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Healthy or Else

by A.B.R.

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Healthy or Else

Zack feels his transportation card vibrating in his pocket, and walks carefully through the crowded bus as it pulls into his stop. He steps out of the bus and glances up the hill, unaware of vague feelings of dissent. His house is near the top of the hill, the bus goes right past it and there is a stop half a block from his front door, but government regulations decree that every citizen must walk a minimum of ten blocks every day. Like everyone else, his transportation card is programmed to notify him to get off the bus four blocks from home; failure to comply is transmitted automatically and results in the issuance of a substantial fine. He no longer owns a car; the fees for driving in Vancouver are prohibitively expensive.

He feels a chill wind blowing off the inlet, zips up his coat, and looks up at a threatening November sky. *At least it's not raining yet.* The bus pulls back onto the road and drives up the hill. He starts trudging uphill after it. It is a steep grade, and he is getting to the age where he feels the effort. It starts to drizzle and is raining hard by the time he turns into his abandoned driveway. Zack sees his six-year-old daughter sitting on the steps, looking up at the front door. *Why is Ashley outside in this rotten weather?*

Zack walks up the stairs, and he doesn't need to see his daughter's face to know she is crying. He instinctively picks her up. She burrows into his arms. "What's wrong, Ashley?"

"When is Mommy coming home Daddy?"

"She should be home anytime, Pumpkin," Zack says in a soothing voice. Ashley is trembling; he can literally feel how upset or scared she is. *Where is Zoë? She should have been home hours ago.* His wife is always home by 3:00, so she will be there when Ashley gets home from school. It is almost 6:30. "Have you been sitting on the steps since you got home from school?"

"Yes; Daddy. It was a long time." She says, choking back her tears.

"Did Mrs. Rodgers walk you home?"

"Yes; Daddy." Ashley has her head buried in his arms and he can't see her face, but she has stopped trembling, at least.

Zack fumbles in his pocket for his magnetic key wondering what could have happened to his wife. *I've got to take care of Ashley first,* Zack thinks as he opens the door. He puts Ashley down. "Hang up your coat and take off your shoes. I'll see what I can find to eat. You must be hungry." He hands her a coat hanger from the open closet beside the front door.

Ashley smiles at him in anticipation. "I haven't ate anything since recess." She hangs her coat on the hanger and gives it back to him, and removes her shoes while Zack hangs her coat in the closet. He repeats the process with his own wet coat and shoes. "Let's go into the kitchen and see what we can find to eat."

"Is it supper time Daddy? I'm really hungry. It feels like supper time."

"Almost. How about I find us a snack for now, and we'll wait for Mommy to come home before we eat supper."

"Can I have juice?"

"Sure, Pumpkin." They walk together into the small kitchen in their old house. "Sit down at the table Ashley. I'll get your juice." Zack gets a plastic glass from the cupboard and pours Ashley a glass of juice from the refrigerator. "Is cranberry juice okay?"

Ashley's smile lights up her face. "I like cranberry."

Zack feels a little better seeing Ashley acting normal and looking happy now that she is inside. He starts looking through the cupboard to see what he can give her for a snack. It has never occurred to him before, but he doesn't know what his wife usually feeds Ashley after school, and he doesn't want to ask her and admit his ignorance. He opens a cupboard door and sees all the boxes of tofu snacks. *Those will do. Zoë should be home any time now.*

"What kind of tofu snack do you want Ashley. Blueberry?" It is his favorite.

Ashley pulls the glass of cranberry juice away from her mouth, shakes her head vigorously, and resumes drinking without saying anything.

"Okay. What else is here? Strawberry?" He looks expectantly at Ashley, but she doesn't respond. Zack shuffles the boxes of tofu snacks around and sees cheese, orange and peanut butter flavored tofu snacks. "Peanut butter is good," he says, hoping to entice her.

Ashley's nose wrinkles in distaste. "I don't like tofu Daddy!"

"Sorry, Pumpkin. I'll see if I can find something else." Zack can't find anything else and is soon reduced to rummaging through the cupboards at random. He bumps a stack of microwave containers and a couple of packages fall out from behind some containers. He pulls one down from the top shelf. Popcorn. *We haven't had that in ... I can't remember the last time we made popcorn.* Zack tears the plastic wrapping off the package and puts it in the microwave. "Do you like popcorn?" He asks while setting the timer.

"Popcorn. What's that?"

"Your mother and I used to eat popcorn when we watched movies. I'm making some. You can try it in a couple of minutes."

I should go all out if she hasn't tried it before, Zack thinks. He gets margarine from the fridge and puts it on the stove. The timer goes off, and Zack empties the popcorn into a big bowl and pours melted margarine over the popcorn. He takes his government regulated salt shaker out of the cupboard and checks the gauge; he hasn't used up his monthly allotment yet, so he sprinkles salt on the popcorn, shakes it, and carries the bowl to the table. He scoops out a handful and slides the bowl over to Ashley. "Try some popcorn."

Ashley picks one kernel from the bowl and cautiously tastes it. "I like this popcorn Daddy." She reaches into the bowl and scoops out a handful, in imitation.

Zack takes another handful and watches Ashley eat. *She really is hungry. I better find out where Zoë is and if she has any plans for dinner. It's almost 7 o'clock. What can she be doing?* He is starting to worry.

He calls his wife's cell phone. It is turned off. *That's strange. She never turns her cell phone off.* Zack thinks for a moment and calls Caitlin, a friend of his wife's from work. After exchanging the normal phone pleasantries Zack asks Caitlin if she has seen Zoë.

"I saw her this morning. She had a doctor's appointment, so we didn't go out for lunch today. Why do you ask?"

"Zoë is late getting home. I wanted to ask her what I should give Ashley for supper."

"I didn't see her after work, had to rush home to take my girls to figure skating practice. Hang on a second; I'll get you Mrs. Pringle's home number. You can check with her."

"Who is Mrs. Pringle?" Zack can't remember hearing that name before.

"She is the new head of our department. Maybe Zoë is working late." Zack writes the number down and calls.

"Yes. Who is it?" A frosty voice answers.

"Mrs. Pringle. My name is Zack Forester; my wife Zoë works in your department. I was wondering if she is working late."

"She left us in quite a lurch Mr. Forester." The disapproval in the woman's voice is unmistakable.

"What happened?"

"She never came back from her lunch break."

"Zoë had a doctor's appointment. But she isn't home. I found our daughter waiting on the steps." Zack winces, and wishes he could retract his last sentence.

"Hmph. I'm not surprised."

"It has never happened before," Zack says in his wife's defense.

"Your wife is your problem Mr. Forester. I'm feeding my terrier. Good evening!"

The woman's attitude is annoying, but there are more important issues at the moment.

"How's the popcorn, Ashley?"

"Good. Can I have more juice?"

"Sure, Pumpkin." Zack refills her glass. "You don't have to eat all the popcorn. We're going to have supper pretty soon. Don't spoil your appetite."

"Can I have popcorn for dessert?"

"If you don't eat it all now, you can." Zack gives her a half-full glass of juice. "I have to look up a phone number Ashley. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

Zack goes to the bedroom to look for the number of Zoë's doctor, and calls from his cell phone. "The offices of Doctors Jaspar, Winkelman, Chan, and Hunter are closed. Call again tomorrow. Office hours are from 10:00 A.M. to 2:30 P.M. The office is closed from 12:30 to 1:30 for lunch."

Not knowing what else to do he tries calling his wife's cell phone again. It is still turned off. *What can she be doing?* Zack is getting worried now; this is totally out of character for his wife. He tries to think of someone else to call. *Her mother.* Zack immediately calls her. "Zoë's cell is turned off. Have you talked to her, or know what she is doing?" Zack asks, after exchanging greetings.

"No. Zoë hasn't called me for days. Where is Ashley?"

"She's with me, at home. Zoë hasn't come home yet, and it's getting late." Zack hears the concern in his voice but doesn't try to hide it.

"Maybe she is out with friends," his mother-in-law says, trying to be helpful. "I wouldn't worry about her too much."

"You're probably right." Zack tries to sound relieved. But he isn't, and looks up the phone numbers of her closest friends, and calls them. None of her friends have seen Zoë, and he is getting more worried with every call.

I'll try the hospital. Zack looks up the number for the Fraser Municipal Hospital, makes the call and chooses what he hopes is the right department, and asks if Zoë Forester-Holmes has been admitted. "Wait a second while I look it up," a friendly female voice says.

"I have the admittance records in front of me now, just give me a second."

The voice is silent for an uncomfortably long time. "Is anything wrong?" Zack asks, growing uneasy.

The voice hesitates noticeably. "I don't see her name on the list of walk-in patients. Or emergency admittance," she adds. "Sorry." A click on his cell phone tells him she has terminated the call.

Zack is at a loss for ideas. He calls the police but is told he can't file a missing person's report until his wife is missing for 24 hours. Something about the call to the hospital bothers him. The receptionist was friendly enough, but there was something about her voice, about the call.

Zack decides to call back, maybe talk to a different receptionist. He calls and a different voice answers. He starts to ask about his wife, but is interrupted. "Sir, our records show you called here five minutes ago. Don't call here again, or the automated phone system will report you to Health Security."

Zack gives up. *Guess I better make something for dinner. Zoë will be mad if I let Ashley fill up on popcorn.* Zack returns to the kitchen and sees Ashley has left the room.

"Ashley, where are you?" He calls out.

Ashley walks into the kitchen a moment later. "I was watching t.v. Daddy."

"Stay here with me. You can help me make supper. I hope you're still hungry. You didn't eat too much popcorn did you?"

"I don't know."

Zack checks the bowl and is glad to see it is half-full. He goes to the fridge and opens the freezer door hoping his wife has prepared something for dinner, on weekends she often prepares meals for the coming week. But he is out of luck. All he sees are bags of leftovers and frozen ingredients. He pulls out a bag of leftovers and recognizes the stir-fry from dinner earlier in the week. *That should do the trick,* Zack thinks. He tosses the frozen stir-fry into the microwave and hits defrost.

He sits down at the table to wait, and scoops a few kernels of popcorn from the bowl and pops one into his mouth. He points at the bowl. "You can have some more while we wait."

"I'm saving the popcorn for dessert Daddy."

"Good girl. Supper should be ready soon."

Zack hears the front door bang open. "Your mother must be home."

Ashley's face flares into a grin and she pushes her chair away from the table to go and greet her mother. Before she can stand up the door to the kitchen is thrust open and a stiffly dressed middle-age woman struts into the room, followed by a younger man and a policewoman. "Domestic Health Inspectors. Stay where you are!" The middle age woman orders them.

"Jason, Kayla, Rodrigo," the unidentified woman calls out. Three more people rush into kitchen. "Inventory the contents of this kitchen," the woman orders the new arrivals. "Where is Mercedes? Mercedes!" Another woman literally runs into the kitchen, almost out of breath. "Oh. There you are. Check the bathroom for banned substances and inventory the contents." The woman named Mercedes swivels her head rapidly from side to side to get her bearings, and rushes out of the kitchen to find the bathroom, as ordered. Jason, Kayla and Rodrigo have computers in hand and are reconnoitering the cupboards.

"Wait a minute!" Zack objects. "You can't just break into my house and start tearing it apart."

The boss lady looks down her ample nose at him, implying that to answer him is below the dignity of her position. She walks over to the kitchen table and looks at the contents of the bowl. "Popcorn!" She says in a disgusted voice and pulls a palm computer from a jacket pocket and makes a note.

"Don't stand around!" The woman orders her subordinates, who have stopped to watch this scene unfold. They scurry for the cupboards like mice fleeing from a cat, and begin pulling out the contents.

"Daddy, what's going on?"

Zack reaches for his daughter's hand and gently pulls her over where he can pick her up and sit her on his knee. "I wish I knew Ashley. I don't know why these people are here." The defroster on the microwave pings. "Oh, to hell with this." Zack stands Ashley on her feet beside

his chair. "Stay here," he tells her, and walks to the microwave. He removes the stir-fry, dumps it into one of the microwave dishes the minions have stacked on the counter, stirs it with a fork, puts it back into the microwave, and sets the timer for two minutes. Then he stands beside Ashley, resting his hand protectively on her shoulder.

The woman glares at him for challenging her authority.

Zack returns her look and says, unapologetically, "My daughter has to eat."

"Of that, I am sure." The woman says in a voice loaded with disdain and worse, an implication that he does not take good care of his family.

Zack resents the implication; he does everything he can for his family. He turns away from the woman. "Sit down, Ashley. Supper is almost ready. I'll get you more juice." Zack gets the juice from the fridge and refills Ashley's glass.

The microwave pings, signaling that the stir-fry is ready. Zack stands up to go to the microwave.

"Rodrigo!" The woman orders and gives him a stern look. Rodrigo opens the door of the microwave, takes out the container and discards the unsealed lid. "Soya noodles, chicken, broccoli, mushrooms, and little bits of carrot, it's acceptable."

"It's better than that," Zack retorts and snatches the dish from his hands. Zack turns on his heels and takes the dish to the table and forks some onto Ashley's plate. "How much can you eat?" Zack asks her.

"She's probably already filled her stomach with popcorn," the woman says in an insulting tone of voice. "How much popcorn did you eat little girl?"

"Don't answer her, Ashley."

The woman is not about to be put off that easily. "How much popcorn did you eat?" She repeats, more insistently, in what she undoubtedly thinks is the voice of maternal authority.

Ashley puts her fork down carefully beside her plate, demonstrating the good table manners her mother has taught her. She turns to look at the woman: "I am not supposed to talk to strangers." Ashley looks away and tosses her head in a haughty manner that shocks Zack. Ashley picks up her fork and resumes eating. "This is good, Daddy. Can I still have popcorn for dessert?"

Zack glances at the woman. She is fuming. "If you eat everything on your plate," Zack replies, hoping he hasn't given Ashley too much to eat.

Zack dumps what is left in the microwave dish onto his plate and joins Ashley in a meal. The inventory proceeds as they eat and more or less try to ignore what is going on around them.

"We're finished with the cupboards and the fridge," a female voice says. "Do you want us to check the basement, to see if they have a freezer or food storage units?"

The boss lady is scrolling through her palm computer. "Jason and Rodrigo can do that. Download their records, Kayla."

"Yes; Ma'am." Kayla walks over to the table. "I need to download your records."

"I thought medical records were confidential."

The boss lady snorts indignantly. "That was a relic of the old free world. We got rid of that nonsense when we took over. Medical records are transparent, so health officials can determine if people are engaging in unhealthy activities. Give Kayla your bracelet!"

There is a pleading look in Kayla's eyes as she makes eye contact with Zack.

Zack doesn't want to make things difficult for her. He removes his bracelet and turns it over to her to download. The bracelets were originally worn by seriously ill senior citizens and

automatically notified ambulance crews of heart attacks or other medical emergencies. Their functionality was later expanded so paramedics could identify and quickly obtain information to treat people with chronic medical conditions. Universal medical bracelets were now required by law, and monitored vitals signs and recorded aberrant readings as well as storing complete medical histories. Until now, Zack thought the records were confidential except in cases of emergency.

It takes a couple of seconds to download his medical records. Kayla returns his bracelet and moves over to Ashley's chair.

Ashley looks at him for instructions. "It's okay. You remember going to the doctor. Don't you?"

"I remember." Ashley lifts her arm to allow Kayla to remove her medical bracelet.

"Bring their records here," the boss lady orders Kayla when she has finishes downloading their records.

The woman studies their medical records and hands Kayla's computer back to her. Then the boss lady consults her own palm computer, and walks up to the table and hovers over Zack. "I see you were involved with the New Democratic Party."

"That was a long time ago."

"Answer the question please."

"I wasn't in the NDP government, or a member of the party. I worked as an anti-smoking lobbyist when the NDP were in government."

"They're a banned organization."

"At the time the NDP was the legitimate government. Elected by the people in a democratic election." Zack allows a trace of irony to infuse his voice; democratic elections have not been held for almost a decade.

"Historical nonsense. Those primitives were banned because they thought the state should make all the decisions instead of doctors."

The woman Mercedes walks into the kitchen. "I finished the inventory of the bathroom. I didn't find any banned or dangerous substances."

"See if they need help downstairs. I'm interrogating this health abuser."

"What do you do now that no one smokes and everyone has had the fat sucked out of them?" The reference to fat purges is lost on Zack; he has never suffered from obesity.

"Work in a tofu processing plant."

The posse pounds up the stairs from the basement and the woman diverts her attention to them. "Find anything downstairs?"

"There isn't any food stored in the basement," one of the inspectors reports.

"I guess that does it." The woman fiddles with her palm computer and a printout rolls out. She tears it off and drops it on the table beside the bowl of popcorn.

"What is that?"

"The law requires parents to feed their children nutritious food. That is a citation for feeding your child banned snacks."

"Banned snacks? ... What is wrong with popcorn?"

"It is hard on gums and contains unnecessary carbohydrates. It was banned two years ago."

So that is why the popcorn was stuck up in the top shelf behind those containers. Zack picks up the citation to see if there is a fine. "Two thousand dollars!" He says in disbelief. "This is ridiculous."

The woman glares at him. "You are lucky that is the maximum fine I can give you. If it were up to me you would be incarcerated in a health re-education center for feeding a child banned snacks – especially before meals. And you put salt! on it. You don't deserve to be a parent!"

Zack is stunned into silence.

The woman glares at him for a second, to make sure he gets the insult. "Let's go," she orders, and leads her flock of cowed inspectors from his house.

The kitchen is in disarray; all the contents of the cupboards are piled on counter tops, except for the bigger pots and pans lying on the floor. Everything from the fridge is piled on a counter. *I better put that stuff back in the freezer*, Zack thinks.

But he ignores that thought and sits down at the table. Zack notices Ashley's empty plate. "You ate everything on your plate," he says to compliment her.

"I did. I ate it all Daddy." Ashley smiles proudly at the compliment.

"Help yourself to the popcorn."

Ashley smiles eagerly at the bowl, but she turns to him and her smile fades and is replaced by an expression of concern. "Will you get into trouble Daddy?"

"I promised you popcorn for dessert, so you can have popcorn. Pass the bowl over here. I think I'll have dessert, too."

While they finish the popcorn Zack tries to make small talk about school. Ashley is in grade one, and it is a lot different than preschool. But she is more interested in the popcorn, and eats one kernel at a time, to extract the maximum flavor. Watching her almost makes the fine worthwhile.

Ashley reaches into the bowl, can't find any popcorn and tips the bowl to look inside. "The popcorn's all gone Daddy."

"Run your finger along the side of the bowl." Ashley looks at him and shakes her head. "It's okay, just this once. I won't tell your mother. Go ahead." Ashley gingerly runs a finger around the inside of the bowl. "Taste it."

She sticks her finger into her mouth. "Oooh, it's salty."

"Hand me your glass. I'll get you more juice." Zack pours a glass of juice while watching Ashley gather margarine and salt on her finger.

"Guess I better put all this stuff back." Zack is not sure what stuff goes in which cupboard.

"They left a big mess. Mommy's going to be mad."

"Not if I clean it up first." Zack starts by returning the frozen food to the freezer. When he has finished with the frozen food he stops to check on Ashley. She is putting unpopped kernels in her mouth and sucking on them for the flavor. "Are you finished Ashley?"

She points to her cheek and puffs it up like a cartoon chipmunk.

Zack can't help smiling. "If I draw you a bath can you bathe yourself?"

Ashley spits the kernels into a serviette. "Sure. I bathe myself every night." She brims with confidence. Zack wants to pick her up and hug her. But doesn't. "You are getting to be a big girl. Get your pajamas. I'll run your bath water."

Ashley gets up from the table and takes hold of his hand and walks beside him. "I like popcorn Daddy. Can we have it again?"

A few moments ago he had been elated watching her eat popcorn. Now he wonders if he had been wrong to give it to her, and wishes she would forget about it. "I don't know Pumpkin. That woman said it wasn't good for you."

"I don't like that woman. She's mean."

"Get your pajamas. It's getting late."

Fluffing up the pillow for the tenth time fails to make Zack comfortable. He glances at the bedside clock, it is after midnight. Worrying about Zoë prevents him from falling asleep. She hasn't called and none of her friends have heard from her. Nobody has seen her since she left work to go to a doctor's appointment. He fears the worst, but doesn't want to think it. His mind imagines an accident of some kind, and he tries to suppress his mental images of her in the back of an ambulance, in a hospital bed. Calling the hospital again is out of the question. Yet something about his call to the hospital nags at him, and he rolls over wishing he could speak to Zoë's doctor. Her absence from his bed is a phantom pain; he feels amputated and helpless.

Maybe she left me. Zack doesn't know where that thought came from, and he tries to dismiss it, but it gnaws at him and won't be dismissed. *This is ridiculous. Our relationship is good; we aren't having any problems. I never noticed anything to indicate she was thinking of leaving me.*

It would explain her friends saying they don't where she is; they know and they're covering for her.

No. That can't be right. Sure we have minor disagreements from time to time, but nothing serious. We get along better than most of the couples we know. We both love Ashley and couldn't stand to be without her. He sits bolt upright and feels the tension drain out of him. *She wouldn't have left without Ashley. And Zoë would never leave Ashley locked out of the house for three hours, something must have happened to her.* And he is right back to where he started: worried sick about Zoë.

This is pointless. I've got to get some sleep. In the morning I have to get Ashley ready for school before I go to work. Maybe I should take the day off. I'm going to. I have to be here when Ashley gets home from school, and I have to find Zoë.

But sleep evades him; every time he starts to fall asleep the bed becomes uncomfortable and he tosses and turns. At last he dozes fitfully or must have, because he is startled awake by the phone. Zack grabs it before it rings twice.

"Zack, listen. I can't talk for long."

Relief floods through Zack at the sound of Zoë's voice. She is alive and sounds normal.

"How is Ashley?"

"Fine. I made dinner and put her to bed. She was no problem." Zack thinks of telling Zoë about finding Ashley sitting on the steps, but a dozen questions he wants to ask run through his mind simultaneously. "Where are you?" comes out of his mouth first.

"Fraser Municipal Hospital. My doctor arrested me."

"What! They can't do that." Zack is shocked and outraged. *They arrested my wife, and then lied to me about it.*

"They can, and they did. I'm being held under what they call the Protective Health Custody Act. I've already had one liposuction operation, and I'm getting another operation in the morning."

"You're not fat."

"The doctor weighed me. He said I was more than five kilos' over the legal weight for my physiological parameters."

"I'm going to the hospital to get you."

"Don't come down here. They won't let you see me; I'm not allowed visitors."

"I am going to bring you home."

"Zack! I can't leave, and you could get arrested. You have to look after Ashley."

Zack knows she is right, and Ashley has been through enough already. "Domestic Health Inspectors raided our house and fined me 2,000 dollars for feeding Ashley popcorn."

"We can't afford 2,000 dollars. I should have thrown it out. It's my fault."

"It's not your fault. I called the hospital a couple of times to see if you were there, the receptionist said I was being a nuisance and threatened to call Health Security."

"Zack, I can't talk now – somebody is coming. They confiscated my cell phone. I snuck into the Nurse's Station to call you. Look after Ashley. I hope to be home in a day or two. Love you. Bye."

Rick Harzman, a salesman at the tofu factory, sits down across the cafeteria table from Zack. "You look shop worn. Any news about your wife?"

"No." Zack slices a forkful of tofu, loses interest in eating and drops his plastic fork into the recycled Styrofoam dish.

"How long has it been since you heard from her?"

"A week. I don't know where she is, and I am afraid to call the hospital."

"They wouldn't tell you anything."

Zack snorts derisively in affirmation.

"If you haven't heard from her for a week, she is probably remanded in a health education center."

Zack stares at his dish of tofu. "She was only five kilos overweight."

"You should be prepared for the possibility that she might not come home."

"Never!"

"I'm not saying your wife won't be allowed to come home – but I've heard of it."

"Why wouldn't they allow her to come home?" Zack can't believe this is happening.

"The government's operating philosophy is that people are liable to become repeat health offenders if they are returned to the environment that caused a health offence."

"How can they do that? Split up families."

The cafeteria is not busy at this time of day but Rick looks around to make sure nobody is listening. "You know the slogan of our beloved Medical Dictatorship: 'Health is not just a priority, it is the only priority.'"

About the Author

A.B.R. was born in British Columbia, Canada, and continues to live there. He became an avid reader at a young age, and his interest in books and writing is life long. More information can be found on his web site and social media sites.

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