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Five Star Diner

Carol Kavanagh



Devon and Celeste stood by the stove talking, only I wasn't listening. I was sidetracked by a lemon — pock-marked, bright yellow and shiny — on the kitchen windowsill. Four wheels were attached to it. A safety pin fastened a piece of shimmering cardboard that looked more like a lightning bolt than a plume of exhaust. I reached to touch the lemon. Soft rubber! I wanted to add black-marker eyes for headlights and a thick black mouth for a front bumper. What's with this? "Kristi, are you in?" Devon asked.

I turned to face Devon.

"I have this great idea. I'm sick of being in the hospital, pun intended." He snapped open a tin of salted cashews and tossed a handful into his mouth.

"Trouble is on the waaay," Celeste said in a sing song voice. I watched her lower three pieces of pickerel into a sizzling fry pan. Although I like fish, I didn't have much of an appetite. "I'd really enjoy a ride in the countryside," Devon said.

"Catch the fall colours — snap a few photos."

I could see it now. He'd insist we stop the car, then roll down the window or he'd get out and start clicking away. Celeste and I would have to wait patiently in the car, but I wouldn't mind if this made my long-time friend happy. My visit might be difficult, but I would've jumped over the moon to be with him at this time.

I had imagined sitting in their back yard with a glass of wine, not going on a road trip. Whenever I visited Devon and Celeste, I purposely came in the back way just to walk through their garden which was surrounded by tall caraganas. I opened the ornate iron gate and stepped on the stone path that wound through sandy circles, green moss and a bonsai-pruned red maple. The reflection of this scene in mirrors that flanked the French patio doors left me feeling enveloped by stillness and in another realm.

"I can see and smell" — Devon scrunched up his nose — "that you're frying fish — again. How about pork chops? When can we have *them*?"

"You can eat a pork chop? With your appetite these last couple of days?" Celeste said.

"I'd sure like to give it a try." His blue eyes sparkled behind black rimmed glasses, a mischievous look he still retained despite how much weight he'd lost.

"I'll barbecue you a pork chop on some special occasion."

"This *is* a special occasion. Kristi's visiting."

"Yes, but Kristi's like family," Celeste said.

"Can't argue that."

"About your plan to see the fall colours," Celeste said, "I'm all in favour, but I need to know that the meds are keeping the pain away."

"We're not going to the moon. I'm feeling even better now that I have pain killers *and* my little squares of pot chocolate, pun intended." He attempted a do-si-do around me, lost his balance and steadied himself by grabbing my arm.

"You see?" said Celeste pointing her finger at him. "Let's wait one more day to see if you're feeling up to it, okay?"

"I'll be feeling great tomorrow. It'll be my first outing."

“Devon, don’t tax me on this,” Celeste said.

“I always feel good in the morning. We can set off early.” He clapped his hands like a child.

Celeste rolled her eyes. “You imagine this will be some great adventure, but the realities might take you by surprise. It might really exhaust you.”

Devon seemed capable of a car ride, to me.

“My reality and yours, dearest, are often quite different.”

“Your reality is different from *everybody* else’s,” she said.

He shrugged his amusement.

I laughed. I knew this about Devon — the next fun event, the next great adventure, mediocre events described as extravaganzas. Even though Celeste groaned at Devon’s banter, I still saw a spark of joy, a look of love light her face as he reached out to put his arm around her.

After dinner I started to clear the dishes, but Celeste insisted that I spend the time with Devon. We ambled through the patio doors onto the deck and I pulled up two bright blue Adirondack chairs. I wanted to ask him questions without being indelicate. Like, how long the doctors thought he had to live, but I knew that would be useless. Devon ignored medical statistics — all numbers, really — stock market ups and downs, bank statements, even his own age. He lived in some unnumbered universe. But then he had Celeste to take care of numerical details.

Sitting there in that quiet, I knew what else I wanted to ask him. It hinged on a story he’d told me a year ago when I’d last visited. Celeste had gone to bed and Devon and I sat outside long past midnight with a night cap.

I remembered him telling me about a very sick friend. The doctors had diagnosed a cancerous growth in his large intestine. Devon had imagined himself standing inside the man’s large intestine. The scene was real to Devon as he described it — moist, red, oozy, bumpy. He looked around and found the growth with its marauding tentacles. He took his instant freeze gun and ‘let ‘er rip.’ I remembered that phrase in particular. When the main core and all the spreading arms were frozen, he took a mallet and shattered the mass into billions of pieces. They melted and dissipated into his lymph system. When the surgeons went in with the scope, Devon told me, they found nothing. I had stared at him, blinking.

Devon never told his friend what he’d done.

I’d heard of these cures by medical intuitives who work that way with the body — all fine and dandy, but now Devon’s life was at stake. I reminded him of the story. “You said something like you took your gun and froze the whole thing and then shattered it. Can you cure yourself in that way?”

“That’s my plan,” he said, a big smile lighting up his face, only I can’t use the freeze gun.”

“How come?”

“In my case blood and marrow are involved, so there’s no single site I can go to.”

Celeste stepped out onto the deck and pulled up a chair.

“So, what will you do?” I asked.

“I’m using a brilliant yellow race car that zooms at lightning speed through my body ejecting a purple-killer-concoction that zaps the cancerous cells.”

I burst out laughing and looked at Celeste who shrugged and smiled.

“Laugh if you must. Mental imaging works. I send my illness out to the universe, the healing’s out of my hands. I just do the work and relax.”

“I didn’t mean to laugh, honest, and I hope with all my heart that it works,” I said.

“Here’s the reality, Kristi. Here’s the reality.” He said this slowly, looking at me. “I’m not in pain. My loved ones are here. It’s been a bright sunny day with a mellow sunset, and we ate well. If you go minute by minute things are pretty darn good.”

He could let go of his situation like that! When I looked at my own behaviour — it wasn’t that I dwelt on difficulties so much, but I spent a lot of time planning my great future. Ha! I was almost never in the present moment.

But, what would he do, I wondered, when the present moment wasn’t so great?

I looked at Celeste. “He’s the magician of the lemonade stand, turns —”

“Lemons into grapes,” he said and bust out laughing.

At that moment the sun lit up a spot in a shrub bed and there sat another shiny lemon car with all the appendages. I wondered how many more of these magic cars populated the yard and the interior of the house.

"I'm tired," said Devon.

What was this? It was only nine o'clock. He struggled out of the low chair, took our arms and the three of us shuffled into the house.

In the bedroom his adjustable hospital bed sat parallel to a single bed for Celeste. I felt sad for them. While Devon changed in the bathroom, Celeste turned down the covers on their beds. I asked if I could help and Celeste sent me to the kitchen to get a glass of filtered water. When I returned, Devon was in bed. Celeste handed him the chemo pills, pain killers and the water. He groaned, "The hounds are howling at the door." Celeste leaned over and kissed him. I stood there frozen, just staring, but managed, "Good night, Devon."

"I can be done here if I have to." He closed his eyes.

"Yes, we know, it's okay," Celeste murmured as we left the room. In the hallway, we reached for each other and hugged. I could feel tears welling up and when we parted her eyes too, were tear-filled.

My mind spun with the reality of his illness and the unfairness of it all. *Get a grip, Kristi. Be there for Devon and Celeste.* I took a deep breath. Apparently there was no cure for Devon's cancer, but maybe his imaging would be a way for him to manage it for a long time or maybe even cure it. I wanted there to be magic in this world.

I'd noticed another lemon car on the dresser in their bedroom. I hoped the house was filled with rubber lemon cars — every self, every corner, every dresser.

The next morning, I arrived in the kitchen to the heated sounds of an argument.

"Look," Devon said. "We'll go this morning. We'll be back by one. Four hours at most."

"Your meds only last four hours."

"I'll take another batch on the way."

"What if you suddenly get totally fatigued?"

"Please, hon. I really need to do this."

Celeste drove, Devon beside her, and I sprawled in the back.

"This illness is a great adventure," Devon said, "the greatest one I've ever had."

"Oh, come on Devon! An *adventure*?"

"Yes!"

I sat in stony silence.

He turned and looked at me. "I know how serious this is. I do. I don't exaggerate it or down-play it. Nor do I go into 'why me' or sit on the pity-pot. I accept and I'm free."

I shook my head. It sounded so simple, but how does anyone get there?

"I think up ingenious solutions and get some fun going."

I laughed. "You're a genius."

Devon and I gazed out the side windows. I was mesmerized by the expansiveness of the flaxen fields and the azure sky. The orange, red and yellow leaves were coming into view now along the river bank.

"I don't want to leave this."

"Oh Devon," I said softly. Celeste extended her hand to him and he took it.

After a time when his voice was steadier, he said, "I'll grow accustomed to our new life."

"So will I," Celeste said.

"I'm in awe of how you two are handling all this."

"Thanks for being here for us," Celeste said.

"I wouldn't be anywhere else."

"You know what I want?" Devon asked.

"No," we both said.

"I want to have lunch at a five star restaurant, and I want a pork chop with mashed potatoes and green peas."

"Devon, that's impossible out here with all the small towns," Celeste said.

"It doesn't matter, anything is possible. Remember all those times I conjured up parking spaces, or the time a pair of red mittens just *appeared* for Celeste, exactly what she wanted, in the absolute correct size, in the first store we looked?"

"Devon, we're already on our way back," she said.

I chimed in, "Can't we just go home and have a nice salad?"

"No, come on. You're both being sticks in the mud."

"There's only Momont before we get to Saskatoon," Celeste said. "No five star anything. You know what you'll get?" Celeste asked.

"You're going to tell me."

"Canned peas."

"No. I'll get frozen peas gently steamed. Here's Momont now. Let's go in."

Celeste groaned, turned the car off the highway and cruised down Main street. It looked like a ghost town. Devon saw it first, a sign ahead on the right. He gave a whoop and threw his arms up. I bent to look out the front window and saw a service station sign that said, "Five Star Services." Devon had almost lifted himself off the seat and was bent over with laughter. Attached to the service station was a diner.

Celeste turned her head and we looked at each other with dropped jaws.

"You knew about this place," I accused Devon.

"I didn't, I swear. I'm a sorcerer."

Celeste said, "You really want to eat here?"

"Absolutely."

She heaved a sigh. "Kristi and I will go in and ask if they have pork chops."

He clapped his hands like a child and began singing a stupid song, 'I love to go a wan-der-ing ...'

The decor inside was prairie farmhouse circa 1920's. Brown jugs, butter churners, and cream cans occupied the old wood shelves. No customers sat at the tables covered with gaudy plastic cloths.

"Ya, sure," the young girl said. "The chops are frozen, but we can thaw 'em." She turned to help a man at the till. We looked at each other and mouthed the word, "shit."

In the parking lot, Devon gave us a hi five. "What fun, what excitement. This is how I want to spend the rest of my days," he said. Celeste and I helped him from the car and up the two steps into the diner. Fatigue was a wraith wrapping around him. As we walked in, Devon asked the young server, "Do you have a bottle of wine?"

"We're not licensed."

"Not even in that remote alcove back there that's attached to your *home*?"

I could see the wheels turning. "Ya, sure. We do live back there. I'll talk to mum."

She returned with a bottle of sparkling Zinfandel and seated us in the back room reserved for special parties. The place smelled of old wood and French fries.

"Aren't you a doll. What a great place this is." Devon had his camera around his neck. "Can I take your picture?"

She looked like she wanted to run away.

"Aw, c'mon — with my partner and long-time friend. All of you, next to the wood stove. On the count of three." Click. click. "Wonderful. Look at this," he said, showing her the digital image. She smiled politely and then looked at him as if she just couldn't quite *get* him. Either that or she thought him some kind of god.

Later, our young server returned to top up our wine. "You must be celebrating something," she said.

"Yes, we're celebrating your place," Devon said. "It's a great find."

She stared at him for a second, shook her head and waved her arm at him, but a big smile graced her face as she sauntered away.

I was happy, too — with my chef's salad which came with heaps of iceberg lettuce, pale ham and grey-rimmed yolk in the hard-boiled eggs, happy watching Devon saw away at his pork chops, happy watching Celeste dig for his pills in her purse.

And inside I was laughing. This felt like magic.