

The Moment Nothing Changed

The days are shorter now, it stays dark longer. I tell myself this is why my husband and dog and I have slept until six thirty this morning. We never sleep until six thirty. An entirely different set of neighborhood dogs are out when Sparky and I go for our walk. At five thirty, our usual time, it's just Chloe the German shepherd and a handful of runners: Byron the cardiologist, who lives a few blocks away and works at the same hospital as my husband, Henry from across the street, our neighbor Bob. But at six thirty Scout the English setter is out, Violet the Havanese, Moose and Shaka the chocolate Labs, and Molly. I don't know what Molly is. All of the runners have run home. It's a dog party. We discuss Isabella's new harness, which is a smart houndstooth. Isabella is the prettiest little Cavalier King Charles spaniel that has ever been put on this earth. She is the kind of dog I'd want to carry in my purse at Bergdorf's were I the sort of person who went to Bergdorf's with a spaniel in my purse.

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When we come home, I fill the blender with spinach, a banana, an avocado, two dates, some lemon juice, water and ice, and my husband and I drink the results for breakfast. From time to time I believe I've found *The Answer to Life*, and right now I think it's spinach.

Sparky and I go to Parnassus. There are as many dogs in the bookstore as there are dogs on my street. Opie, a large hound, belongs to Andy the store manager. Belle comes to work with Cat. Bear, who is ancient and has to wear a belt with a Kotex in it because otherwise he pees on the books, belongs to Sissy. Mary Todd Lincoln, a fancy dappled dachshund, lives in a cross-body sling on Niki's chest. The dogs mostly stay in the back, where it's easier to beg for treats. The dog treats are kept in the staff bathroom, and whenever Sissy goes into the bathroom the dogs stand outside the door in a pack and wait for her. Sissy slides dog biscuits under the door. We yell at her to stop because Opie is better at the game than the rest of them and winds up getting all the biscuits. Opie's vet has made it clear he's supposed to be cutting back.

I'm at a big table in the back office signing copies of my new book for the store. I have sixteen hundred to sign and I feel like I'm losing my mind. Mary Laura pulls up Old Spice commercials on her computer, and Cat and Niki and I watch them over and over again until we know all the words and can act them out ourselves. *Look at me*, we say to one another, *now look at your man*.

The next morning I'm up at the regular time. I wave to Chloe the German shepherd from the other side of the street. Sparky, who weighs about fifteen pounds, is intimidated by Chloe despite her persistent friendliness. The runners run by.

I have a meeting at the bookstore with people who are flying in to discuss a future bookstore project. I'm wearing a dress. It's early and

THESE PRECIOUS DAYS

the store isn't open yet. I gave these people my cell-phone number so they could call me when they arrived and I could unlock the door for them. I turn my cell phone on about ten times a year, and only for occasions such as this. When it rings it's Byron the cardiologist. "Byron?" I say. I can't understand why he would be calling on my cell phone when I never carry it and no one has the number anyway. He says his name again, and tells me to come over to the hospital, even though he's pretty certain my husband is not having a heart attack.

MY HUSBAND IS not having a heart attack. By the time I arrive (minutes later) this fact has been established. The tests have all turned out perfectly. Karl sleeps off the Versed while I sit beside his bed in the tiny cardiac observation room. While watching him I think about a flight we were on years before. We were leaving Russia, and while we were going through all the various lines in the airport in Moscow, we noticed that nearly everyone had a baby. There was no overlooking it. We struck up a conversation with an American couple ahead of us in line. They were going home to Atlanta with a beautiful little girl they'd just adopted. We congratulated them and said that we were on that flight to Atlanta as well. They were radiant in their happiness, this couple and their Russian baby.

The closer we got to our gate, the more babies we saw: tiny infants, just-walking toddlers. When the announcement came that it was time to board our flight, everyone who had a child gathered up their strollers and diaper bags and got into line. One direct flight from Moscow to Atlanta, and everyone who had come to Russia from the States to adopt a baby was on it. We were a little nervous at first, more than a hundred babies on a twelve-hour flight, but as it

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turned out they were all happy—happy parents, happy babies. None of them were anywhere near being tired of each other. The couple we'd met in line sat right across the aisle from us, their sweet girl in their arms. How random it all was, who got which baby, where they would all go later on connecting flights.

Once we were airborne, the parents began to walk up and down the aisles, talking to one another, bouncing their infants in their arms. There was almost no crying until several hours into the flight when the woman across the aisle from us came back to her seat. She was crying. Her husband was asleep.

Karl asked her what was wrong. She waved him off, but he persisted. Karl persists.

"A woman in the back told me something was wrong with her." She was looking at her baby. "Can you see it? The woman said she wasn't holding her head up enough. She said I should take her to see a neurologist as soon as we get home."

"Give me that baby," Karl said. He told her he was a doctor, that he had delivered hundreds of babies. He held out his hands and she passed the infant over.

Karl studied the baby carefully. He looked in her eyes, sat her upright, let the baby grab his finger. He did whatever he could think of to appear as medical as possible. "I've looked at all these babies," he said to the woman. "This is the best baby on the plane."

She leaned over, touched her daughter's head. "Do you think so?"

"I'll give you twenty thousand for this baby."

The woman and I both looked at him. "What?"

"I'd love to have this baby," he said. "We can wait in Atlanta. My accountant will wire the money."

"I don't want to sell her," the woman said. She had the look on her

face that anyone would have if the stranger holding your baby had just offered to buy her.

“This is the best baby I’ve ever seen,” Karl said. “If you don’t feel sure about her, you could get another one.”

I thought the woman would call for the flight attendant, but instead I watched her grief break apart. Grief dissipating, evaporating, vanishing. “No,” she said. “No, I don’t want to sell her.”

Karl handed the baby back with some regret, then gave the woman his card. “In case you change your mind.”

She thanked him and thanked him. He had offered to buy her child and, in doing so, had restored her to joy, which served to underscore what I am constantly learning: Karl has an understanding of humanity that eludes me.

“Was the baby really okay?” I whispered to him later.

He didn’t look up from his book. “There’s nothing wrong with that baby,” he said.

The woman had just needed someone to remind her how valuable her daughter was, how lucky they were.

I remember again how valuable he is, how lucky we are. Karl isn’t having a heart attack. Byron didn’t know what might have caused the pain. Indigestion? Stress? It didn’t matter. Karl is beside me. The meeting I’m missing doesn’t matter, and Sparky is fine with his dog friends at the bookstore. For as many times as the horrible thing happens, a thousand times in every day the horrible thing passes us by. A meteor could be skating past Earth’s atmosphere this very minute. We’ll never know how close we came to annihilation, but today I saw it—everything I had and stood to lose and did not lose. Thanks to this fleeting clarity, the glow from the fluorescent tubes on the ceiling of this small cardiac recovery room lights up the entire world.