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What About Saving the Earth

LYNN HAMILTON

By the third week it was easier to go into the room: after unlocking the door, I would look straight ahead—not at the chalkboard, not at my desk—walk past the laboratory tables to the windows, focus on each gray handle—a twist to the left, then toward me—and feel the cold air against my face. I would look out at the athletic fields while the air currents pushed past my shoulders. When I heard sighs and grunts and the dull crunch of backpacks hitting the floor, I’d turn and speak, knowing the day had begun without my help.

On Thursday of the third week I unpacked my briefcase at my desk and answered a few homework questions, the students perking up as the chilly air stripped away tendrils of sleep that clung before first period. Two months earlier, back in December, they’d been shocked at my letting cold air into the room—it’s a waste of energy, Mr. Hansen, what about the environment, what about saving the Earth? I’d enjoyed their arguments and told them they were right, but that an overheated room led to dullness. I didn’t think it hurt them to see me as human and inconsistent. Now, as part of the new care they took with me, they kept their sweaters on and didn’t say anything.

Two of the boys had taken Goldie out of her cage and were watching the hamster skate on her nails across a desktop, speaking to her in the high, tender voices adolescents save for animals. “Hey, Goldie, over here, girl, this way.” One of them put Goldie in her yellow exercise ball and set her gently on the floor. She moved along an aisle, slamming into desks and chairs, changing directions, rolling on.

The bell rang. At my nod, Martha, a thin, sharp-chinned girl who liked to keep things on track, got up and shut the windows. “Any questions or comments before we get started?” Their faces lifted toward me like flat flowers toward the sun. They must have thought I had a lot of nerve, to come right out like that, almost daring them. Yes, Mr. Hansen, we have some questions for you, we thought you’d never ask.
Henry, one of the intellectuals, raised his hand, a small derisive smile flickering. I leaned against the smooth oak of the desk and readied myself.

"Earlier in the semester—" Henry stopped. His tone of accusation hung over the sounds of Goldie’s quiet collisions.

“Yes?”

“Earlier, you said…” Henry now seemed embarrassed, glanced at his classmates for support. “You promised we’d make clouds.”

“Yeah,” someone else said with resentment.

I felt a small pressure against my foot and looked down to see Goldie inside her ball, straining, trying to press forward. I nudged her aside, then raised my head and saw the demanding eyes. They wanted to make clouds.

In the teachers’ lounge, Mary Kirsh, who taught music, and Allen Spaack, the gym teacher, stood at a table pouring coffee. Mary was a small, quiet woman I’d never known well who lately seemed to offer a condolence with every glance. Allen had until recently played basketball at a small college upstate. He’d made a few attempts to get acquainted, asking for tips on relating, as he called it, with the students.

“Hey, there, Hansen, save any whales today?”

“It’s only nine-thirty, Allen. I save all that for my lunch hour.”

Incredibly, he laughed and looked pleased. “I’ve been warned not to let you catch me throwing anything away.”

“The faculty is quite appreciative of John’s recycling efforts,” Mary said with a vehemence I never would have expected. She gave us a small unhappy smile before slipping from the room.

A pink message slip rested in my faculty mailbox. Mrs. Shelby had phoned and wanted to see me. Mrs. Shelby, Bobby’s mother. I had only one image of her from Bobby’s funeral—a small woman in a gray suit, her arms filled with the flowers and gifts my students had pressed upon her. Printed in block letters next to Mrs. Shelby’s phone number was the command: “See Mr. Wainwright first.”

In the hall, I eased my way around clots of kids punching and stroking each other near open lockers smelling of dirty gym clothes and rotting fruit. I got outside through a door near the cafeteria and stood under a passageway dripping with melting ice. I took deep, cutting breaths of cold air and stared out across the athletic fields. At the far boundary of the grass, a row of white houses, as dingy and worn looking as old refrigerators, leaned into the winter light.
After a few minutes I went to the main office. Wainwright’s door was shut, so I waited near Abby’s desk. She was on the phone, the receiver deep within her curly black hair. Abby was divorced and sometimes flirted with me, pretending to pity me for having a busy physician for a wife. She hung up the phone and opened her desk drawer. She handed me an index card. “It’s a new chicken recipe—with peanut butter. Easy.”

“Thanks.” I slid the card in my pocket, touched the crinkled paper of the phone message. “You talked to Mrs. Shelby?”

She nodded. “She sounded nice. Sad and nice. I can’t imagine what she’s going through. To have your only child…” She took an orange fabric-covered elastic band off one wrist and bound her hair on top of her head. As she raised her arms, her breasts lifted and bunched together under her gray wool turtleneck. Then Wainwright came out, waved me inside, and shut the door.

Wainwright had refurnished his office during the previous six months—using his own money, he repeatedly pointed out—with a cherry desk that seemed to levitate, a Pakistani rug, Japanese prints. The faculty speculated Wainwright had set his sights on a more prestigious independent school over in Boston.

I sat in one of the two blue upholstered visitors chairs. He hung his suit coat on a rack in the corner before sitting behind his desk.

“I understand Mrs. Shelby wants to see you,” he said. “Any idea what her agenda is?”

I rested my hands on the arms of the chair, the fabric already worn and sticky from the hands of admonished children. “She probably just wants to talk.”

He picked a fat silver pen off the desk and twirled it with his fingers. There were plum-colored depressions under his eyes. “Sometimes, after the first grief wears off, parents look for someone to blame.”

Blame was reasonable, blame could help. I heard the echo of the questions I’d waited for my students to ask, saw their uplifted faces—they wanted to make clouds.

Wainwright leaned forward and rested his shirtsleeves on the desk. “The mother’s not very stable. She’d moved the boy around a lot. There was a nasty divorce and custody fight.”

“I’ll just see what she wants.”

He laid the pen parallel to a silver letter opener on the dark green blotter. “Playing much squash these days?”
"Not much."
"We should play sometime."
"Sure." A slow fatigue was settling into my arms and legs. Wainwright stood, walked to the window and parted the blinds to look out at the playground. Bright winter jackets flashed in the sun. "Our attorneys say a key issue is whether we ignored any clues beforehand that the boy was in trouble. I wonder if you’ve thought anymore about why he chose your room, why he timed it so you would find him. You must have wondered if he was sending you a message."

I had once thought of this guy as my friend. He had at times gone out of his way for me, and not in inconsequential ways. It took me a moment to get my voice under control. "Who knows? Maybe he hated science. Maybe he hated me."

The bell rang. Wainwright walked over to the coat rack and lifted his jacket. "John, I’m going to ask you not to have any contact with this woman."

At the door I turned back. "Does Abby run all faculty phone messages past you, or do you let her use her own judgment?" He was looking in a mirror on the wall, adjusting the collar of his coat.

Abby was on the phone as I passed by. She raised her eyebrows and shrugged in apology. She had taken her hair down again. Next to her desk a girl I didn’t know slumped against the back of a chair, her eyes closed.

"It’s a hundred and one, Mr. Kaminsky," Abby said. "You’ll have to come get her. It’s school regulations."

I worked at my desk for an hour after dismissal, grading quizzes. Most of my students had memorized the necessary terms—cumulus, cumulonimbus, altostratus. My students still believed that the hardest questions came presented on sheets of paper. They believed that if they protested enough or were sufficiently charming, the questions might be put off to another day, perhaps avoided entirely.

I changed the litter in Goldie’s cage and filled her water bottle. I held her in the crook of my arm and stroked the short hair behind her ears. Rodents had never held much appeal for me, but Goldie and her predecessors had elicited great kindness from my students over the years, and her fur was comforting to the touch. In the days after Bobby died, when the grief counselors came to help us, my students had passed Goldie up and down the aisles, lifting her to
their faces, holding her, stroking her, nearly squeezing the life out of her. We had met in another classroom while workers replaced squares of linoleum around my desk. I had sat mutely at the back of the room, letting the counselors, a man and a woman, be the wise adults in the room, the ones who could comfort.

At five o'clock I drove to Laura and Andy's elementary school and collected them from aftercare. They carried the dusky scent of a day spent with crayons and cheap paper and other small children. We stopped at the grocery store to buy a roaster and peanut butter to make Abby's recipe. We were coming out of the store, Andy's hand in mine, Laura a few steps behind, when a guy began shouting in the parking lot. I turned in time to see a tall bearded man in a baseball cap hit a young boy—no more than five years old—hard on the side of the head.

"What did I tell you?" the man yelled. He turned and walked away, the little boy stumbling after him through the heavy traffic of the parking lot.

"He hit him, Daddy. Did you see that?" Laura tugged on my arm. "Help him, Daddy." I took a step forward, then stopped. But as we watched, the man let the little boy catch up with him, then knocked him against a car. I went back and handed Laura the grocery bag. "Take Andy to the sidewalk and stay there."

I ran across the icy asphalt, razors of energy and rage slicing down my legs. There was a flickering blackness at the edge of my vision. The little boy reached a long maroon sedan, pulled open the car door, and scrambled onto the back seat.

The man with the beard was standing beside the open front door of the car. When I got to him, I grabbed the front of his flannel shirt. "Look, asshole, you want to hit somebody? Go ahead, hit me."

The shirt strained as he pulled back from me, ducking his head, not fighting back. His eyes darted from side to side, fast. He was just waiting for me to hit him.

I let go of the shirt and stepped back. The blackness seemed to fall away then, and I saw the cars around us, the people, a woman in a fur coat hurrying by with a shopping cart, looking the other way.

I leaned down and looked in the car window. "It's all right," I said. The little boy's brown eyes were wide with fear. He scrambled away from me, into the far corner of the seat.

I stood. "There's no need to hit anyone like that." I couldn't take a full breath. "He's just a kid."
He stared back at me, his eyes dull under heavy, twisting eyebrows. "It's none of your damned business," he said. His voice was low and controlled. He knew nothing was going to happen. He got in the car and shut the door, looking at me in disgust as he started the engine and drove away. It was starting to sleet—millions of snowflakes were forming in cold clouds overhead, then falling and melting through a warmer zone and refreezing in the band of cold air that wrapped the earth. We would talk about sleet in class next week. From the sidewalk, Laura and Andy stared at me with wide orphans' eyes.

When I reached the sidewalk, Laura thrust the grocery bag into my arms. I reached to pull her close, but she twisted away, her pale braid whipping against my arm. In the car, Andy reached around to the four doors and pushed down each lock, each click a reproach.

At home, I put the chicken in the refrigerator. It would have to wait for another day. I microwaved some pizza, and the children and I ate at the pine trestle table in the new kitchen nook. The room hadn't been painted yet, and two nights earlier Liz and I had let Laura and Andy use markers on the walls. The gray sheetrock, spotted with spackling and decorated with their drawings, glowed like the moist interior of a prehistoric cave.

Andy fell asleep over his homework and I carried him upstairs. Later I tucked Laura into bed. Her shelves were covered with orderly collections of shells and fossils and rocks, and I had a secret hope that she would grow to be an archaeologist or paleontologist someday.

"That man was bad. Was he that boy's daddy?" Her eyes pierced like her mother's, sharp as arrowheads.

"Probably. That's what makes it hard to know what to do, honey. When it's other people's children."

She let me get away with that, reached up and patted my hand. "You don't hit me." Her hair was spread across the pillow, fragile as spun sugar.

I touched her cheek. "No. I never would." I was wondering what happened to the little boy when he got home. Maybe his father had become jovial, had joked with his son, his buddy, about all the weirdoes in the world.

"Someone should hurt that man back. Show him how it feels." Laura made a fist with the hand that rested above the lavender covers. The burden of responsibility was already pulling her eyebrows together. Someday she'd have a permanent look of concern, a look like mine.
"You're a good person," I said instead, putting my own hand around her fist. "A strong person."

I was grading book reports at the kitchen table when Liz came home. She kissed the top of my head. "I'm sorry I'm late. It's getting icy out there." She leaned against me and I stroked her wool coat, which still held the cold.

She set her bag on the table, the beeper clinging like a barnacle to the handle. While she went upstairs to change, I heated water for tea, put two mugs on the table. When she came to sit at the table she wore a flannel nightgown. She stretched out her legs and slid her feet onto my lap. I rubbed her calves and ankles, the light stubble scratchy under my palms. Tired legs were an occupational hazard of both waitresses and surgeons, and she'd been the one before being the other.

She pulled pins from her hair and dropped them one by one on the table. The pins were the same copper as her hair, and I gathered them under my fingers as I graded. After a while I told her about Mrs. Shelby's call and my conversation with Wainwright. I didn't tell her about the scene at the grocery store.

"Paul is probably right about the mother planning to sue," Liz said. "Are you going to talk to her?"

"Part of me wants to see what she's like."

She lifted her tea bag out of the mug and pressed it against the rim to squeeze out the last bit of flavor before setting it on a saucer between us. "She probably doesn't understand it any better than you do. There usually aren't any answers and if there are, the families are often the last to have them."

I kept my eyes on my papers, wondering if she used this tone of absolute sureness with her patients. I could imagine her pointing to illuminated x-rays, outlining each available option.

"Seeing the mother seems the least I can do."

"It's masochistic." She pulled her legs off my lap, sat upright in her chair. "You think there's a chance you can make yourself feel just a little bit worse, make us all feel just a little bit worse. Maybe you can find out some heartbreaking details about Bobby's childhood, learn the name of his favorite stuffed animal, his favorite storybook."

I looked at her, at the old argument. "Let it go, Liz."

She picked up her cup of tea, closed her eyes as the steam rose in front of her face. "I'm sorry. But I work every day with people who
have made mistakes that have hurt other people, maybe even contributed to their deaths. They manage to go on without making their mistakes the great dramatic issue in everyone else's lives."

"I'm the one who found him. He picked my room. He sat in my chair, at my desk."

"I know that. I know it was hard." Her voice was softer. "I wish you'd remember what Howard said."

I was trying to remember which particular thing Howard, the marriage counselor, had said that was relevant to this conversation. Back in the fall Liz had said we needed to see someone, that she was unhappy about our communication, or lack of it, that she was frightened for us. Once a week we sat together in a softly lit office as Howard directed his quiet questions to us, mostly to me. He was a nice guy and I liked him, although I found it hard to remember much of what he'd said once we left the office.

Liz set her mug on the table, reached to place her hand on mine. "You don't have to be there if you don't want to be. The money's not that important anymore."

I moved my hand away. "Thanks. That's especially helpful to know."

"I didn't mean it like that. I just want you to do what you want to do, whatever makes you happy."

I moved on to the next paper, made some marks on the page in front of me. "I don't want to get into it right now," I said.

"You never' want to get into it." She gathered the hair pins together and stood. She hesitated by my chair and touched my shoulder once, lightly, as she carried her cup to the sink.

I heard her walk up the stairs and into the children's rooms. I could imagine her straightening their covers with light hands, making a quick appraisal. She would not linger at their bedsides or gaze for long moments from each doorway, grateful for another day of safe passage. She didn't care any less than I did; she was just more optimistic. I remembered something I hadn't thought of in years, how angry I'd been with her on the day of Laura's birth, when she'd seemed to make a party of her early labor. I'd wanted to get to the hospital, into the hands of professionals, but she'd put me off, had instead invited two friends to the house to keep us company. Every half hour, she and Melinda, a fellow resident at the hospital, retreated to our bedroom to see how the labor was progressing. I didn't think either of them had helped deliver
enough babies to be so casual. At one point, at Liz’s laughing insistence, I took pictures of her and Melinda on the living room couch, Melinda holding up three fingers to show the number of centimeters Liz’s cervix had dilated. I took the pictures, thinking of Melinda’s fingers inside my wife—yes, Melinda was a doctor, but I wanted white sheets, sterilized equipment, people with decades of accumulated experience. I’d lost it then, had yelled at my laboring wife, at her friends.

Hours later at the hospital, after Liz had begged for an epidural, after Laura’s broad (even then) shoulders had finally been eased out of her, Liz had stroked my face as I leaned over her in the recovery room. “It wouldn’t have been any different if I’d worried more,” she’d said. I had pressed my face into her sweaty hair, into her sureness, relief coating over the leftover anger and fear deep in my gut.

After school on Friday I graded a new set of papers, then did some tidying in the lessening light. Abby stopped by my room to ask if we’d liked the chicken recipe. She said she was going to a basketball game with Allen Spaack that night, did I think he was too young for her. I told her no, but maybe too tall. She stood on her tiptoes and curved her arms up, pretending. After she left I thought about asking Liz to come up with somebody for Abby, a doc maybe.

I had just finished cleaning Goldie’s cage when I heard someone behind me. A woman stood in the doorway, wearing jeans and a well-tailored white shirt, her dark hair in a ponytail. In front of her she held a small purse that made me think of saddles and riding gear. She tilted her head to the side. “Is that Goldie?”

“Yes it is…Mrs. Shelby?” She nodded and walked across the room. I lifted Goldie toward her. She gave the hamster a tentative pat; her hands were small and ringless. “Bobby talked about her once. Some silly thing she did. I wouldn’t let him have a dog. I said they ate too much, that we couldn’t afford it. Can you believe it? I go over every stupid thing I ever said to him.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t returned your phone call,” I said, turning to put Goldie away. I took an unnecessarily long amount of time settling her and locking the cage door. The thought came to me that Mrs. Shelby had come to hear stories about Bobby in class, that she wanted to gather every possible memory. The unforgivable truth was that I could remember almost nothing in particular about him. During the eight weeks I’d known Bobby he had been quiet, but not
unusually so. He hadn’t stood out as a loner or a trouble-maker. He’d never lingered after class with the confiding look I’d learned to recognize in children who needed to share family secrets.

As she lowered herself into one of the desks, she still held the purse against her chest. I thought of what Wainwright had said, something about instability. She saw me noticing the bag and set it on the floor.

I saw her prepare herself, saw it in the way she held her mouth tightly and lifted her chin. “I wanted to see you, to see where he—where it happened—where he killed himself.”

I nodded, still standing by Goldie’s cage.

“It must have been terrible for you, being the one to find him,” she said. She hugged herself, her hands tightening into small white fists. “I need you to tell me.”

The smell filled my head, the heat of the closed room, the way I’d stood there, briefcase and coffee mug in hand, thinking at first the room had been vandalized, red paint thrown like a curse on the chalkboard. Then coming closer, looking to see who it was. “I don’t think I…”

“Please,” she said. “I can’t sleep. I just imagine—” Her head jerked toward the open door. Wainwright stood there, his overcoat on, his briefcase under his arm. “Why, Mrs. Shelby,” he said. His eyes were wide, actually frightened looking.

“Everything’s all right, Peter,” I said. Mrs. Shelby didn’t say anything.

“Can I be of any help?” he asked her. She shook her head.

“Everything’s all right,” I said again.

He looked at us. There was the sound of Goldie drinking at her water bottle and the tinny crackle of the heaters coming on. “I’ll catch up with you in the morning, John,” he said. I nodded and he backed through the door.

I walked around to my chair, gripping the back of it hard. “He must have hidden in one of the storage closets over there until the cleaning crew locked up. Sometime during the night he backed my chair up against the chalkboard. The police said he must have put the butt of the shotgun against my desk. He’d used some twine to rig the trigger.”

She nodded, her arms still wrapped around her chest.

“When I found him that morning, he was on his side, on the floor here. He was curled up. He might have been sleeping. That was all.”
As I came around my desk, she lifted her hands to her face and began to sob quietly. I reached my hand toward her, nearly touched her, then didn’t. She reached down for her bag and opened it. I braced myself, ready to move toward her, but she pulled out a soft clump of tissues.

“Dear God, he was only thirteen,” she said. “How did we ruin things for him in that amount of time?” She wiped her face with a tissue, then put her head down on the desk, her ponytail curving around her neck.

“I don’t know,” I said. I touched her then, patting her shoulder a few times. I wondered suddenly where Laura and Andy were. I had to consciously picture them at aftercare—they were part of the great daily shuffling of children into other adult hands, they were fine.

Mrs. Shelby blew her nose, a short determined effort. When she looked at me, her dark eyes were calmer. I leaned back against my desk. Under my hands the oak still felt smooth with the lemon oil I’d rubbed in two Saturdays before, after scrubbing every crevice with a toothbrush. Voices of warning—Liz’s, Wainwright’s—floated through my mind, then dispersed into wispy trails.

“For some time—for the whole past year, really—I haven’t been sure I wanted to keep teaching.” She was looking at me with a glint of some feeling—confusion, perhaps compassion—in her eyes. “I haven’t cared as much as I used to. So many children pass through, you see... it becomes... I’ve been thinking that I should have noticed Bobby was in trouble.”

“It had nothing to do with you.” Her voice was kind, but there was an edge to it, and the expression in her eyes had hardened, as if I had just emerged as a person, someone to like or dislike.

My face was suddenly hot, the whole room once again overheated, airless. “No, of course it didn’t,” I said. I moved to the windows, pulled one open. The cold, dry air hit me like a stinging blow.

“Do you have a family?” Mrs. Shelby asked.

“Yes,” I said, turning back around. “Yes, I do.”

I walked to my chair, sat in it for the first time since Bobby died. “I’ve just wondered—I’ve asked myself—why did he do it here, in my room?”

Mrs. Shelby dropped the damp tissues into her bag. “He told me once he liked the way you cared about the world and everything. I guess he thought you’d make sure things were handled right.”
I looked down at my hands. I had taken his blood-spattered coat from my desk, had used it to cover him. I'd rearranged one arm that had twisted in an uncomfortable looking way. Then I'd gotten away, as fast as I could.

She shut her bag with a sharp metallic click. When she spoke her voice was brisk. "Bobby said that you told them that every day three kinds of plants or animals were dying out forever. I told him it couldn't possibly be true."

"It's mainly in the rain forest," I said. "And it is true."

She shook her head. "I'm glad I told him it wasn't so. Children don't need to hear that sort of thing." The denial was bright and absolute in her eyes. She stood and walked to Goldie's cage, reaching one finger through the bars to stroke the hamster's fur. After a moment she said, "You can tell Paul Wainwright he can stop calling. I'm not going to sue anybody."

"I'll tell him." I stood and pushed my chair up squarely against my desk.

She walked around the room's perimeter, looking up at the posters and mobiles, leaning over to sniff a tray of bean sprouts. She shook the coffee can that held our Adopt-A-Tiger fund, the result of a hard-fought class vote on which species to save. But what about the pandas, Mr. Hansen? What about the whales?

She stopped near a laboratory table on which I'd stacked a case of empty soda bottles. "You don't see glass soda bottles much anymore."

"We're going to use those to make clouds. You light a match and put it in the bottle, then suck out the air. It creates condensation, little clouds in each bottle."

She nodded and continued around the room, looking hard at things. As she neared the door she turned to me. "Bobby didn't leave any of his things here, did he? Books or maybe something he wrote? A navy blue jacket?"

"No. I'm sorry." At the door, she turned back toward me and lifted one hand in a quick wave. "Thanks." Her shoes squeaked as she hurried down the hall. I wondered where she was heading, if anyone was waiting. I shut and locked the open window. Across the fields the white houses were turning to lavender in the winter light. A low shelf of purple clouds was edging its way across the sky. On Monday, after we made clouds, we would talk about rain, how it took a million droplets to make a single raindrop. I would
explain the collision process, how the droplets hit each other and clung together until they formed a raindrop heavy enough to fall.

A light went on in the first-floor window of one house, then another, then lights glowed on the floors above, as people came home from work to their families—to sweet pleasures, or boredom, or the hardest parts of their lives. I felt Liz’s touch on my shoulder—the warning in it, the plea—as she left the kitchen the night before. I stood at the window of my classroom a few more minutes, looking into the darkening evening until, one by one, all of the houses were lighted.