

## Sick Day

“Wait. When are you leaving?” I ask Kent, adjusting myself in the uncomfortable cloth passenger seat for about the trillionth time. I turn and stare past him as the sunset flickers through the trees lined along the I-95 corridor back from Miami.

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow!” Of course, it was tomorrow. I should have known. “What time?”

“Six in the morning”

I scoff. I am stewing. I glance at the clock in our old rental. 6:23 p.m. I just finished eating my drive-through burger. My stomach is somewhat queasy, but I can't drive because I am too tired. I don't trust myself. We'd be certifiable road kill.

“I can't believe you booked the flight for tomorrow.”

“I had to.”

“No. You didn't.” I glance out at the dark shadows whirring past us on the road.

“I'm meeting the CIO of Alfonso and his Senior Vice Presidents.”

“You're an idiot.”

“This was planned a long time ago, Mandy.”

He's referring to his Half Ironman Triathlon. That's the reason we are here, jammed in a rental van stocked to the hilt in sweaty, dirty gear.

We've been driving for hours, I'm exhausted. We all woke up at 3:25 a.m. this morning for this Tri. I glance back at our kids. Nathan, is content finishing up his kid's meal while staring at the movie playing on his tablet. Katy, is in the seat directly behind me. Her little nose is bright red from all her sniffing. Cheap hotel tissues have rubbed it raw. But we can't stop. We have to keep driving because CIO's are the boss.

Three days ago, we were all excited to drive down to Miami. Happy and eager to cheer our daddy and husband on for his National Half Ironman Championship. It's the qualifier for Worlds. Next year, if he qualifies, we'll be traveling to Denmark.

"You could postpone it for a day." I say. Hoping.

"It's a quarterly meeting. The dates are set." His hands grip the steering wheel.

I look at him. His eyes are tired, but he manages to keep them open. His glance steadfast on the road. I know I am bothering him. But he just keeps on staring ahead.

"I know you're tired." I say.

"I do what has to be done."

God, I hate him sometimes. So stoic. *I am the hero. I am the savior.* He's so stupid. He always does this. Plans poorly. It's like he thinks he's invincible. But he's not. And this time it caught up with him. He plans way more than any superhuman can do in a day. And then he does it, or most of it, anyway. But some of us are not superhuman.

I start to shiver again. I put on my sweater and adjust the thermostat in the car from 72 to 78. I'm probably the only person in Florida needing a heater. But that's the low-grade fever

making me hot one minute and cold the next. My hacking cough starts up again. I spit mucus into a fast food napkin and stuff it in the gray car handle.

“This is feeling familiar,” he smirks, “I feel like déjà vu.”

I glare at him. This is the second time we’ve gone to Miami and the second time I’ve gotten sick. It’s like this trip is cursed. We did it last year, for his Tri. It’s how he qualified for Nationals in Nebraska. But I got this infection in my finger. The day we were driving to Miami I rushed to my family practitioner and she gave me an antibiotic.

We filled it, I took it and we were on the road minutes later. Only, I got an allergic reaction to the medication. I arrived in Miami sicker than ever. Feverish and nauseous. I was sick the whole trip. When we got back to Jacksonville I had to be hospitalized. The medication had adversely affected my blood and then proceeded to screw up my liver. I was a mess.

Now here I was, feverish again, on the trip from Miami. Only this time it wasn’t a reaction to medicine, it was a hell of a cold. Kent got it first. He was terribly sick when he went on a business trip two weeks ago. I had advised him against it, too. I told him he should take some time off to recover. Just a day or two. But he didn’t listen. He never does. By the end of the week he was home, and still running a fever. His National competition was in a week. He’d been working so hard to train. Running and cycling twice a day. His running times were improving and he was getting stronger on the bike, too.

That weekend we planned to go to the Zoo for an overnight campout with Nathan’s cub scouts group. We had paid for all four of us to go.

“You need to take a day or two off.” I had told him on the phone on Thursday night, while he was on his business trip.

“You mean, I shouldn’t go camping?” He asked.

Wait. How was my telling him he needed to not work suddenly turning against me?

I never go camping without him. Never.

“What do you mean?” I asked, knowing this is going to be bad. For me, at least.

“I fly back tomorrow. You are suggesting I take some time off. So, that means I shouldn’t go camping, right?” I could hear his smugness over the phone. Shit.

“Tomorrow’s Friday?” I could eat crow and take back what I said when it didn’t suit me or I have to go camping with a bunch of nine-year old children. Alone. My own personal idea of hell.

But I had done it. For my husband and my kids. So my husband could rest up and recuperate. So my kids could have their fun. And Kent would be ready for his Tri in Miami, and hopefully qualify for Worlds.

This car ride feels endless. I take the blanket I have and roll it up. Trying to shove it by my back. Anything to ease the discomfort in my joints. I try to lift in the seat and hit my shin on the dash. I hate this vehicle.

“We are not buying a van like this. Ever.” I mumble to my husband. My legs are way too long.

Kent chuckles, “Scoot the seat back.”

“I can’t. Katy’s almost as tall as me. I don’t want to cramp her.”

Kent glances back at Katy, “She’s asleep with her feet tucked in.”

“We should’ve sat Nathan behind me,” I say, carefully sliding the seat back while Kent continues to drive. I stretch my legs out in front of me. Every inch of me is sore. I know it’s the fever, but if I am sore, Kent must be in pain, too.

I’m still mad at him, though. Quarterly meeting.

“Wouldn’t it be great if quarterly meetings happened more than once a year?” I say sarcastically. Wishing he would maybe opt out of day one of this week-long meeting and stay.

“They do happen more than once a year.” He replies, clearly not getting my point.

“Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“Stop acting like you’re not tired! Like everything is okay! You had a fever up until the day before your triathlon. You’ve hardly been eating. Today, we all woke up at 3:25 in the morning for your event, then you did a Half Ironman, then we rush out of the hotel, now you’ve been driving for hours, and then you plan on getting what? Four hours of sleep, if you are lucky, to turn around and drive another hour to get to the airport!”

“Stop yelling at me, Amanda! You think I don’t know that?”

Now I did shut up. If he yelled at me, that means he was super mad. Kent’s not a yeller. Not unless I nag him to death. Which I was doing. I was just so heated about this whole mess. It’s like he enjoys dragging himself through the wringer only to turn around and say, Yay! Let’s do it again! Why does he refuse to take care of himself? What is so wrong with taking a sick day? Other people do it. Normal people. It wasn’t immediate grounds for firing. I know he is the sole breadwinner of our family, but what kind of boss would fire you for wanting a recovery day. Not even a recovery day if you count the fever he’s had for the past two weeks. Surely, it could count as a sick day . . . you’re allowed to round a little, aren’t you? I was sick. Katy was sick. I glance over at Nathan. He had gotten this dreadful cold first. Could he get it again?

I stare out at the orange and white reflectors on the dark road. Everything is dark. I am exhausted. We will arrive home and have to rush to empty this entire vehicle of our insane cargo. Sweaty clothes. Tons of laundry. Muddy shoes and bike. Folding chairs and canopies we didn’t

use. Bags and coolers full of food that might rot. Countless amounts of entertainment, books, scissors, colors, tablets, chargers, laptops . . . and I would have to deal with it all, along with my fever and this endless hacking cough, and my sick daughter who has the world's runniest nose coupled with incessant sneezing fits. I just hope she doesn't have a fever, too. Then they have school, scouts, ballet and cross country. And I will have to tackle it all. Alone. While Kent is on his business trip. No one to even warm me a can of soup.

CIO's need him to read them a report they should be competent enough to read themselves. Or he could call in and do a telecom. He could get a decent eight hours of sleep in our own sweet bed. He could walk around and work out the lactic acid that is surely building up in his legs. He could help me a bit, just for a day.

I have another coughing fit. My cold seems to be getting worse. I am quickly running out of napkins to spit into. My throat is well past raw by this point. He could go on the flight on Tuesday. I would be better. He would be better. Life would be better.

Why was he so stubborn?

"Who pays for these lights I wonder?" Kent glances at the streetlights as we pass a short section of freeway. This town seems inviting with its lit-up streets, gas stations and hotels. "Don't get me wrong. I appreciate it. I just wonder. Somebody has to pay for it. Don't you think?"

I nod. Envisioning the comforts of fluffy hotel beds passing us swiftly as we continue on. I remain silent as I mull over my frustration. Unbidden, my mind recalls a conversation we had about a month ago. We had been in a car then, too. I had a craving for donuts and he had obligingly driven us to the nearest donut shop.

“What would you say if we traveled to Miami and I had to take off to a business trip from there?” He’d asked.

“What? Why?”

“I mean you could just drive back, right?”

“Uh, wrong.”

“You wouldn’t do that?”

“No. Drive back? Alone? With the kids? From Miami? Are you nuts?” I couldn’t fathom what part of that scenario seemed doable to him, for me at least.

“You could totally do it.” Obviously, he wasn’t remembering my fear of long distance highway driving. I was defenseless and then I would have to protect not only me, but also the kids. What if some whack job wanted to torment us during the night? No way. Not happening. Or if this rental stalled and I was alone on the side of the road, in this dark.

I look out the van window. Then I glance over at the controls. An orange light with an exclamation mark is lit up. Has that always been on? I don’t know what it means. But any warning light is a bad sign. I am really glad Kent is with us tonight.

That day, with the donuts I had scoffed. “You’d be going to that triathlon alone, buddy,” crossing my arms defiantly in front of me.

“You really wouldn’t go?” He’d asked, shocked.

“Nope.”

I had never missed one of his triathlons. Not once. Even when the kids were babies and it was snowing or raining. I had chased after him with my toddler and stroller in tow. Going from his swim, to his bike mount, cheering in the sometimes freezing wind or the sweltering heat, all the way to the finish line.

“That’s harsh.” He’d replied. I remember thinking it was odd for him to sound hurt. I mean, it was just a hypothetical after all. I had laughed it off. But now I remembered.

I glance over at his blanch face lit up by the van’s control lights. He is always so pale after a triathlon. It’s like it sucks all the energy and blood out of the surface of him and can pump it only into the deep recesses of his body. I reach over and touch his skin. He is ice cold. Another after effect of the triathlon.

My poor husband. It’s taken me nearly a month to realize it wasn’t a hypothetical question after all. He is doing this for me. I am the stupid one. Selfish, too. He had tried to think it through. He had tried to figure out a way to not have to drive for eight hours immediately after his triathlon. He had thought he could leave from Miami directly. He could have gotten more rest. Stayed at the hotel one more night. But it meant I had to drive back to Jacksonville, by myself, with the kids and all his Tri equipment. That day at the donut shop, I had told him “no.” That I wouldn’t come to his Tri if that was the scenario. He was doing this madness, for me. To take care of us.

Yes, it means he won’t be there to take care of me with my cold. He will be in Texas with some snotty CIO, protecting us with his job security. He will be there in his hotel room, after traveling for two lactic acid inducing days, still recovering from his fevers, from his triathlon, from the drive, from the air travel and he will be presenting in front of CIO’s as if everything is perfectly fine.

We arrive at Jacksonville in a flurry of activity. The kids are half asleep as they zombie their way out of the van. Kent and I work as fast as we can to empty the rental so he can return it before his flight. We toss our wet, dirty and sticky belongings all over the kitchen and living



room floors. I get the kids settled in their beds while he starts to pack his suitcases for his business trip. I am still mad. But I can't vent at him anymore. Not without guilt.

Frustrated, I ask, "What can I help you with?"

"You can get my socks."

I do. Feeling both useless and helpless to stop him.

When he's finally done packing and I feel like I have been zapped out of every micron of energy I have left, I join him on our bed. I reach to turn off the light, but instead I pause, turn to look at him and say, "I'm mad at you because I am scared." He glances up at me, setting his phone down.

"I'm scared that you don't take care of yourself." I take a deep breath, "That you think you are so important to this company that doesn't even care about you. If you get on the road tomorrow morning with four hours of sleep and get in a wreck because you are too fatigued to stay awake. You could get hurt or worse die. And those CIO's, they'll just say you were dumb for getting on the road when clearly you shouldn't have. And then they will find someone else to fill your spot. But us . . . you are the world to us and if you get hurt or die, we'll be devastated." I don't want to cry. But I am so tired. It has been a hectic day. I wipe the insolent tears off my cheeks. I am scared for him. And I still have to make it through the night and the morning, before I know he's safe. Or at least safely on a plane, where someone else is at the controls.

"I know my limits."

I scoff, "And I just have trust that it will be ok?"

"It will be ok. Mandy, I wouldn't do anything that puts me in danger."

"You might not try to fall asleep on the road, but it might just happen," I reply.

"I won't fall asleep."

I give an exasperated sigh.

“You have to trust me.”

I roll my eyes and sit facing away from him. He just doesn't get it.

“I knew my limits today.” The tone in his voice makes me look at him. “That's why I didn't finish the Triathlon. I knew I had given it all I could. I knew I would be really hurting if I had gone the extra six miles.”

In all his twenty years of triathlons, this was the first time he'd ever not finished. I knew it was a big deal for him. I had been shocked when he had met us up in the van parking lot and told us he was through. At first I thought I had missed seeing him pass the finish line, but when I looked at my watch, he was early. Too early. That's when he told me he was opting out of finishing the second loop on the run. This was a National competition. It was the qualifier for World's.

He picks up his phone and shows me the finisher stats. I see his name and under the finisher's time are the dreaded letters DQ. “This is the first time I'm ever disqualified from a Tri.” He says somberly. He could have finished, but that would have jeopardized our drive and then his business trip.

We turn off the lights and hold each other in the darkness.

“If the alarm rings and I don't feel up to it, I'll take a later flight, ok?”

I squeeze his arms tightly.

My cough starts up again and I sit up. He takes some extra pillows and tries to prop me up as I lay back to rest.

The rest of the night is sleepless. My cough and hacking keep me up for hours. I didn't see how I was letting Kent get any sleep. The hours on the clock are quickly approaching four in the morning. Would he really take a later flight?

I open my eyes just enough to see the light coming from the outline of our closed bathroom door. I fight sleep. I need to talk to him. I need to convince him. But it's no use. I can't keep my eyes open. After being up most of the night, sleep is overpowering me.

My eyes flutter open once again. He's standing by my side of the bed, motionless. He's visible only by the light from the streetlamp as it slips through the tiny gaps in the blinds. I can see him dressed handsomely in his business suit. He must have just kissed me goodbye. I imagine that's what woke me. I close my eyes for just a moment. When I open them again, he's gone.