning out to be more of a jerk than she had thought. To begin with, she wasn’t sure his visit was a great idea. But the lure of having a man around, someone to overcome the loneliness, someone to help make decisions and fix things around the house, someone to grow old with, had overpowered her ability to reason. However, as the week progressed, she couldn’t wait for him to leave. He was surly, negative and grumpy the whole time.

Even before she decided to let him visit, Eileen told him she didn’t want a smoker in her house. He promised her he quit. Said he had 3 days off cigarettes. A day after he arrived, Eileen had to drive him to the store to buy a pack; got into an argument with her daughter about it.

“Why do you have to buy him *cigarettes*?” the girl demanded. “You *hate* cigarettes!”

How to make an 11-year-old understand nicotine addiction? “Well, honey, it’s either deal with his irritation because he doesn’t have his nicotine, or let him have his fix so he’ll be nicer to be around.”

Eileen’s daughter didn’t like Eileen compromising her values for him. Neither did Eileen.

She steered the SUV behind the line of vehicles waiting on the freeway on-ramp. They had just dropped her daughter at school. Eileen was prepared to brave the rush-hour traffic to drive him to the airport and get him on his way.

“Did your kid get hurt badly in the attack?” she queried Randy. “Tell me what happened.”

Randy described how his son was at high school, talking with a girl in the hallway. Another kid came up from behind and whacked him over the head for no apparent reason. He broke his son's jaw, requiring plastic surgery.

Eileen suspected there was more to the story. These kids must've had some history. Does anyone really commit assault for no reason? She left that part alone.

"Didn't he have medical insurance?" Eileen asked.

"Sure did. The bills were more than a hundred thousand dollars. Insurance covered all but six thousand of it."

"Did you try talking to them? Maybe you guys could work out some sort of an arrangement," Eileen offered.

"No," he replied. "The lawyers told us not to talk to 'em."

"Yes, that's what lawyers do," she acknowledged. "But if you could all meet and get to know each other, hear the kids' stories, get them to, maybe, apologize, it might help everyone overcome their hurt feelings. You know your attorneys have a stake in keeping you all as adversaries."

Randy didn't respond. She really had no desire to get into this with him; not when he'd soon be on an airplane, out of her life forever.

Maneuvering onto the freeway, Eileen realized she neglected to listen to the traffic reports. She also hadn't chosen a route to the airport and now needed to make a quick decision. Take the northern route, Highway 8, where there was usually a fair amount of traffic, or the southern route; the 94, which cuts through downtown on its way to the airport.

Mentally tossing a coin, she headed for the 94. They passed the main interchange where traffic was flowing smoothly. *Good choice*, she thought to herself. *I'll soon be rid of this guy.*

"I don't understand why you are suing the kid's mother," Eileen said. "Didn't he face criminal charges?"

"Sure he did," Randy grumbled. "Damn kid got probation. He had to perform some damn community service and pay some fines and restitution."

"Why don't you just sue them for the medical bills that weren't covered by insurance?" Eileen asked.

"That's not enough for me," he declared. "I wanna make 'em *suffer*, just like my ex and my son and I've hadda suffer. I'm gonna make 'em pay. Well, she's a single mom, ain't got much,

but I can getta lien on her house. She didn't raise him right! She'll hafta work the rest of her life to pay *me* off. *Then* I'll be satisfied."

Eileen mulled over what she could say. She felt sorry for that kid and especially sorry for his mother. As a single mom herself, she knew how difficult it was, raising a kid on her own and making ends meet. She was angry with Randy for not being able to see that.

"Damn, Randy. You don't have to take her *house*, for God's sake."

The freeway traffic suddenly screeched to a halt.

"Oh, no," Eileen exclaimed. "This means there's probably an accident up ahead. Let me turn on the traffic report." She reached over and pressed the radio knob. After a commercial ended, the sounds of the familiar jingle signaling the "Eye in the Sky Report" filled the car.

"An incident in Balboa Park has all the northbound lanes and two of the southbound lanes of Interstate 5 closed. This is affecting traffic on the 163, the 94, the 8, and the 805. Your best bet is to take surface streets. This problem is slowing traffic on all northbound and westbound routes into the city and the airport."

"I wonder what happened," Eileen said.

The morning drive talk-radio host came on the air. Eileen usually found this guy to be too obnoxious to listen to, but today his report caught her ear. He was talking to a caller, and from their conversation she gleaned that a woman was threatening to commit suicide by jumping off a freeway overpass in Balboa Park. As a safety precaution, CalTrans closed the roadway beneath her. The overpass was a pedestrian walkway which was enclosed with chain-link fencing to prevent people from throwing objects onto the freeway below. But the woman had somehow crawled *on top* of the chain-link. She was first spotted at 1:30 a.m., so apparently this standoff had been underway for the past seven hours.

"This is ridiculous!" Eileen whined. "People should not be allowed to cause traffic jams like this! Traffic is backed up for miles. We'll be late getting to the airport."

Usually it was the radio guy who complained about the problems that people caused, but today he was speaking tactfully; choosing his words carefully. He was ranting about how some of the television stations and other radio stations were only describing "an incident" without divulging the particulars. His stance was that it was happening. That made it "news," and he was going to report whatever details became available.

A caller came on the air.

“Why don’t they get a big net, and gather underneath, and shoot her down with a tranquilizer gun?” inquired the caller.

“What if that was your mother, or your kid?” the radio host responded. “Is that the solution you would choose?”

Eileen pulled her attention back into the car. They had passed an exit just before the traffic snarled, so she knew it would be a couple miles before there would be a chance to get off the freeway. She had a limited amount of time to get Randy to the airport so he could make his flight. Lord knows she didn’t want him around any longer.

Randy had called her a few months back and described how he lost his job managing a restaurant. He was driving a cab to make ends meet and felt he needed a change in his life. He offered to come out west and marry her. Eileen found his offer of marriage quite flattering, but she wasn’t sure it would be wise to commit to spending the rest of her life with someone she only knew superficially. That’s when they agreed to this visit.

Eileen had known Randy since she was 15. He was a year older and taller than most of the guys then. He smoked and took taxis everywhere and she thought that was the coolest thing. Funny, how people change. Today Eileen hates smoking and thinks taking a taxi is an outrageous waste of money. Over the years their paths crossed, but at least one of them was always in a relationship with someone else. He had been married and so had she. During her divorce, Randy became her long-distance confidant. He allayed many of her fears during the proceedings, when she was riddled with anxiety about the shenanigans her ex-husband pulled. Now, they were both unattached. He shared his sons with his ex-wife, but Eileen’s ex-husband left the country when he received his settlement money from the sale of their house. Eileen moved into a smaller place with her daughter and lived off what money she could make with her writing.

Randy’s voice interrupted her reverie.

“I have to make this flight,” he said vehemently. “I have a connecting flight and people meeting me in Philadelphia. I can’t take a later plane.”

Now she was more upset. All week Randy had been on her nerves. Every time she asked him for input in making a choice of activities, he had deferred, saying whatever she wanted to do would be fine. He never weighed in on any decision, leaving all the responsibility to her. He didn’t even offer her money for food or gas; not that she would have accepted it.

Eileen spent the week showing him around San Diego County; took him to the mountains one day, the desert another, showed off the seals at La Jolla Cove and the dam at Mission Trails. Of course, he couldn't go hiking because of his smoking. Then, on his last day, Randy casually mentioned that he was more of an urban type of man; he would rather have seen downtown instead of viewing all this countryside. Eileen was beside herself.

"Why didn't you tell me that in the beginning?" she nearly exploded. "I used two full tanks of gas driving you everywhere and you weren't even *interested*?"

Randy shrugged, mumbling, "I thought that's what *you* wanted to do."

Eileen could've overlooked everything if he had at least been good in bed, but his lovemaking style matched his supercilious, selfish character. Eileen was looking for tenderness and romance; Randy was all business. He even declared, "Ain't it great to be older and we don't hafta play that stupid game where we take off our clothes one piece at a time? I hate that crap." That was the final straw. She gave him her bedroom and spent the rest of the week sleeping with her daughter.

"Damn selfish people have no idea how their actions affect everyone," she said out loud. Eileen was referring to the woman threatening to jump as well as Randy and his "me" attitude.

"Why do they have to close the freeway for God's sake?" she grumbled. "She's only doing this for attention, and they're giving it to her." Her irritation with Randy, herself and the whole damn week overshadowed what little compassion she had for the woman on the overpass. Eileen didn't fare well in traffic jams. "Doesn't this woman know the problems she is causing? What's wrong with that guy's idea? Why *don't* they just rush her and put a net underneath so she falls into it?"

Eileen smacked up the turn signal lever to change lanes so she could make her way off the freeway. The driver of the car next to her leaned on his horn and made a rude gesture as she veered too close. "Fuck off," she cursed under her breath. She inched the car forward and to the right until she reached the shoulder. Then she floored the gas pedal, heading for the exit.

"Hey, ain't it illegal to drive on the shoulder?" Randy asked.

Eileen glared at him. "Do *you* want to drive?"

He slunk back into his seat. Eileen reached over and shut off the radio. Silence filled the car, but angry thoughts circulated through her head. She made a silent vow to allow no more out-of-town visitors, even if they offered money or a trip to Hawaii instead of a proposal. She promised

herself not to leave the house without listening to the traffic report. And she was not going to waste any more time telling Randy what she really thought of him. He had met none of her expectations, and she should just cut her losses. Better to just get him on the plane and out of her life.

She managed to get him to the airport just in time to catch his flight. Relieved, he gathered his bag and gave her a quick hug. “Thanks,” he said. “I’ll call you when I get home.”

Don’t bother, she thought. “Fine,” she said. “Have a safe flight.”

She breathed a sigh of relief as she drove away from the airport. Better listen to the traffic report, she thought, and reached over to turn the radio on again.

“...Breaking news. The woman who had been threatening to jump from the freeway overpass since early this morning has fallen to her death. Crisis team response members just reached the woman when she lost her footing and tumbled to the freeway below. Paramedics on standby attempted to revive her but she was pronounced dead at the scene. Traffic is still snarled on all major freeways, and motorists are advised to avoid the area.”

Eileen brushed away a tear and turned the car away from the freeway, heading home by surface streets. She hated using her cell phone while driving, but she was too upset to *not* call anyone. Connecting her Bluetooth, she decided to call the radio show.

To her surprise, the call was answered on the first ring.

“The worst part is, I got so angry with the traffic that I practically wished that woman dead,” she sniffled into the phone.

“You’re not the only one,” the host told her. “I can’t tell you how many callers were yelling and cursing at *me*, like I was the one up on that freeway fence.”

“What? Why would they do that?”

“I’m not sure. Human nature is such that, when something gets in the way of our plans, many of us react very badly. I don’t know why we are so quick to anger, yet very slow to forgive. Maybe because our animal nature is instinctive and swift, so that we can react in the face of danger, but our spiritual side, where we practice compassion and forgiveness, takes practice and hindsight.”

Eileen told him she had not noticed this aspect of his nature in past radio shows she had heard. Usually he was snarky and sarcastic.

“I’ll tell you something, I’ve been on this story since 3 am,” he sighed to his radio audience. “Many callers were yelling that the woman should just jump so they could re-open the freeway. They got angry about that woman, who was in so much emotional pain that she believed jumping off a bridge would solve her problems. But now that she’s dead, a few of them have called back to express their sorrow. One caller was in so much grief he couldn’t even talk. Too bad we couldn’t give that compassion to her when she was still alive. But I guess we’re only human.”

Their call ended, and Eileen headed home by way of surface streets—no more freeways today, she thought.

Later, she picked her daughter up from school.

“And how was your day, dear?”

“It was pretty awful, Mom. Do you remember my friend Amber? She lives with her dad. She found out this morning that her mother died because she fell off a bridge in Balboa Park. Amber was so broken up, they had to call her dad to come get her. They stopped teaching classes because all the kids were upset and couldn’t focus. So we had to spend the day hearing about grief and loss and how to comfort someone who is hurting. Anyway, what’s for dinner? I’m hungry.”