

Louise Runyan

Hour Wait - Minute Thrill

*You're getting old when you get the same sensation from a rocking chair
that you once got from a roller coaster.*

“God, Carl, you’ll puke if you eat all that!”

“Hey, if I puke, I puke. But I can’t stand in this line for an hour without food.”

“Give the guy a break, Marge. If he pukes, he buys the beer.”

Marge sniffed, and turned to face forward, ignoring the rest of the group. As usual, she was the first in line among her fellow club members, and chances were good she’d probably manage to cut in front of several others who were patiently waiting their turn to ride the newest roller coaster in the park, *The Holy Rail*.

Their bright blue T-shirts proclaimed they belonged to the *Senior Screamers*, and not one of them was a day under 65. Most had retired from the company that had designed the thrill rides enjoyed in amusement parks throughout the United States. All carried notes from their doctors verifying that they were healthy enough to survive the ride.

Ted held hands with his wife, Wendy, at the end of the line. Although he’d retired over ten years ago, Ted still kept tabs on his last project. *The Holy Rail* was his brainchild, conceived long before the technology to support it existed.

“The best ride will be the front of the first car,” he whispered to Wendy. He began counting intervals of twelve under his breath. Others in the club were doing the same.

“I can’t believe you told everyone the back was best,” Wendy giggled, “Look at Marge! She can’t decide whether to be a bitch and shove ahead of five, or graciously give cuts to six!”

Bitch won out as Marge glared at the open-mouthed pre-teens she'd managed to put behind her. As the line began to move again, an attendant reprimanded those near the front.

“Stay with your party! Even number groups, please stay together! Singles, we'll fit you in with odd groups.”

“That takes care of Marge,” Ted said, as Marge triumphantly took over the last seat on the coaster.

“I feel sorry for that kid next to her,” Wendy said. “The lap bar is going to squeeze Marge all over him.”

The coaster cars began their slow ascent, and Marge's seatmate looked like he might be sick before the first turn.

“Sixty-two miles an hour on the first loop, 4 g-forces on the second!” Ted beamed like a proud parent. “Fastest minute you'll ever have on a coaster!”

“Let these two in front of us.” Wendy gestured to the couple behind them. Nose rings quivering in anticipation, the two clambered into the last car.

“Excellent!” Ted let Wendy precede him into the front of the first car.

“Get in, Sit down, Hold on, and Shut up!” she grinned.

And those were the last words Wendy ever spoke.

[Chapter One]

My breath is smooth and regular, like ocean waves. Ebbing and flowing, out and in... I'm practically floating along the highway...

“Shit!” Reality hit as I nearly slipped in a pile of same. My dog usually warns me of these land mines, but she'd inexplicably elected to remain home this morning. Like me, she needs her daily run to ward off the degeneration caused by the four F's. Fat, female, fair, and forty...well, she *is* a blonde lab, and in dog years she must be about my age.

Stopping to scrape my shoe, I realized the escape of running was gone for today. Might as well go home and relieve my daughter of her eldersitting duties. I pictured her at the front door, foot tapping impatiently, whining into her cell phone,

“I have to stay with my grandpa until my mom gets back. It's not like he's going anywhere. I know! This is so Not Right!”

Lindy was a high school senior this year, and anything asked of her was a huge imposition. But I was a pro. My third romp through the angst of teenagerism was going to be a piece of cake.

And it really was Not Right. The same year my husband decided the four F's were Not Right for him, my folks had their last roller coaster ride. Literally. My mom was killed outright, and my dad became a wheelchair bound wacko. I guess if I were him, I'd want as little of reality as he seemed to have. Heck, I go for these daily runs to escape *my* reality.

Reality backed into me as I turned up my driveway.

“Gotta go! Grandpa's fine, he's watching TV. Soccer practice after school, and then I'm going to Gina's, be home late!”

“Love you,” I said to the back of the Toyota as it sped off down the block. I rarely saw Lindy anymore. She left for school every morning and had some activity or another that kept her away from the house long after I’d collapsed for the night. I tried to give her plenty of space – it hadn’t been an easy year for her. After the divorce, she and I moved in with my parents, and then there was the accident to make the move permanent. As a senior, Lindy was allowed to finish at her high school, although it meant a half hour commute to the other side of the Valley.

I imagine Lindy’s world tips back to normal after she leaves for the neighborhood we’d lived in for the last eighteen years. In a weird way, my life seemed to finally fall into place after we moved back to the home where I grew up. Only now, I was the parent. I took a deep breath, pushed open the screen door, and entered my Caregiver and Breadwinner world.

“You just missed Mother,” my dad said.

“Well, I’ll be here the rest of the morning. Maybe she’ll stop by again,” I replied.

According to Dad, Mom was always dropping in while I was out running. I just figured this was his way of coping while I was away. He still recognized me as his daughter, although he didn’t seem to understand who Lindy was. He seemed oblivious to his condition, which was a blessing as far as I was concerned, and if he wanted to spend the bulk of his day in the company of the dearly departed, who was I to dissuade him? At eighty, he had more friends on the Other Side anyway.

I moved on into the kitchen, dismayed as always by the mess that hatched while I was out. Evie, my sweet and faithful companion when it suited her, stared hopefully at the breakfast dishes.

“Missed you this morning,” I told her. “Stepped in some shit.”

Evie was unmoved. The phone rang. I turned from the sink to answer it, stumbling over Evie, who apparently did move.

“Hello?” I heard a click, then static. Damn telemarketers.

Dad was chatting amiably with a group of childhood friends from beyond. He broke off when the phone rang, and reached out for the phone, so I passed it over. He listened intently for a moment, then handed it back.

“Molly, it’s for you. It’s your mother.”