

Top 5
By: Donna Lowe

Now I am sitting in the hospital waiting room, with Ted's cellphone in my hand. There are a couple of tiny spots of blood on the phone, which I wipe off. I have just used this phone to call Ted's wife: #1 in his cellphone's Top 5. I am #2. It is both unnerving and touching to see my name and number there, like any other person's. I consider erasing it, but decide there is no longer any point.

My traffic accident karma is either very good or very bad. I do not drive, yet I have been in three car accidents as a passenger. All three accidents have resulted in serious injury for the drivers, and little beyond scratches for me. The four stitches on my elbow are all that I bear after our collision with a snowplow. Ted is in the ER, and is scheduled for surgery within the hour. His wife should be here by then.

I feel her presence before I even hear the urgent heel-clacking that is only heard in hospital corridors. Liz. I have never spoken to her, but what I know from surreptitious observation is that she seems hard-bitten, flinty, a little fierce. What I know of her from Ted is that if they divorced, there is no doubt she would take everything. That fact, and their five-year-old daughter, is the reason why I have remained #2 in his cellphone list. I wonder how much time Liz has spent in hospital waiting rooms. I suppose I am looking for some kind of upper hand.

Here she is.

"Are you the one who called?" She is appropriately disheveled for someone awakened by bad news at 3 am, but she still fixes me with a hard stare. Her eyes are grayish-green, like a wolf's. I don't know how I will lie to this woman.

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“Yes,” I say, trying to hold her gaze. “You were...on the phone.” I hand it to her, only realizing after I’ve done so that I may be damning myself, but she is distracted and just accepts it.

“Where is...?”

“Through there.” I leap at this opportunity to redirect the conversation, to take charge even momentarily. I have spent a lot of time in hospital waiting rooms. “They were prepping him for surgery, last I heard. I don’t know, though.” I want to know. I am consumed with wanting to know, in fact, but of course only the next of kin hear the details.

“Thanks.” She heads for the double doors separating the trauma unit from the artificial calm of the waiting area. Then she stops with one hand raised. “Were you...at the conference? Do you work with Ted?”

My eyes flare slightly.

“...sort of,” I manage. Maybe she is too far away to tell I am paralyzed by that question.

“What was your name again?”

I tell her. I don’t lie. I can’t, and besides, what difference would it make? I am on the phone’s speed-dial, and I am sitting in an ER waiting room at 3 am because of her husband. I can’t tell at all if my name is even familiar to her, or why she asked for it.

“Oh...well. Thanks for calling.” She holds the phone up in some kind of appreciative gesture, and then disappears through the doors. I stay in my seat.

Ted is good to me. He is soft-spoken and kind, tender and affectionate. He is afraid to leave his wife and his adorable daughter – to disrupt the semblance of family,

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although he claims that love left his marriage long ago. I suppose this reluctance to change shows disrespect for me, but I am naïve enough to find Ted's unwillingness to cause pain endearing. In fact I have not wanted him to leave his wife until this moment, when she is inside speaking with doctors and knowing things, and I am out here.

A nurse comes out of the ER and calls my name. They want more details from me about the accident. What happened when, although I've already told this story to the police and to the paramedics. I follow the nurse and say the same things again. On my way out I stop because I can see Ted in one of the rooms. I know it is him even though his face and body are swollen and he is attached to tubes and a ventilator. I am drawn to the doorway, and I am standing there stupidly when his wife notices. I try to hide the insane panic I am feeling, but I'm not sure I succeed.

"I know, you know," Liz says to me. "Who you are to him. There's only one reason you would be #2 in his Top 5."

The world freezes. I cannot feel anything.

"You care, though." I realize somehow that she is still talking. "I hate who you are, but you care -- and that could save his life."

For some reason I am drawn into the room. I take Ted's hand, and the two of us stand there not speaking, holding the hands of this unconscious man we both love. Nothing makes sense, I am thinking, when suddenly Ted's phone rings.

Neither of us answer it.