

Before

"I hate it when you do this," Mike said.

"Do what?" Linda answered, staring out of the side window of the car.

"You're pouting or something. The temperature in here is about forty and I don't have a clue."

They drove for a few blocks in silence, the kids in the back seat quiet for the first time all afternoon.

"Sometimes I'm really sorry I didn't go back to school after I had Ricky."

Traffic was heavy on Menaul Boulevard and Mike had to speed to keep up with the flow. Drivers were running late yellow lights and changing lanes without using their turn signals. Guts driving, Albuquerque style.

"Don't bring that up again unless you want to do something about it," Mike said. "You know I've told you over and over that if you want to go back to school we can work something out. I can spend more time baby sitting the kids and doing cooking and laundry. Whatever it takes."

"You say that but then it seems there's always something happening. I mean who's going to take care of the kids if you're working out of town and I have classes? Or you want to go to an Aikido tournament during the week."

"That's not reasons why you can't go back to school. That's just logistics for Christ's sake. Just problems we have to solve."

"Mike, you're being practical and logical and I'm talking about how I feel."

Mike snapped back at her without listening to what she'd said. "I thought we were talking about you wished you had gone back to school after Ricky was born. Don't forget, you were the one who wanted to stay home and be with the kids until they were out of grade school. You're the one who was always talking about your mom being at work or out on a date when you were small. About baby sitters putting you to bed and how that wasn't going to happen to your kids."

The car hit a pothole making a loud thump.
"Goddammit!"

"Watch where you're going, Mike."

"I am watching where I'm going. I saw the pothole but the jerk in the yellow pick up was changing lanes in front of me and I couldn't miss it."

Linda reached into her purse and got a package of peanut butter crackers out and opened them. "Here, Mike. Eat something. You're being cranky and I think your blood sugar's low."

"My blood sugar's not low and I don't want anything to eat," he growled, staring straight ahead.

Linda handed the crackers back to the kids. She twisted a strand of her hair with one hand. "Well, I've done that."

"Done what? What are you talking about?"

"Been there for the kids and now they're old enough and I'm thinking that soon it's going to be middle age city and the most exciting thing in my life is a picture one of them draws or you coming home from work. There has to be more to it than that."

"So what's stopping you? I mean, is this really the issue, going back to school, or is it something else. I have the feeling that this is leading up to something else?"

In the back seat Jennifer kicked at Ricky, a tug of war between them over Jennifer's teddy bear. "Mommy," she screeched, "Ricky is trying to take Buster Bear from me."

"Stop it Ricky." Linda said. "And settle down. We'll be home in a few minutes."

"Well she started it and I was just reading and she started kicking me."

"Did not."

"Did to."

For an instant, Mike looked over his shoulder at his children. "Both of you move over to your side of the seat and stop fighting right now. Or I'm going to reach back there and start smacking anybody I can reach."

"He started it," Jennifer whined. "I was on my side."

"Did not."

"Come on Ricky", Mike said, clenching the wheel with both hands, looking over his shoulder at the line of cars on his left.

"She's your sister and half your size. Don't pick on her."

"I wasn't picking on her, Poppy. I was minding my own business and reading."

"Were not. You grabbed Buster Bear and pulled his bad arm."

Cars and trucks were close and either flowing quickly or slowing down if someone wanted to change lanes or turn. "Be quiet both of you," Mike barked. "I don't want to hear another word from back there until we get home." His knuckles whitened on the steering wheel as he looked first in his left rear view mirror, then his inside mirror, then glanced over his shoulder to see his blind spot.

"Oh that's good, Mike. Great parenting. I see you'll do real well putting your life on hold for child care while I'm in class or studying. How do you expect little kids to be quiet for twenty minutes. That's the problem with the way you deal with them. They're not just short grownups you're in charge of and can order around. You're too harsh."

"I don't believe you said this, Linda. I don't think they're short adults. But goddammit if they're fighting what's wrong with telling them to be quiet for a while."

"You pay attention to the traffic and I'll deal with the kids."

"I am paying attention to the traffic. Have I ever wrecked a car? Have I ever been in an accident?" He wanted to get into the

center lane but traffic was solid. He hit the steering wheel with the ball of his fist.

"Jesus Cristo!"

"I don't know how we'd pay for it," Linda said.

"Pay for what?"

"I mean tuition and books, day care for Jennifer and who would be home when Ricky came from school."

"You're talking about scheduling, planning, nothing else. You might have to pick courses that met at certain times. We would have to be flexible. Day care is just money."

"We don't have any extra money. I've told you we should be saving but somehow we don't ever build it up."

"Don't try to lay that on me about our savings. We had a nice balance and you decided both kids needed new bedroom sets. They sure didn't care."

"Those beds were old and second hand in the first place. The kids should have nice things you know. They deserve nice things."

"I'm not saying they don't deserve nice things but don't say you can't go back to school because we don't have any money because I'm not saving. Do I ever go out and buy things without discussing it with you?"

"What about your six hundred dollar bicycle, Mike? What about spending almost two week's salary on a bicycle?"

"I'd been talking about a new road bike for months. I even took you by the bike store and showed you the one I wanted."

"But you didn't say you were going to buy it without telling me." Linda continued staring out of the window, talking to her reflection. "Will you crack your window," she said. "It feels too close in here."

Mike rolled his window down a few inches. "Why don't you crack your window?"

"It messes my hair, if you don't mind. You're not helping, you know."

"I knew there'd be a hassle. Either way it was going to be a hassle. I knew I was going to buy the bike and if I told you before I was going to buy it we'd have a fight and then you'd be pissed again when I bought it

so I decided that I'd just go through the whole thing once and buy the bike and bring it home."

"That's not very fair you know."

"You have equal access to the checking account, the credit cards. What are you saying? I don't believe this. I bought the bike six months ago."

"I would never spend that kind of money on myself. Certainly not without discussing it, make sure it was okay with you."

"Haven't I ridden my bike to work every time I could so you could have the car?"

"I don't see what that has to do with it. I'm talking about how we'd pay for school and all the other expenses that would come up if I go back to school."

Jennifer yelled, "Mommy, he's trying to take Buster Bear."

"Am not."

"He's pulling on Buster Bear."

"Ricky, leave Buster Bear alone."

"Well she started it."

Their car was in the middle lane and fast approaching College and Menaul, where College is a two block downhill ramp off the freeway. Cars bunched up on both sides of them, in front and behind. The traffic light ahead turned from green to yellow and the cars ahead of them speeded up to make it through the intersection. Both children began screaming at each other and for their mother to do something. "You two shut the hell up," Mike shouted. At the same time he reached

over the seat without looking, flapping his hand at anything that he might hit.

He pushed on the gas and then realized he was going to have a red light and stomped on the brakes. He looked in the rear view mirror and saw the car behind speeding towards them. It had accelerated also and couldn't stop. It rammed into them at the same moment Linda screamed, "Mike, look out!" She was turned to her right, both hands up in front of her face. Their car was launched into the intersection at the same time that an eighteen wheeler, its horn honking, crossed Menaul, brakes failed, forty tons of inertia.

The front tires of the truck crushed the front of the car and across the back seat, dragging it under its carriage for half a

block, showers of sparks spewing into the air in cascades like a buzz saw cutting through metal. The huge truck and smashed car came to a stop in front of the Hilton, in the flower garden, knocking over the marble fountain. Gas and oil and radiator fluid and blood snaked down the sidewalk and trickled into the gutter.