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Fresh, New-Age Stuff

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A ding and a breeze drew my attention as the door of the diner swung inward.

Morton, that scoundrel, shuffled in, smiling at the waitress as he came over to my table. He eased himself slowly into the chair in front of me, sighing and adjusting his belt, his belly straining against his shirt's buttons. He hung the hook of his cane on the edge of the table, next to mine. He grinned broadly. I shook my head.

"You old so-and-so," I scolded. His grin only got wider. "No, you're a real schmuck, Morty! First you miss our lunch last week, and now you show up late this week?"

"Oh, come on, Syd, what's a couple weeks after forty-five years, hmm?" Morton protested. "You telling me *you've* never been late in forty-five years?"

"I'm sitting here waiting, not knowing if you're going to show or stiff me again. What chutzpah! What disrespect!" I persevered.

"Sydney," sighed Mort.

“And the waitress was just here. I shoed her away ’cause I was waiting for you, and now who knows when she’ll be back!”

“Waitress, shmaitress,” he said.

“And you could have told me you weren’t coming last week. I really wanted to talk to you!”

“Sydney, Sydney, wait till you hear why I couldn’t meet you. You of all people, with your hemp and your organic supplements, you’re just gonna plotz!”

“Morton, I swear to God I’m going to strangle you. How about you listen to me for a second? I needed you last week.”

“Shh, shh, listen, Syd! I’m sorry I wasn’t here, but you really have to listen to this.” His voice was so excited, his eyes wide. I relented.

“Go ahead, Mort.”

“You know I’ve had my health problems. I know you hate hearing about them, but I’ve been a sick man. Shirley tells me she’s already been picking out my headstone. The diabetes, and the terrible gout, and my fakakte heart after all the heart attacks. And when I get the—the—the atrial fibri-who’s-its, my heart feels like it’s pounding out of my chest.”

“Sure,” I nodded. I had heard the sob story of his health so many times, I was practically mouthing along with him.

“Well, last week I went in for a little procedure. Dr. Far—Farshahar... well, this nice Arab gentleman, he’s the best in the business, so they say, at this thing called RBTM, remote bio-medical tele-monitoring. You’d love it, Syd, it’s fresh, new-age stuff.”

“Uh huh.”

“What they do is they take this whatsit, this implantable analyzer, and they put it in your arm, see, and it takes readings from your body and sends them back to their central health centre in Milwaukee or somewhere,” Morton said.

The waitress came over, pad in hand.

“Lox and cream cheese,” said Mort.

“Green salad,” I said, pushing the unread menus into the waitress’ hands. She dutifully wrote down our orders and strode away.

“Must be new here,” I said, smiling at Mort for the first time today, but he didn’t seem to notice, he was so caught up with his health gizmo.

“It sees your blood sugar, and your heart rhythm, it does heart readings and brain readings and blood readings and all sorts. And when the analyzing folks in Milwaukee sense something dangerous is happening in your body, they just call you and tell you, and it could save your life, see?”

“On the phone?!”

“Sure, why not? I have a cell phone, after all. Shayna taught me how to use it!”

“A degree from Granddaughter Academy does not make you an—wait, you have this thing inside you?”

Morton slid up his left sleeve, his eyes alight. There was a tidy three-centimetre scar on his left forearm.

“They take this little pill-sized thing and just slap it right in. You’re out for an hour and that’s it. Syd, I’ll give you his number, my doctor.”

“And why would I need this?” I asked. Mort had always thought I was absurd in the ways I

took care of my body. He had laughed at me ever since I got acupuncture when we were stationed in Vietnam together. He poked fun at my natural remedies and love of Eastern medicine. I'm proud to have jogged every week for the past however-many years, even as my joints began to ache and protest. And meanwhile, I've watched Mort's body fall apart. I really tried to help him, but he always scoffed at my advice. He trusted the doctors, with their pill-for-every-season and their fancy treatments, but where had that gotten him? And this mechanical phone surgery was just ridiculous.

"Syd, it's what we always talked about! It's what we always dreamed of! We'll live forever! We'll keep this café in business until the mashiach comes! We're going to be here to see the great-grandchildren after all. We'll dance at all the simchas, you and me."

He reached across the table and held both my hands with his. His gnarled, arthritic hands grasped my own gnarled, arthritic hands. I nodded, but I couldn't say I was convinced.

"Listen, Syd, maybe you don't need it, with your fruit juices and your never-aging tie-dye, but me, the doc says that since I have diabetes, I might not even know if I'm having a heart attack. If I had a stroke, this thing would know before I did, and I could be at the hospital in minutes."

The waitress put two tall glasses of water, napkins, and cutlery in front of us.

"I can't believe you let them put that thing in your body, Morty. You're half robot now."

"Half, that's overstating it, isn't it?"

“Well, you washed-up lawyer has-been, sue me if I’ve overstated it. Me, I like to keep my body free of toxins.”

“Sure, Syd, free of toxins, except for your girlfriend, what was that shiksa’s name again? Oh, now I remember. Mary-Jane. Ha!”

I shook my head at his taunts.

“Let’s see here,” said Morton, taking out his cell phone.

“Listen, about last week—”

“Oh, damn it, my phone was on vibration. I always miss the vibrations! I missed a couple calls from the centre! At least I didn’t forget it somewhere again.”

He switched it on full volume and the phone rang almost immediately. He answered it.

“Yes? Yes, Morton Rabinovitch. Okay. Okay. Sodium? Okay. Oh, sure. What? Oy, damn. No. No. Yes. Thank you. Yes. Bye.”

“So, nu? What did they say?” I asked, surprising even myself with my sudden curiosity.

Morton looked at his phone intently for a few moments, then put it away carefully.

“It was the centre, the health centre,” Morton said.

“Yes, I figured it was the health centre, Morty! What did they say?”

“They said I’m flipping in and out of atrial fibrillation. They wanted to know if I was doing something that might be causing it, like drinking coffee, or if I thought I had an infection.”

“Is it serious?” I asked.

“No, my doctor had mentioned it’s happening to me all the time nowadays and that I should just

take my medications. Oh, and they also said that my sodium was going too low, and reminded me I shouldn't be drinking so much water. Speaking of which ...”

Morton pushed the glass of water across the table towards me.

“See? I'm healthier already.”

“Well don't give it to me!” I yelped, looking at the water as if it had turned into poison. Morton winked at me.

Our food arrived and we set into it.

“Mort, I can't tell you how sad I was not to have you here last week. I had to eat my babka alone. And then yours, too!”

“See, Syd? You need one of these things too! Shame on you, babka is bad for you!”

“This coming from the king of babka himself,” I retorted.

“Well, now I'll be able to eat just the right amount of babka! Haven't you always wanted to know what's going on in your body?”

“Morty, I do know what's going on! If you ever actually did meditation with me, you'd know. ... Anyway, I don't need a little robot to know what's *not* going on in yours. You've been constipated for weeks, haven't you, Morty? I can tell from your face.”

“Oh yeah? Well the little shits I squeeze out are bigger than your pecker!”

“Keep your voice down, Morty!” I said, trying not to make eye contact with our hovering waitress. Morton grinned through his cream cheese.

“Listen,” I began, again. “Let me just tell you about last week. I really wanted to talk to you—”

Morton’s phone rang loudly. He pushed his plate away and fumbled about in his pocket before pulling out his phone.

“Yes? Yes, yes, Morton Rabinovitch. Sugar is 12? Well, I’m just finishing lunch. Sure, feeling fine. Yes, please do. Fine, fine. Thanks. Bye.”

My eyes must have been blazing. I could have strangled the son-of-a-bitch right then and there.

“Oh cool it, Syd, they were just checking in.”

Morton hit a few buttons on the phone, making sure he had hung up, and put it down on the table.

“Ooh, I have to go to the washroom,” said Mort suddenly, pushing himself up from his chair. He hurried off, tossing over his shoulder, “Wish me luck. My prostate’s the size of a honeydew.”

He left me alone with two empty plates, one cane, and his cell phone.

I tapped at the face of the phone absentmindedly. When I realized he had forgotten it, he had already disappeared down the hallway to the bathroom. What a selfish, thoughtless jerk. I really needed him last week. I really needed him now. My wife meant the world to me, and now, with her mind all twisted up, I felt like she might never be mine again. ... I was terrified. And losing your mind, you couldn’t talk to just anyone about something like that ... it had to be Morty. Morty was always smarter about things like this. He would know what to do. If only I could have gotten a damn word in edgewise. I blew my nose as the waitress cleared away our plates.

Suddenly, Morton's phone rang. Once, twice, three times, very loudly. I looked around. Mort was still in the washroom. These spies, these damn swindlers... I turned his phone on vibrate and shook my head.

Bzzzzz, it buzzed, moving slowly across the table. *Bzzzzz*. *Bzzzzz*. It stopped buzzing.

Moments later, it buzzed again. Exasperated and only a bit curious, I answered it.

"Hello?"

"This is the Body Monitoring and Maintenance Centre calling for Morton Rabinovitch. Is this Morton Rabinovitch?"

I panicked and hung up. My heart was pounding. The whole thing made me uncomfortable. Who were these people? How much of him did they have access to? Could they hear what he was hearing, see what he was seeing? How was I supposed to pour out my heart to him with this thing monitoring his every move? Morton, my dear and foolish friend, was always too trusting, even when we were serving together. How many times had I saved his hide? Now I had to save him from this nonsense. These thieves were probably charging him by the call. Did he really think this would help his health? Annoying pricks; if I could just—

"Did anyone call?" asked Morton, startling me as he eased himself back into his chair. He took his phone back from me and put it in his pocket.

"What? Come on, listen, I actually want to talk to you about something important, Mort."

"Sure," said Morton, again reaching across the table to grasp my hands. "Your life gives me

naches, Syd. You know I've always loved our Wednesday lunches."

"Me too, Morty. But goddamn it, I wish you would goddamn listen to me! I really needed you here last week, you son of a bitch! You see—Morty, are you okay?"

Morton was sweating and looked pale.

"Morty, are you okay?"

"Ha! That's the great thing! I'd know if something were wrong, since the centre would call. No call, no worries! But you, you're too good for a little surgery? You sad sacks can never be sure. Is it indigestion? Is it a heart attack? Ha!"

Morton began breathing faster, with weird, uneven breaths. I was starting to really worry about him.

"You don't look well, Morty. Maybe we should call an ambulance. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Oh yeah. I charged my phone this morning! Shayna showed me how. They'd call if—"

Morton suddenly slumped in his chair.

The waitress came up behind him.

"Just the cheque?" she asked.

Bzzzzz, went Morton's phone in his pocket.

Bzzzzz. Bzzzzz.

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