

## Decision

*Jeannine Kozar*

She sits on the third step. It is the last dry step before the concrete stairway is covered by the waves of Puget Sound. Not crashing waves, but slow rhythmic ones that come to the shore in a diagonal and wrap around the poles supporting the boardwalk.

She is trying to decide. If she disappears, her family and friends will be inconvenienced. In her mood on this bright August morning, inconveniencing people is a good reason to disappear. However, she wouldn't want to worry strangers. Flyers with that hideous driver's license picture must not be hung on every pole and window. No milk carton space is necessary. She just wants to vanish.

She is tired of a life filled with meaningless demands and commitments. Everyone starts conversations with, "Laura, you should...." Her husband of 23 years always points out ways she can improve herself. Now that her sons were grown they also admonish her. It seems as if the whole world knows something that she doesn't: her depression would evaporate if she tried a little harder.

She tries to remember what life was like before marriage and children. When she knew her own bank balance and her life had been her own business. She remembers she had wanted a family and she now has that. Some days it had been great, but not anymore. Today she longs to be herself again, with dreams of her own.

Laura looks up at the boardwalk full of walkers on this bright morning. Closest to her, an old lady in a pink sweater and straw sunhat walks a small black Sheltie. The frantic dog can see the movement of the waves below them. He pulls at the leash and barks at the spaces between the boards. The old lady just laughs at his foolish aggression.

Laura feels like the dog, barking at the benign. It's not about her husband. It's not even about her wasted life. She is sitting on the third step because she just doesn't like herself anymore. If she steps down the rest of the way into the cold sea and turns into the waves and disappears, will it quit hurting?

More likely some Good Samaritan fisherman would pull her out and rescue her so she would have to explain it, over and over. Eventually she would hear it was a cry for help, but it wouldn't be. She had been crying for years and this was different, way different.

She thinks, "Surely there is some reason to stay, something that connects me to this world." She ponders her life. There is no career. She had married Richard after her third year of college and had three sons in the next five years. Richard became a minister and needed her at home. They had moved 4 times to different congregations. They had been in Tacoma, Washington for just over two years. She began to talk about a job. Richard didn't think it was a good idea. The home would suffer. The boys would be denied her attention. Her volunteer work would dwindle. And in offhand comments, where the truth comes out, he would convey there was really nothing she was capable of doing. "I don't know why you think you want a job. The house and family are your job now, and you don't seem to be able to keep up with that." He complained about their financial situation. She knew they barely made ends meet. Well, she didn't know that. He just told her there was no money and he was doing all he could.

Those three sons were grown men now. The youngest, Luke, nearly out of college. Laura had tried to name each one Benjamin, after her father, but Richard insisted on the names of his favorite disciples. Matthew, Mark and Luke...so much their father's sons. Like Richard, they are good, but often cold and judgmental.

All three sons are faithful members of Richard's Lutheran church. Though Laura still attends regularly, she is more uncomfortable all the time. She finds the superior attitude of the "chosen people" intolerable. It is as if they think they have cornered the market on God. Laura's lifelong faith in a loving God is crumbling. Her friends, nearly all from the congregation, would be shocked by that. So she keeps these thoughts to herself.

She ponders each slice of her life for a rightness but she finds none. She pushes her brown hair back behind her ears and pulls the gray cardigan around her. She found the sweater in the backseat of the van when she realized the morning, despite the sun, had a chill off the water. Now she notices it is very dirty and wrinkled. There are lots of snags and one long loose thread. She smooths the sweater, brushing off some of the dust and then gives the stray thread a little tug.

The middle button pops off and with a tiny plop, hits the water. It floats to the next step and settles in. Laura lets out a tight laugh.

“Laura? Is that you?”

Laura jumps and she feels an adrenaline rush as though she has been caught in some horrible act. She focuses on the face. The morning sun illuminates the figure with her blonde hair and deep healthy tan. She is wearing pressed khaki shorts and a coral tee tucked in perfectly.

“Oh, hello, Shelly.”

Shelly pats her hair, which is already perfect, and says, “What are you doing down there?”

“Oh, I was just resting a minute after my walk.”

“Darn it. I was just starting. We could’ve walked together. We should do that sometime. Meet here to walk. It’s always easier to exercise with a friend. My aerobics class is Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 9:00. But I like to walk here on Tuesdays and Thursdays even though it is on the other side of town. Maybe next Tuesday?”

Laura stands and brushes off the gray sweater a little more and pulls it around her. “That’s probably a good idea,” she says without conviction.

“Are you okay? You don’t seem quite with it today.”

“I’m fine, maybe a little tired.”

“Oh my goodness! Aren’t we all? I haven’t had an evening at home for two weeks. Between Len’s soccer things and Alison’s piano and dance. And this is summer when things are supposed to slow down...”

Shelly continues talking. Laura’s face has an understanding smile. She nods now and then, but she has quit listening. She is wondering when conversation became just a smile and nod.

She hears Shelly say, “Don’t you think so?” Laura nods again and then Shelly continues. “Well, I better let you go.” Shelly glances at Laura’s sweater. “I’m sure you need time to get cleaned up before the altar guild lunch today. Oh, and Laura, would you like me to start the coffee this time? Remember how long everyone had to wait when you forgot last month? Anyway, I’ll see you there.” Another smile, nod and a quick “Bye” and Shelly is gone.

Laura turns and climbs the steps. She crosses the street to the ten-year-old minivan Richard assures her she needs for her work with the church “in case anyone needs you to give them a ride.” She unlocks the door and gets her purse from under the seat. From inside the wallet, she takes out the three twenty dollar bills she has been accumulating, a little every week, from the grocery money. She slides the three bills into her pocket, returns the wallet to the purse and puts it under the seat again. She takes the assortment of coins from the ashtray and slides that into her other pocket. She looks over the rest of the contents in the van, but there is nothing else she wants. Then she puts the keys in the ignition, gets out of the van, and closes the door.

She begins walking away from the water, up the steep two-lane wooded road that curves through the ravine. She stays to the right of the pavement in the dark shadows. There is very little traffic on this side road. Even if there is a car, she is pretty sure no one will remember seeing a middle-age woman in a gray sweater walking away on a Thursday morning.