

**DEPARTMENT
OF
TEMPORAL
ADJUSTMENT**

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This book is a work of fiction and a figment of the author's imagination. Similarities to actual characters, places, names, or events are purely coincidental.

Onny—

We have had some great adventures so far.

Are you ready for more?

DEPARTMENT OF TEMPORAL ADJUSTMENT





Chapter 1



“LEFT!” I YELLED, UNABLE TO keep my voice low. “There’s the sign! This is it, turn right here!”

My husband quickly moved into the lane to turn right, and I realized that he must not have heard my directions clearly. I frantically tried to correct his mistake before we had to waste more time turning around yet again.

“No, no, no!” I squeaked, “I said left, turn right here!”

“That’s what I’m doing,” Tony said through gritted teeth with what appeared to be ultimate patience. “We *are* turning right.”

“You’re not listening,” I said in the calmest voice I could manage. “I said to turn left right here.”

“I don’t think *you* are listening, since that doesn’t make the least bit of sense,” Tony responded in a voice tinged with frustration. “We can’t turn left and right at the same time. Do we need to turn left, or right?” He seemed to be a bit distressed, but I could not figure out what he was getting so

upset about. All he had to do was drive the car and follow my directions—nothing complicated about that!

“Left, at this next road coming up...right here!”

“Just point.”

I pointed to the left, and Tony swerved into the left-hand lane to make the requested turn.

Finally, we were heading in the right direction. I turned to smile at my husband and realized that in my excitement to get where we needed to go, I had probably handled the whole exchange the wrong way. My poor Tony was the perfect picture of the harassed husband, with his clenched jaw, tense shoulders, and death grip on the steering wheel.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to yell,” I admitted contritely. He glanced in my direction and I cringed at the expression on his face. It was clear that my apology had not been accepted, since he was now the picture of the cantankerous cab driver as well as the quintessential harassed husband.

I glanced toward the back of the car to see if my loudness had upset the children, who were being suspiciously quiet, and was relieved to find they had all fallen asleep. At least I was spared the embarrassment of my children witnessing their mother’s fall from grace. They, at least, could still think of me as the “calm, cool, and collected” type of person.

“I am just so frustrated,” I continued quietly. “Do you realize we have been driving over half an hour, and we still cannot find that stupid road?”

“We’ll find it, don’t worry,” Tony responded, and I was happy to note that his death grip on the wheel had loosened just a bit, and his shoulders had lost some of their tension.

“I hope so.”

“How are we doing on time?”

“We still have another half hour before her appointment,” I admitted, “but that doesn’t take into account that we are supposed to be there fifteen minutes early to fill out

paperwork. So in reality we really only have fifteen minutes to find this place.”

I turned again to look at the sleeping children in the back seat. This wild goose chase of a drive had come about because my oldest daughter, Becca, struggled with chronic asthma. When I had heard that a neighbor’s child had been all but cured by one of the local doctors, I had immediately called to make an appointment for my child.

I had been informed firmly and calmly by the receptionist that the doctor was no longer taking new patients, and that there was a long list of people who were waiting for an opening. The thought of my daughter in the midst of an attack had caused pride to fly out of the window as I had begged and pleaded, and had somehow managed to convince the receptionist to find room for my child.

I knew that it was paramount that we arrived for the appointment on time. If we blew this chance, there was no way any amount of begging and pleading would win a second one. Which was why I had allowed a full hour for a drive that should have only taken about ten minutes.

Should have. Unfortunately, the directions given to me by the office staff had proven to be confusing, unclear, and just plain wrong. Half the streets I had been told to drive past had never materialized, and it seemed that the streets we were supposed to turn onto were elusive enough that I was beginning to suspect they had either been renamed or had never existed at all.

I held on tight as my husband quickly made a right turn at my urging. But somehow, nothing looked quite right. We should have been in the middle of a series of medical offices, and this street could only be termed residential. It only took a few minutes of driving to realize that we must have made another wrong turn.

“Darn it! I must have misread the sign...again,” I sighed. “As much as I hate to admit it, I think we might as well give up and go home. We’ll never make it to the doctor’s on time, and

there is no way they'll give us another appointment if we're late to this one. Why *would* they give such bad directions?"

Tony made the block through the residential area and pulled back out onto the main road. He drove for a couple of minutes, looking all around to get his bearings.

Tony was one of those rare people who had the most amazing sense of direction. No matter where he was he could always find his way. Put him in a city he has never seen, tell him where you want to go, and he'd somehow miraculously get you there.

If he were a superhero he'd be Map Man, or the Right Direction, or, or...well, he'd be something that instantly identified him as the man with the infallible inner compass who always knew the way to...well, anywhere.

But every Superman has his Kryptonite, and I'm afraid for my Map Man, it's me. I must have my own personal magnetic field, because I seem to have an amazing talent for confusing directional issues.

Tony, tired of driving around aimlessly, pulled into a half-empty parking lot and turned off the car.

"Okay," my husband said more calmly than I deserved, "tell me again the directions they gave you."

"They said to turn left out of our driveway, and then take another left..."

"Wait, wait, wait! The doctor's office told you to take a left out of our driveway? How did they know that we would need to take a left?"

"Oh, they didn't. I added that part. I knew we'd need to take a left."

"So leave out the part you added, and read to me *exactly* the directions they gave you."

"Well, to be perfectly honest I didn't *exactly* write them down. I mean, you know how people around here say go north until this road, and then go west, or east, or north by

southwest. It is so confusing. So when I wrote them down I converted them.”

“What does that mean, you converted them?”

“You know, got rid of all that north, south, east, west stuff.”

“You converted north, south, east, and west to right, left, and straight?”

“Yes, it was easy. I just remembered that if you face north, east is to your right, south behind you, and west to your left.”

My husband closed his eyes for a moment and seemed to be muttering to himself. I could not hear exactly what he was saying, but I’m pretty sure I heard something about the “lack of common sense,” “how can someone so smart be so dumb,” and “it might be true that blondes are airheads.”

I was beginning to get a bit miffed as the mumbling continued for several minutes, but I decided that I should pretend I could not hear him and keep my mouth shut. After all, if Tony put his mind to it he might be able to get us to the appointment on time. I evidently could not. I could only get us more and more lost.

After what seemed an eternity, Tony finally stopped grumbling and pulled himself together. “So,” he asked in a voice he probably thought was kindly but I found patronizing, “what is the address again?”

“It’s on Fifteenth,” I calmly said, looking at my notes. I would keep my cool if it were the last thing I did.

“Is that Fifteenth Avenue or Street?” I could tell that he was trying his hardest to keep his frustration in check.

“Um, I didn’t write that down. I only wrote down Fifteenth N.”

Tony slammed his hand down on the steering wheel, accidentally honking the horn and startling a pedestrian who just happened to be walking by at that moment. Tony smiled and waved an apology to the pedestrian, and then turned to me.

“Sweetie, I think I know our problem. I know why we couldn’t find the streets we’re were supposed to find.”

I hated it when he called me sweetie in that particular tone of voice. It made me feel that he thought I had the brain of a three year old.

“How could you possibly know why we were having so many problems just by hearing the name of a street?” I challenged. “I mean, we’re on Fifteenth right now!”

“Yes, that’s true. But we’re not on Fifteenth N. We’re on Fifteenth NE.” His response was smug, as if he knew something that I could not possibly comprehend.

“Fifteenth N, Fifteenth NE, what’s the difference. It’s the name of the street, Fifteenth that counts, right?”

“Not quite. Fifteenth NE and Fifteenth N are in different parts of town. Fifteenth N is on the other side of the highway. I’m pretty sure it’s in Greenwood.”

“Greenwood? I just don’t get it. How do you know what part of town by the N, S, E, W thing?”

“SW is West Seattle, S is south of downtown, NE is over here near Northgate...” Tony looked at my face and sighed. I must have looked as confused as I felt.

“I’ll explain later,” he said patting my leg. I hated it when he treated me like a child. “We have to hurry if we want to get Becca to the appointment on time.”

I decided to let the “treating me like a child” thing go for now. Tony evidently thought he could still get us to the appointment on time. I’d deal with his attitude later. Maybe. After all, I was the reason we had gotten lost in the first place. Accepting my husband’s condescending attitude seemed a fitting punishment for my mistakes.

Tony took a moment to get his surroundings and I could see the exact moment when his internal GPS system kicked in. He must have found a way to block my magnetic field and

gotten his compass working again, because Map Man was alive and well and ready to save the day. Amazing!

“If we go this way...” Map Man began, but I grabbed his arm to stop his words.

I had seen a most unusual sight.

“Tony,” I whispered, “do you see those men? The ones right over there?”

“Why are you whispering?” Tony whispered back. “No one outside the car can hear you.”

“Over there, across the street.” I gripped his arm tighter. “Those three men who are dressed like old-timey aviators. They are walking so strangely, like they have steel rods stuck in their back. All three of them. Do you see them?”

“Yeah, I see them. They do look a little strange, but I don’t think there’s anything to worry about. We’re pretty near the U-district. They are probably part of a fraternity prank, or they have to walk around like that because they are being hazed.”

“I don’t know,” I said. I wondered if it would be possible to convey the weird feeling I had about these men to my level-headed husband. “They look somehow beyond U-district strange...they look like, well, like they are straight out of an old sci-fi movie.”

“Don’t worry about it. Like I said, they are probably trying to join a frat. We need to get moving, or we’re going to be late.”

And again, the condescending pat on the leg.


Chapter 2


“MOMMY,” SCREAMED BECCA AT THE top of her lungs. “I need help!”

I ran from the back of the house where I had been folding clothes, fear coursing through my veins. Images of blood, broken bones, and cracked heads crowded my vision as I tried to determine the direction from which the call had come.

“Please, please, please be okay,” I muttered fervently as I thought about the new bunk bed we had bought just a week ago. Becca loved jumping on her bed, but now she slept on the top bunk. If she had tried to bounce from that height...her head would hit the ceiling...Becca would get a concussion...the fall would break bones...could a mother get to her baby in time?

Rushing into my daughter’s room, I stopped short in the doorway and breathed a sigh of relief.

Instead of blood and broken bones, I found my oldest daughter sniffing loudly in the middle of her room, totally surrounded by open newspapers. “Becca darling,” I

questioned, relief tingeing my voice, “what is the matter? Did you fall? Are you hurt?”

Becca looked at me as a fat teardrop escaped from the corner of her eye, rolled down her cheek, and plopped onto a front page headline directly below.

“I . . . I . . . I,” stuttered Becca, and then the worried look on my face was too much for her sensitive nerves. She burst into loud, gulping sobs.

I ran over to my daughter and wrapped my arms around her little shaking shoulders.

“It will be okay sweetie, it will be okay. Just tell me what happened.”

Had I said the wrong thing? Instead of feeling better, Becca just cried harder.

“Take a deep breath. Look at me, Becca, and do what I do.”

I pushed my daughter away slightly and turned her until we were eye to eye. I slowly breathed in and out.

Becca followed my lead and tried to take the calming breath, but was interrupted by several gulping sobs. I kept modeling the calming breath technique until Becca regained some calmness.

“Now sweetie, tell me what is wrong.”

“I,” began Becca, and then her bottom lip slid forward and began to shake. A sure sign that Becca was about to lose it again.

“Take another deep breath,” I ordered. “Just shake your head to answer my questions. Did you fall and get hurt?”

Becca’s head moved from side to side in an adamant no. Her lower lip stopped vibrating.

“Okay, good. Now, did one of your sisters get hurt, or did you see someone at school get hurt?”

“No, Mommy,” Becca responded, seeming to calm a bit. Her lower lip resumed its normal position and no longer protruded.

“Great! Now, does it have to do with these newspapers spread all over the floor?”

Becca’s lower lip immediately jumped back out into the dangerous position, but she managed to nod her head affirmatively.

“Ah, so now we’re getting somewhere. Do you have a school project? You know I’ll help you, like I always do,” I said as I hugged my stressed daughter. School projects were the bane of the household.

“I have to do a poster, where I find a bunch of newspaper stories that all go together. And there are so many! How am I supposed to choose?” Becca’s last words were barely understandable, as the tears once again began to flow. Only a mother’s experience dealing with tears allowed me to translate the sputters into English.

“No problem, sweetie! Look, here’s a trick. Pick one of the headlines. There are sure to be other stories on other days when it makes a headline.”

“But which one? How do I choose?”

I looked down at the newspapers spread around the room. My eye was immediately caught by the same word glaring at me from three separate headlines.

“Look, Becca,” I said excitedly, snatching up the appropriate newspapers. “Here, and here, and here. Look, all of these headlines are about a new man-made element that is being tested. They are all about the same thing!”

“Really? You mean I can use these and not look any more?”

“Sure, darling. Let’s look them over together, just to make sure they are what you want.”

“It says here that local scientists feel that this new element may be the answer to any energy crisis we may have in the future. They plan to put it through a battery of tests, and

if the tests are successful, they will release their findings to the rest of the world.”

Becca looked at me, and tears started to pour out of her eyes again.

“What’s the matter darling,” I asked, grabbing the munchkin and giving her a big hug.

“It’s...it’s...it’s...,”

“It’s what, darling?”

“It’s...it’s...,”

“Come on sweetie pie, tell me what’s wrong?”

“I can’t use that story, it’s too boring!”

“Too boring? What do you mean it’s too boring?”

“If I make a poster with all those big sciencey words, my friends will call me names and think I’m smart. They’ll make fun of me.”

I sat back on my heels and looked at my daughter. I had encountered similar feelings in my childhood, but not at such an early age. Unlike my daughter, at the ripe old age of eight I was still worry free and unafraid of how my peers might see me or think of me.

Peer pressure seemed to be rearing its ugly head at rather an early age. Was it the region we now lived in? My husband and I had moved here from a different part of the country. Or was it just that my daughter was particularly sensitive?

Whatever the cause, I decided that although I wanted Becca to overcome her feeling that she must conform to the will of the crowd, now would not be the best time. She was entirely too distraught to listen to a lecture.

Besides, anyone who had ever tried to reason with an eight year old knows that it requires a strong will and a clear mind. Right now, I had too much homework cluttering up my brain.

“No problem,” I said gently to my little socialite, “let’s take another look at the paper and see if we can find any other stories that you like better.”

I started scanning the headlines, and looked up at my daughter to see if anything was catching her interest.

The little twerp had grabbed the comics and was sitting cross-legged beside me.

"Beckie-girl, you are supposed to be looking through the paper with me,"

"I am, Mommy."

"No, Becca, we are looking for something that you find interesting."

"But this is interesting, Mommy. Look at this one, it's so funny. See this dog...," her voice trailed off as she realized that I truly was not pleased.

"What's the matter, Mommy? You have a funny look on your face. Does your tummy feel bad? Do you want me to ask Daddy to make you some chamomine tea?"

Chamomine! Chamomine was one of a whole list of words that Becca had somehow never learned to say correctly. Her sisters, being the good little sisters that they were, had copied the speech patterns of their big sister. Now we often heard, "I need a mapkin," or "Can we have skapetti for dinner tonight?"

I could not help myself. I grabbed the little sweetheart and tickled her until all vestiges of worry left her face.

How people manage to be serious or mean to children, I'll never understand. They are so sweet, innocent, and just plain funny!

As Becca's giggles died down, I turned again to the newspaper and was surprised to immediately find the answer to her homework problem.

"Becca, look! It says here that there is a theft ring operating that is stealing all the copper wiring. It seems copper is very expensive, and it is believed that the thieves are selling the copper to scrap yards to make money for drugs."

“That’s a good one, Mommy! Everyone knows that drugs are bad for you.”

“That’s right darling. Now, it looks like there are other stories all about the same thing, the copper being stolen. Do you want to use these articles?”

It was as if the clouds had parted and a bright ray of sun had focused on my daughter. The glorious smile that lit her face was plenty of reward for the little help I had given her. I felt like Super Mommy. I could tell by the expression on my daughter’s face that I had saved the day.


Chapter 3


I LOOKED AT MY WATCH and rolled my eyes skyward as I realized I still had hours of work to do. I did not know why I wasted my time rolling my eyes up. There was nothing there except the dingy archaeology lab ceiling. No beautiful sky and no possibility of one for many, many hours.

To be honest with myself, I was not really surprised at the amount of work I had left to do. This class had proven itself to be a perpetual nightmare almost as soon as it had begun.

Most professors are on top of things and have their courses thought out and well designed—but not this one. This professor had evidently seen too many old movies and modeled himself after every absentminded professor ever invented. He had transformed a week's worth of lab work into a painful series of never-ending, ever-shifting deadlines. As soon as one task was complete, the professor discovered another detail that was absolutely essential that had somehow been left out of the instructions. So we lowly students were forced to begin at the beginning and do the whole thing over again.

Or fail the class. Which we all knew was not a real option.

So here I was, stuck in the basement at two o'clock in the morning, nowhere near finished. I still had hours upon hours of drawings to complete.

It was a real problem that this archaeology professor had begun his academic career in Art rather than in archaeology. After I got the first assignment back, I realized that it was not enough to do accurate drawings. No, this professor critiqued the technique and artistic merit of the drawings. There was no possibility of doing an accurate but sloppy job on the drawings and moving on to the next assignment. Unfortunately, I had never taken a single drawing class.

When I first signed up for the class, I had wondered why students were required to check out keys to the lab. Now I understood. The detailed measurements and calculations demanded by the professor took an outrageously long time, and the drawings...well, they required a meticulousness that needed a safe, uncluttered, quiet setting. No distractions.

So I found myself in this stinky old basement instead of at home, where I would not be safe from distractions even in the middle of the night. There had been innumerable times when I had gotten to a crucial part of my calculations, only to be interrupted by a child who fell of a bed, had a nightmare, or needed a drink of water.

The thought of my little munchkins at home, snuggled up in their beds looking like angels, made me smile. It also reminded me that while it was essential that I worked hard to get my degree, the really important people in my life would need me tomorrow.

I calculated the amount of work I had left to do, glanced at my watch once again, and made the difficult decision to go home, finished or not. I did not have classes to attend the next day, but my lovely and rambunctious daughters would be requiring my full attention and loads of energy. I had no intention of short-changing my children just because I had decided to pursue a degree.

As I slid off the tall stool provided by the school for the students' sitting pleasure I realized two things. First, the stool must either be a part of a science experiment gone wrong or it had been created by a sadistic engineer, because the second was that my leg had fallen asleep.

"Not again," I grumbled. It seemed that every time I spent more than three hours on one of those stools some part of my body fell asleep. I could never look forward to buckling down to long hours in the lab because I absolutely hated the tortuous prickly feeling that meant that blood had once again begun to circulate.

My first supposition that this was a part of a science experiment must be the correct one. I wondered where they hid the camera. It was certain that someone was at this moment documenting my reaction to this uncomfortable situation. It felt like an invisible being was using me as a pincushion. Or, to be more accurate, multiple invisible beings, thousands of invisible beings, each with their own very sharp, very hard, very long needle.

Cautiously I stretched my arms over my head, testing other parts of my body to see what might have decided to take a nap. My achy muscles reinforced the decision to call it a night. My neck was extremely sore from bending at just the right angle to see the shard, and my hands were beginning to cramp from holding the pencil for so long.

I had to learn how to take breaks more often. Finishing this project was not worth my body becoming twisted like a pretzel.

Although I must admit that going home looking like a pretzel would have one benefit. My children would think it was hilarious. There would be amusement value.

I gathered my purse, double-checked that my keys were firmly in my hand, and reached deeper into my bag to retrieve

the pepper spray my husband had given me for my late-night forays into the lab.

It was only a short walk from the lab to the parking lot where I had parked the car a mere five hours ago, but better safe than sorry.

Moving to the door, purse in hand, I flipped off the light. I reached for the knob but stopped short of turning it. I paused to listen to the strange whirling noise that had caught my attention.

Whatever could it be?

Shrugging my shoulders, I gripped the knob tighter and began to turn. I had just opened the door a crack when my movements were halted once again, but this time by what I saw.

It was the freaks! The same ones my husband and I had noticed the day before.

What were they doing in the archaeology building, and why were they coming out of the janitor's closet?

Carefully and quietly I closed the lab door. Another ten minutes in the lab would not hurt me. Surely that crowd would not stay around this almost deserted building any longer than that.

Besides, what was ten minutes, or even an hour for that matter? The important thing was that I avoided whatever mischief that freaky crowd had planned.


Chapter 4


“OKAY DARLING, I’LL BE RIGHT home. My bus should be here any moment,” I whispered into my cell phone. “Yes, I know you hate it, but let them do it anyway. No, don’t worry—I’ll take care of it when I get home.”

I glanced at my fellow bus stop inhabitants, and I was relieved to see that not one of them had any interest in my purely domestic conversation.

“I said I’ll take care of it when I get home,” I said louder, since it was evident from his responses that my husband was having trouble hearing me. “But I understand what you are saying.”

“Listen darling, just don’t worry about it, I’ll clean it up when I get home.” Tony was still having trouble hearing me, so I raised my voice a bit more. I looked around at those waiting

for the bus with me. I might as well have been alone in the middle of a desert for all the attention I was getting.

I took several steps away from the group onto a grassy area. It had rained recently so it was muddier, but that meant it was also more private. I felt that there was now enough distance between me and everyone else that I could raise my voice to a normal level. My husband seemed to not be able to hear me properly when I spoke in a lowered voice.

I listened to the sound of my husband's voice for a few minutes and realized that he still had not heard me properly.

"Tony, don't worry," I said calmly, but more loudly, "it's good for them."

"Of course not," I responded. Could he still not hear me?

"No, it won't teach them to be slobs! Just let them do it, okay."

I felt eyes on me the moment frustration crept into my raised voice. I looked up to see every person at the bus stop looking my way.

How embarrassing.

For years I'd fought the degradation of good manners fostered by the cell phone culture. The overly loud voices, the embarrassing secrets not kept secret. The number of conversations I'd heard in public places that should have remained private...the number my children had heard!

After one particularly embarrassing bus ride, during which I could not escape from one side of an R-rated conversation, I decided that I would rather die than become one of those rude, obnoxious people who carried on loud, private cell phone conversations in public places. I vowed that all my conversations would remain low-key, low-voiced, and G-rated.

Based on quite a few faces, I had piqued the interest of my fellow travelers. But since my conversation contained nothing vulgar or private, it must have been my tone.

“Fine,” I said in a once again lowered voice, “but remember what I said...it’s good for them. I’ve got to go now—my bus is turning the corner. I’ll be home in a few minutes.”

I smiled as I closed my phone and stuck it in my purse. All this fuss about such a little thing! My husband absolutely hated messes, and it disturbed him when the kids used sheets and blankets to make a fort in the living room.

My theory was that living-room-fort-building was a win-win situation. The kids had a blast using their imaginations, they had a nice dry place to play on a rainy day, no one got hurt, and all we had to do was fold the linen again and the room was as good as new.

I still could not figure out why such a harmless activity bothered my husband so much.

Just as my bus pulled up to the stop a group of men came down the hill and streamed between the bus and the passengers waiting to board.

An odder group I truly have never seen. There were about fifteen of them, and they seemed to have walked off of a 1950s movie set—with their slicked-down, side-parted, long side-burned hair, black slacks with black shoes, plaid or white shirts, and pen protectors sticking out of the front pocket of every one of their shirts.

Even their skin seemed odd. It was somehow too smooth, too blemish-free...too perfect to be true. I’ve only seen that kind of perfection with the aid of makeup, which confirmed my movie set theory.

The group finally cleared the bus, and I watched their progress down the hill as I waited for my turn to board. The group ignored everyone around them as if no one else existed, or as if everyone else was too lowly for their notice.

I watched as they reached the street and continued across as a group even though the light was against them. They did not talk together; they just walked in concert as a mass.

As I heard the screech of tires, thankfully not followed by the sound of metal hitting a human body, I knew my guess must be right. Only actors too full of their own importance could be so inconsiderate as to stop the flow of traffic on a busy street.

It was not the first time actors had invaded campus. A movie studio must be using the university grounds as a setting for a 1950s movie.


Chapter 5


I YAWNED, AND NOT FOR the first time—or even the tenth.

This project was taking *forever* to finish...for me, at least. My well-rested and unencumbered classmates had stayed for a mere two hours after class and had zipped right through the work they needed to do.

I, on the other hand, was destined to spend quite a few more hours all alone in the pseudo comfort of the basement lab of Denny Hall.

The problem was that I was neither well rested nor unencumbered, which had resulted in a concerning and irritating series of mistakes. I simply could not get my brain to achieve the level of concentration a project of this sort required.

Zoe had run a fever several days this week, and I could not help but be concerned. She was so tiny, so fragile, and looked dismally pathetic with her flushed face and lack of energy. To

make matters more alarming, she would not eat anything and I had to force her to drink.

My head told me it was nothing serious, that this was a normal part of being a kid. This illness would pass just as Zoe's fear of riding in cars had passed.

But my heart was of the worrier breed and had a different, much scarier opinion. It pulled out a huge spotlight and focused it on every single news report I had ever heard over the years that told about some poor family who had discovered that their precious child had a rare and fatal disease. Then, to make sure I got the point that life could be scary, it spotlighted every known instance reported where a disease was not fatal, but serious enough to change the life of a child forever.

It was not easy to do my schoolwork while my brain and my heart continued to battle. To say it was distracting was an understatement of the monumental sort. Particularly since all I could really do for my child at this time was to console and entertain.

Caring for a sick child—let me tell you—was a huge, exhausting, and horrible job. Walking an ill three year old around the living room for hours at a time was great for building muscles and burning calories, but not much else.

One problem was that I could not use the time to plan what I needed to do, or even think about my assignment, since my children had an innate talent for discerning the exact moment when my mind had begun to wander. As soon as my focus was not entirely on the little angel there would be a pitiful whimper, an uncomfortable wiggle, or occasionally a scream of pain.

Yes, in my house a sick child claimed all brain power available, and left none for silly things like schoolwork.

Now, even though Zoe was over her fever and was feeling better, there was still a twinge of worry. Just enough to distract me from the things I needed to accomplish so I could graduate...so I could help provide a better life for my

children...so they could grow up to have children of their own...so they could be tortured by their own kids!

One of my main worries was that my family was not clear of this illness yet. Maybe—if I were very unlucky—a random germ had escaped my massive disinfection effort and the rogue germ was at this very moment stalking one of Zoe's older sisters. If that were the case I would have to begin the whole process all over again. It made me tired just thinking about it!

I often theorized that among every group of germs there were extraordinary ones that were armed with special armor that protected them from disinfectant. They were the Special Forces of the germ world. Their purpose was to survive no matter what, so that they would have the opportunity to infect again.

My theory was first crafted a few months after the birth of my second child, and was validated before my third child had her first birthday. I was so sure that my theory was correct that I had contemplated writing a paper on it. It certainly was a fact that in my household, if one girl got sick, a week or two later the others came down with the same illness no matter how hard I tried to keep the girls separate and immerse everything in disinfectant.

It was imperative that I stopped that rogue germ before it struck! Two weeks from now was mid-terms, an extremely bad time to be distracted, worried, and exhausted. Zoe's older siblings must not get sick!

I yawned again, for what must have been the hundredth time, which prompted me to take a peek at the clock on the wall. Yikes! I'd just wasted a full half hour worrying about a child who was probably happily snoring in her bed and anticipating a situation that might not even happen. If I was lucky.

I must focus! I had no hope of getting all this work completed if I spent all my time day-dreaming. Or should I call

it night-dreaming, since it was the middle of the night? But night-dreaming sounded too much like normal dreaming that happened while a person slept. So maybe I should call it awake-dreaming.

“Awake-dreaming,” I whispered aloud, trying it out. “Yes, that is much better, since awake-dreaming pretty much sums it up, no matter the time of day.”

But as I said the word ‘time’ aloud, I was shocked out of my awake-dreams. That nasty word, time, was the bane of my existence, the commodity I seemed to be unable to not waste.

I glanced down at the pile of paper in front of me and groaned as I noticed the pen clutched in my hand.

I closed my eyes a second and took a deep breath. I would not panic. I would keep my cool.

But really, I was probably worried unnecessarily. I was a reasonably intelligent human being. I had full control of myself. Why was I worried?

But no matter how much I tried to reason with myself, I was afraid to look at my papers. You see, some people sleepwalk, I awake-dream doodle. The more distracted I was, the more I doodled. And I had been very, very distracted.

I gathered my courage and took a good look. I could not help but groan again, since my entire paper was covered with little squiggles wearing breast-plates and helmets. While I was distracted, my hand had drawn the very germs that had invaded my thoughts.

“Darn it! These squiggles don’t look anything like the pottery shard I’m supposed to be drawing. The professor will think I’ve gone nuts if I turn this in to her. I’ve got to focus if I ever want to complete this assignment.

“No matter what, I will finish today—even if I have to stay up all night. This is due Friday, so I have no more time to waste.

“I should be able to do it. Tony has the kids safe and sound, and no one ran a fever today. I cannot worry about my family. All is well on the home front.

"I'll sleep all I want later. And after I sleep, I'm sure I'll stop talking to myself.

"Oh, sleep! What a lovely word, sleep. I wonder who first said that wonderful, wonderful word—sleep? Was it a mother, trying to get a cranky child to rest? Oh, there's another great word, rest, and then there is slumber, snooze, doze, nap. So many words for something so simple, something I could do right now if I just let myself relax just a little. And there's another one, relax."

The pain of my head hitting the cold hard table shocked me awake. I hoped it would not leave a bruise, but really, it served me right. How *could* I fall asleep sitting up? I needed to finish my work so I could go home. I needed to stop getting distracted by whatever nonsense was floating around my head. I need to focus.

"It is time you got down to business," I told myself firmly. "Now that you've had a nice little nap, a little deep breathing should clear your head."

I breathed in and out deeply several times to give my body the oxygen it needed to stay alert. Unfortunately, I soon found myself struggling to stifle a monstrous yawn.

"Not good enough! I need to be more alert than this. It may not require a tremendous amount of concentration, but I certainly can't do it in my sleep. I will finish this, and I will finish it now. I will be awake, alert, and conscious."

I shook my head like a wet dog and stretched my arms over my head. It was lovely to feel the blood once again begin to circulate. Just to make sure everything was working correctly I popped my knuckles. My mother had always told me that popping my knuckles would cause them to swell up like balloons, but it had not happened yet, and if it helped me stay focused...

I had been told by one of the other students that several pieces of the pottery shards were etched with a phosphorescent

material. It was a detail that I wanted to include in my findings, but of course, it could only be seen in the dark.

“Well, this is as good a time as any to see this phenomenon,” I said to myself decisively. “Off with the lights, and watch for the glow.”

I crossed the room, switched off the lights, and turned to walk back to my station.

“Darn it,” I said in frustration. “Of all nights to have a full moon, why does it have to happen when I want to look for the phosphorescent etchings! I won’t see anything with that lunar spotlight shining in the window. I’ll have to close the shades.”

I crossed over to the window, but as I reached for the shade my hand was arrested as my attention was caught by a strange humming noise. It was an insignificant noise, not loud at all. If the normal noises of the day had been around, I probably would not have noticed it.

I shrugged my shoulders as I pulled down the first of the shades. The noise was just another distraction, and I would just ignore it. I turned to look toward my work station to assure myself that I was getting the proper result. I smiled as I saw that much of the moonlight that was illuminating my station had already been blocked.

Should I pull all the shades? Probably not, since I had started on the side that shaded my lab station. If I could avoid working in total darkness in this creepy basement I would.

Pulling down two more shades, I turned to again check my work station. Perfect! I was just about to make my way across the dark room when the bright moon projected the moving shadow of a person through a window with the shade still raised. As soon as that shadow passed, another took its place.

“Who could be here this time of night,” I whispered to myself. “I hope it is just a couple of security guards patrolling.”

I peered around the edge of the nearest shade. I vowed to be cautious, since I did not want whoever was out there to

know I was in the basement alone. I was sure it would not be wise.

“Oh, my goodness,” I whispered, unsure if I should be more shocked or afraid.

In the bright moonlight, a veritable pageant of freaks poured past the basement window. The group consisted of about fifteen to twenty people, and the moon provided sufficient light so that I could get a good look.

Something was not right. Among the group parading by I recognized both the aviators I had spotted in the U district weeks ago and the 1950s self-centered geeks from the day before.

One thing was certain—even if they were a part of a movie company, they had no business on campus in the middle of the night.

I pulled out my cell phone and called security. I no longer felt even remotely safe in the basement of Denny Hall, not with these freaks and geeks free to roam around all night.