

Time Can Do So Much – 2011 All Stars win for 3rd Place

By
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Susan sees lights blinking through the trees. She frowns. Someone has come to the house across the lake. “April is my time at the cabin. No one has bothered me for years. Now somebody’s here and I don’t like it, not one bit. I just want to be alone.” She blows out the candles with faint hope the intruders hadn’t seen them.

She spikes her coffee, curls up on the deck chair, and snuggles into her afghan. The coffee is too hot to drink, so she cups the mug with both hands. Its warmth holds off the falling temperature. She gradually calms down and listens to the night as she sips her Irish coffee. The heady aroma and soothing whiskey warm her. Susan’s head nods; soon it rolls against the cushion. She sleeps.

She should have known it would happen, it always does. Liquor hastens the onset of her nightmare, the nightmare she fights off most nights. But tonight, the awful memory overtakes her and she re-lives the most horrible day of her life.

She and her husband, Paul, are driving north on the Blue Ridge Parkway. They had left early from home in North Carolina with their eight-month-old daughter, Hannah. She’s anxious to introduce their baby to family and friends in New York.

Just south of Harrisonburg, Hannah starts crying. Paul pulls into an overlook. He stays behind the wheel, picks up his cell phone and checks for messages. Susan opens the passenger door and steps out.

She moves to the low stone wall and takes in the valley below, the lush vegetation, and the majestic mountains stretching for miles. The dogwoods decorate the valley with white and pink. Azaleas of every shade take her breath away.

As she turns to ask Paul to bring Hannah, she hears the unmistakable guttural roar of a powerful sports car downshifting. Turning toward the road, she looks uphill in the direction they had come, and sees a red Corvette passing an eighteen-wheeler on the curve. The Corvette misjudges and cuts in front of the truck too closely, clipping the front left corner of the truck with the right rear of his car. Air brakes shrieking, the truck driver tries to slow down his rig. The acrid smell of rubber burning on the road fills the air. The driver of the Corvette can’t regain control. The 'vette spins in front of the truck.

Yanking the steering wheel to the left, the driver tries to avoid the Corvette, but the downhill weight and speed of the truck keep the forward momentum going.

Metal on metal screaming, the truck rides up and over the little car with its front left tire, crushing it. The rig keeps rolling. The double tires just behind the cab run over the demolished car. The trailer starts to fishtail across the narrow mountain road, dragging the Corvette underneath its carriage.

The cab veers away from Paul and Hannah, but the trailer is swinging back to the right. Under the pressure of the panic stop and extra drag of the mangled car, the truck's air brakes lock. Brake linings start to burn. Tire treads burst apart. The fishtailing trailer keeps swinging around, closer and closer to Paul and Hannah.

The full weight of the trailer slams into the back of Paul's car, batting it like a baseball. The trailer pushes the car in front of it, smashing it grill first through the low stone wall. The car holding Paul and Hannah sails over the steep edge of the overlook. The gas tank ignites. The car explodes in midair and disintegrates into thousands of fiery pieces.

The warmth of sunrise slowly wakens Susan. The songbirds make her smile. As she soaks in this beautiful morning, the stranglehold of her nightmare lets go. She prays: "Paul. Hannah. TIME CAN DO SO MUCH. I will love you forever and miss you every day of my life, but it's been long enough." Susan spreads her arms and shouts: "Today I start anew! And I start right now!"

Her kitchen is warm and feels good after sleeping outside all night. It only takes a few minutes to mix the batter, fill the muffin tins and pop them in the oven. She hurries her shower. Slicking her hair into a ponytail, she pulls on a pair of jeans, slips into a sweater and laces her hiking shoes.

The timer rings. Grabbing a pretty cotton napkin, she tucks the hot muffins into a basket. Flinging a denim jacket around her shoulders, she punches her arms into the sleeves. Then she's out the front door, slamming it shut. She whistles and skips her way to the house across the lake.

The powerfully built man behind the screen door is over six feet. He wears jeans and a flannel shirt. But there's something about his brown eyes; they're so ... *sad*.

"Hello! Can I help you?"

"Hi! I saw your lights last night. I was curious and thought I'd drop by."

"We did get in late. The directions weren't clear. But we got here!"

"I brought some muffins." Susan lifts the napkin to show the golden tops.

"Well, thank you!"

Susan hears the unbridled joy of a child bounding down the steps yelling, "Who is it Daddy?"

"It's our neighbor. Remember we saw lights last night." Looking back at Susan, "We thought we imagined them, since they only flickered."

"That was me!" Susan nods and adds a white lie, "I was enjoying the stars and didn't want to ruin my night vision."

From behind her Daddy, a bundle of ten-year-old energy erupts. Her strawberry blond hair is a rat's nest. She's mis-buttoned her blouse and only hooked one strap of her overalls. She's adorable with her million-watt smile. Her brown eyes dancing with curiosity, she giggles and points to Susan's basket. "What's in there?"

"Muffins for you and your Mom and Dad."

"Mom isn't here. She died last year. It's just me and Dad."

She said it so... matter of factly ...her innocence spilling out of her.

Susan's eyes meet his. He nods. So that's the sadness she'd seen.

She shares, "Ten years ago I lost my husband and daughter."

Looking through the screen door, somehow knowing the thoughts of the other, they share a lonesome bond of understanding.

"Dad, ask her in ... so we can eat the muffins!" With a chuckle, he pushes open the screen and steps aside. Susan is delighted when her little friend resists the treats and politely asks "Would you like some milk?" This little tomboy has good manners.

"Milk's perfect."

Grinning from ear to ear, the little hostess pours the milk. Susan lifts her glass and toasts, "Here's to new friends! My name's Susan."

The imp in overalls returns the toast, "Glad to meet ya! My name's Hannah!"