Sammy's Hill

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Early to Rise

THE PARTY REALLY started to rock when Willie Nelson and Queen Nefertiti began pouring shots. I downed one and felt my stomach immediately replaced by a large liquor bonfire that spread through my chest, its flames licking up the inside of my throat.Willie leaned over and whispered that Winnie the Pooh had the hots for me. No way! I loved that guy! As I watched Winnie get down on the dance floor, throwing smoldering Pooh Bear glances in my direction, I all of a sudden felt myself floating. Flapping my arms, I rose higher and higher. Soon I was at thirty thousand feet, and a bit chilly. I plucked the edge of the cloud nearest me and draped it over my shoulders, fashioning a cumulus-nimbus pashmina. Feeling quite stylish, I surveyed the landscape below. I checked in with the mountain ranges, the vast oceans, the tiny cities, the—

". . . exceptionally long lines at the gas station. Congressman Francis, do you expect some sort of bailout package for Exxon?"

NPR's Morning Edition crackled into my consciousness to remind me that I was not a party-hopping sorceress but rather a Capitol Hill staffer who only had twenty minutes to get to work.

Huh. If I didn't do shots with Willie Nelson and Nefertiti, then why did I feel hungover? A brief glance into the kitchen brought it all back. Right, the bottle of wine from the ninety-nine-cent store. It had seemed like such a good deal at the time.

Okay, twenty minutes. Considering I was supposed to meditate for thirty, I'd have to postpone that until later. I'd also have to delay the fifteen- minute stomach crunch set, the do-it-yourself manicure, and the new dictionary word for the day. I promised myself I'd get to all that, but I knew I was lying. In reality, I would crawl home after working late, feeling too exhausted to do anything but maybe test out some ninetynine- cent tequila.

But it was way too early in the day for such cynicism. As my dad always said, anything and everything is possible in the morning.

I'd never been a morning person.

I checked the clock. Seventeen minutes and counting. As I fed Shackleton and began scavenging for clean clothes, it occurred to me how difficult these simple tasks would be without my right arm.What would I do if I suddenly lost it in some sort of escalator or escaped hungry lion accident? People laughed, but I lived only a few short miles from the zoo. So I took a moment to do what I always did whenever these neuroses attacked. I reached for a sling from my pile of medical supplies,

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fashioned it around my right arm, and continued my routine with this new handicap, confident that I would be the one with the last laugh when I was so ludicrously prepared for life without my right arm.

"Amazing," they'd all say, "can you stand how quickly she's adapted? Why, she's just as capable as she was before! Maybe even more so!"

And thanks to my brilliant foresight, it would be true. I'd just nod and smile and continue my life as a well-prepared, one-armed genius.

I snapped myself out of this daydream to concentrate on the extraordinarily difficult task of opening a container of yogurt with just my left hand. And then, as I gathered up my work folders, cleverly using my foot to lift my briefcase up to the table, I caught sight of Shackleton's mossy gills. Oh no. The mossy gill death sentence.

I had managed to inadvertently murder eight Japanese fighting fish over the course of the previous eleven months. I had never meant to kill them. In fact, I did absolutely everything by the book, but they still died. Mr. Lee, the pet store owner, assured me I hadn't done anything wrong. I secretly suspected he was keeping something from me—some critical piece of caretaking instruction or water-purifying product that would keep my fish alive—because whatever it was, by withholding it, he ensured my lucrative repeat business. He played the helpful counselor, however, and, according to him, the Japanese fighting fish sometimes just lost their will to live after a simple change in surroundings and performed a sort of fish-style hari-kari. Three of them wasted away, two of them became grossly bloated, and Jacques, Moby, and Ballard had all developed mossy gill disease.

I looked sadly at my ninth and longest-living fish, the six-month trouper whom I thought had changed my luck. Shackleton, so named for miraculously surviving an unfortunate wintertime power outage that had turned his bowl into an icebound wasteland, stared bravely back. Amazingly, he had lived through being thawed out. I had assumed this proved he was some sort of fish messiah, a powerful spiritual leader of the marine realm. But I should have known that even the mightiest of fish couldn't survive for long in my murderous clutches.

I was beginning to obsess about the implications for my fitness as a future mother if I couldn't even keep a tiny little fish alive for more than a few months when I caught sight of the clock. Twelve minutes. I quickly grabbed some magazines for the commute and rushed out the door, barely remembering to shed my sling along the way.

The good thing about working for a senator I respected was that I felt like I had a chance to make a positive difference in the world every day. The bad thing was that I worked so hard I didn't have time to notice things like the fact that I was wearing two different shoes until I was already on the Red Line, rapidly approaching my stop.

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And the pathetic thing was, I probably wouldn't have noticed at all if I hadn't caught the snickering glances of two perfectly groomed Senate pages and looked down to let myself in on the joke.

In my opinion, it's not totally unreasonable to mix up two pairs of shoes of the same style but slightly different colors, like a navy blue and black loafer. Embarrassing, sure, but understandable, particularly if one didn't have a right arm to turn on the closet light while one rooted around with one's healthy limb. But a tan sandal and a bright red sneaker? I was fairly certain the only people capable of that would have to be somewhat mentally handicapped. Apparently, they could also be me.

I decided to act like I knew exactly what I was doing, and shot a pitying glance at the two page-babes—a glance that communicated how sorry I felt for them that though they were immaculately coiffed, they clearly hadn't heard about the newest look to hit the runways. And I, I who read the Economist for fun on the way to work because, yes, I was that smart and genuinely interested in what it had to say, also happened to be on the cutting edge of fashion. How sad for them, my demeanor purred. How fabulous to be me.

With that work done, I exited the Metro at Union Station and made my way down First Street to the Russell Senate Building, holding my head high and silently cursing the fact that I didn't have time to run into a shoestore and buy anything that made me look less like a clueless fool. But, I mused, even if I did have the time, there are some things money just can't buy.

Janet, the ultracompetent, middle-aged personal aide to the senator, glanced up as I entered the office.While talking on her phone headset, stapling a stack of briefs with one hand, and making a scheduling change with the other (difficult multitasking even with two perfectly intact arms), she also managed to smile at me.

"RG'll be here in five. He needs the committee brief right away," she said, in her pleasant but no-bullshit tone.

"It's all ready, no problem." I smiled back, trying to project confi- dence and professionalism before my first cup of coffee, which was no small feat.

RG was office shorthand for Robert Gary, junior senator from my home state of Ohio. The committee brief was for the Senate's Health Care Committee hearing on prescription drug plans for the elderly, scheduled to begin that morning. And I was responsible for the brief, along with shepherding the constituent slated to testify, because I was a domestic policy adviser to Senator Gary.

The fact that I had managed to become a health care analyst for a United States senator at the age of twenty-six still surprised me, and I lived in fear that someone would realize how ridiculous it was to have given me this sort of authority and fire me on the spot.

Born and raised in Ohio, I owed my passion for government to my mother, a political science professor for whom fostering interest in public service came naturally. From

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the beginning, I'd been an eager and enthusiastic student. And perhaps most significantly, my mom's only full-time one.

Under her tutelage, I'd learned early that participation was paramount and that change could be just an effort away. Together, we'd drawn up campaign posters for local candidates, passed out voter registration forms, and canvassed neighborhoods for initiatives in which we'd believed. In the mornings before school, she'd helped me read the newspaper and answered my questions. In the evenings, she'd edited my letters to the president for spelling mistakes. It had never occurred to me that all this might make me an enormous dork. I'd loved it.

I'd begun taking up my own causes in grade school. I'd tried to protect the rainforests, adopt litter-free highways, stop animal testing, ship school supplies to impoverished children in Haiti, and generally save the world one bake sale at a time.

In high school, I'd become obsessed with issues of free speech, railing against censorship and challenging the school newspaper to rise above it. I'd written passionate papers about how freedom and rebellion represented the beating heart of democracy. I hadn't been above invoking these themes to denounce the tyranny of dress codes and curfews.

I'd run for class office here and there, but mainly devoted myself to general activism. It hadn't been until college, at the University of Cincinnati, that I'd developed a more specialized interest in health care policy. This interest had grown out of a particularly intriguing freshman seminar on communicable diseases—a seminar which had provoked both a passion for health care reform as well as a terror of the essential vulnerability and filthiness of the human body. From that seminar forward, a sore throat was never just a sore throat—it was much more likely the beginning stages of Ebola, rickets, or wasting disease. Since then, I had dedicated myself to doing the little I could to prepare for the disasters that were sure to befall my relatively defenseless body.

I had also devoted myself to studying the complexity and flaws of the country's health care system. Its inadequacies and inequalities had offended and embarrassed me. I hadn't been able to understand how the government could continue to allow nearly forty-four million Americans, many of them children, to go uninsured. I'd been horrified to discover the price gouging that went on, and the toll that it took on lower- and middle-class families. And as my mother's daughter, I had resolved to do what I could to bring about change.

While slaving away on my thesis, I had landed interviews with Ohio's nineteen members of the House of Representatives and both senators. Senator Robert Gary had impressed me as head and shoulders above the rest with his thorough grasp of health care issues and his longterm vision. As he'd answered my questions and talked about his plans for reform, I'd felt a mixture of awe and inspiration.

I'd sent Gary a copy of my thesis and immediately volunteered for his reelection campaign upon graduation. I'd been flattered and terrified when he'd remembered me, complimented my thesis, and asked me to work with his domestic policy team

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specifically on health care issues. I'd thrown myself into it, written a couple of noteworthy briefs, and after Gary had won in a landslide, been asked to join his D.C. staff. Which was how I'd suddenly found myself in a position of real influence. Scary, but true.

I barely had time to sync my BlackBerry and scan e-mails before Janet was buzzing my line.

"RG's here. He added a meet-and-greet with the teachers' union, so you only have ten minutes right now to get him up to speed for the hearing. Go."

As I rushed to his office, I wondered if I would be able to brief him in only ten minutes if I didn't have a tongue. I could probably come close if I was equipped with markers and flip charts and more advanced charade talents than I currently possessed, but it would be tough. I'd been told I had very expressive eyes though, so as long as I could use those . . . oooh, no tongue and blind, now that would probably stump me. How exactly would I go about—

"Can I help you with something?"

Senator Gary's sarcastic impatience put an end to my planning by alerting me that I must have been standing in his office looking like an entranced idiot for a good ten seconds. After a quick calculation I decided to pass on explaining that I had been musing a blind, tongueless existence and just get straight to the briefing.

"I'm here to prep you for the hearing, sir. Is now an okay time?"

He just looked at me for a moment and then nodded. He was tired, I could tell. He was a good-looking man and I thought the gray flecks in his dark hair made him look distinguished, but the deepening creases in his forehead and the bags under his eyes just made him look ragged. He was a workaholic with one-year-old twins at home, so that accounted for some of it, but I got the sense he was worrying about something else in the deep, portentous way he often had about him.

His blue suit, white shirt, red tie uniform was crisp and pressed as usual, but I noticed he had a yellowish stain on the collar of his shirt. I promised myself I'd gently bring that up after we got through the briefing. He'd be grateful without being embarrassed. I knew just the tone I'd use.

"Okay, sir, your committee today will be hearing testimony from Alfred Jackman, a constituent from your old congressional district. He's eighty-three and suffers from a kidney condition that leaves him in intense pain much of the time. The prescription drugs he needs are unaffordable on his budget of Social Security and pension payments, so he makes regular trips to Canada to obtain the cheaper generic versions that should be available to him here."

"And Medicare in its current incarnation doesn't cover what he needs, correct?"

"It doesn't come close, sir."

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"And the price controls in Canada allow him to save what, forty to sixty percent?"

"He shaves fifty-five percent off his drug costs on average, sir."

RG was nodding and I felt lucky all over again that I worked for someone who actually understood the policy issues he was being briefed on. One of the major shocks of my twenty-six years was the discovery that a distressing number of the people holding the reins of our democracy were glad-handing lightweights. Not RG, though. He actually cared.

"That's it? That's all you've got? This will be a disaster if that's all you've got for me."

And the fact that he actually cared was the only thing that made putting up with his bullshit worthwhile.

"Well, no, sir—I have a list of pertinent questions for you to ask and I've also drafted the remarks you should lead off with to frame Mr. Jackman's testimony in the larger issue of the travesty our nation's health care system has become."

"I'd like to avoid the word 'travesty,' Samantha. We can't just point out the problems. People don't like that. Do the remarks include a blueprint for the future?"

I loved that phrase. It always made me feel like an architect, which I had really wanted to be in the third grade. I had even designed several projects to practice, my most elaborate being a shoebox village painstakingly conceived for the squirrels that lived in my yard. With grand expectations, I had perched it in the branches of the oak tree next to my bedroom window, but it had been brutally shunned. I had always believed it was the squirrels' loss—Reebokville had really been a rodent wonderland, resplendent with zipwires and even a fire pole from the spa down to the Acorn Lounge.

"Of course, sir.Your standard speech outlining steps towards a singlepayer universal system."

"Good. This needs to go well today. C-SPAN's taking it live."

"You'll be great, sir."

"I'm not the one I'm worried about. This Jackman fellow has been fully vetted?"

I had spent approximately a hundred and thirty-six hours on the phone with Alfred Jackman, his various doctors, Canadian pharmacies, you name it. I knew Jackman's health history better than my own. For instance, I knew he had a double-jointed thumb that throbbed when it was going to rain, but I didn't know whether or not I was still in possession of my adenoids. Were they or were they not removed when I was six? My mom claimed the surgery had just been to extract my tonsils, but then

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why would I have named the doll I got that year Adenoida? It can't have been a coincidence, as pretty as that name was.

"In my opinion, Mr. Jackman will give tremendous testimony, sir."

"Tremendous? Really? Will it rock everyone's world?"

RG was capable of swinging from impatient irritation to playful ribbing in a heartbeat. This was a good sign, though, because he wouldn't have been teasing me if he weren't happy with the briefing.

"At some point we also need to discuss the reception this evening, because there'll be a couple . . ."

I trailed off as I watched RG return to his e-mails and proceed to completely ignore me. After a few seconds, he looked up.

"You're still here?"

Janet stuck her head in the doorway.

"The teachers have arrived, Senator," she said with a questioning glance in my direction.

"Send them in, but interrupt me in ten minutes with an important call."

"Of course."

It was time for me to go. If I was going to point out the collar stain, it was then or never. There wasn't time to conjure up the perfect tone I'd planned. I contemplated aborting the mission. Maybe the stain on his collar made him look more "of the people"? Maybe I was a giant coward.

"Um, sir?"

RG looked up, annoyed.

"It's just, um, there's something on your shirt, sir. Something yellow. Not white. Like the rest of your shirt."

I motioned helpfully towards his collar. He looked down and spotted it.

"Baby formula. Got it."

There, that wasn't so bad. He was even smiling at me. Strange that it seemed to be his mocking smile, but I'd learned to take what I could get. I started out the door.

"Thanks for the fashion tips, Samantha. I can see I've got a lot to learn from you."

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He was looking pointedly at my mismatched shoes. Fantastic.

I mumbled something about a new style, but he was already greeting the teachers who were shoving past me, eager for their ten minutes.

I had five voicemails from the Capitol Hill Police when I returned.A representative sample: “Ms. Joyce, we have an Alfred Jackman down here. He’s setting off the metal detector but refusing to take off his jacket or shoes until he talks with you. Please call us back when you get this.”

Could it be 9:00 am already? The clock on my computer informed me it could in fact be 9:15. The phone rang accusingly.

“On my way!” I shouted at it as I raced out the door.

Ralph was on duty when I arrived embarrassingly out of breath from running down the three flights of stairs to the security checkpoint on the ground floor. Ralph always reminded me of what I imagined a basset hound with an eye lift would look like. Lazy and sad but with a perpetual look of unnatural surprise.We had found ourselves on the same Metro train one evening months ago, and he had confided in me that his new job didn’t hold a candle to the excitement of his previous stint driving the Oscar Mayer Weinermobile up and down the Mall. But he had felt compelled to bow to his girlfriend’s demands and exchange his hot dogging ways for the more staid and respectable work of a Capitol Hill guard.

“Hey, Sammy,” he drawled, “your boyfriend’s being detained.”

He jerked his thumb towards the guard office where, through the wire-latticed Plexiglas, I could see Alfred Jackman staring at the ceiling.

“Did he do something wrong?”

Alfred Jackman was scheduled to testify before the committee in thirteen minutes.Why were they hassling a harmlessly shriveled eightythree- year-old man with a kidney problem? I felt my demeanor lurch perilously towards outrage but battled myself back to politeness.

“I can’t imagine he poses any serious threat to national security.”

I smiled but Ralph looked unconvinced.

“He’s been real disrespectful. He a U.S. citizen?”

Oh Lord.Don’t go all Ashcroft on me,Ralphie.Not today of all days.

“Of course. Look, this is really all my fault. I was supposed to meet him down here when he arrived. He’s just very old, you know?”

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Take pity on us, I commanded in my head. For the millionth time I wished I was a Jedi knight and could employ the extremely persuasive mind control skills of the Force. And for the millionth time, crossed fingers would have to substitute.

“He claimed he’s here for the committee meeting?” Ralph asked, his skepticism obvious.

I nodded officially.

“Very sad health history. He went through a lot to be here today.”

If you looked up “professional, but grave” in the tone dictionary, you’d find my name next to “master of.”

Ralph laughed.

“I bet he did.”

Fine, be cynical, you tone-deaf Botoxed basset hound. But don’t screw with my committee hearing.

“Come on, Ralph, I really need to get him in there. Can’t you let him go? He couldn’t have been that uncooperative.”

Ralph was shaking his head.Was he kidding me? Would the ACLU need to be contacted? Did they have an AARP branch? I glanced at my watch and felt a rising tsunami of panic. I clutched Ralph’s arm and made intense eye contact.

“Ralph, the fate of our nation’s health care system is in your hands. If you care about poor, uninsured children, if you care about suffering senior citizens, if you care about justice . . . well, then, I think you know what to do.”

I could practically hear the faint chords of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” echoing in the background as I stared pleadingly into Ralph’s eyes, silently willing him to do the right thing.

And he answered duty’s call with an explosion of hysterical laughter.

“You’re too much,” he gasped between guffaws, “I love you ones fresh off the bus.”

I smiled tightly.

“May I escort Mr. Jackman to the committee room, now?”

Ralph could hardly breathe.

“Poor, uninsured children . . .” He dissolved into unmanly giggles. “Yeah, go ahead and take him,” Ralph waved me away. “Good luck with that.”

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I turned my back on the hilarity and hurried over to Alfred Jackman. I rushed into the booth, hoping Ralph hadn't alienated our star witness too much.

"I'm so sorry for the misunderstanding, Mr. Jackman. If you'll just come with me—"

I stopped short as I detected a familiar smell in the small office. Good Lord, had the guards been smoking pot in here? Did that explain Ralph's paranoia and uncontrollable giggling? Oh no, was I supposed to report that? I wasn't cut out to be a narc. I quickly decided to pretend I had a cold. Or that I had lost my sense of smell in a chemistry experiment gone tragically awry. It could've happened. It still could. Best practice for that possibility by not smelling anything, certainly not the unmistakable scent of marijuana saturating one of the guard shacks of the Capitol Hill Police.

"So, um, I hope you weren't too inconvenienced . . ." I soldiered on.

Alfred Jackman looked up at me with bloodshot eyes arranged in a loopy stare.

"Looka here, it's the pretty lady," he grinned goofily at me. "Do you ever feel like you could just sit and stare at wallpaper for days and days? It's so beautiful."

Even as I noted the bottle of Visine sticking out of Alfred Jackman's pocket, I clung desperately to denial. But he wouldn't stop talking.

"Are there gonna be any nachos at the hearing? I took a little something to calm the nerves, but now I'm afraid I've got a bad case of the munchies."

Denial cut me loose. The eighty-three-year-old kidney patient I had handpicked to persuade the Senate Health Care Committee to embrace Senator Gary's prescription drug proposal—this tiny, grizzled grandfather of twelve sitting before me—was baked out of his head.

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