ENCOUNTER

 It was a typical gray and foggy Saturday morning in late October when Norton Hull first saw the woman.

 He had driven his trusty Ford Explorer nine miles from his home in Arcata to exercise his black dog, Seal, at Clam State Beach, which was located off the Pacific Ocean in far northern California.

 Seal was a sweet-natured female Labrador Retriever. Due to her breed, she loved running and fetching sticks that her master flung out into the cold, salty water. Norton liked this stretch of beach too -- watching the murky waves roll in and out, observing the sea birds weaving and darting across the sky, and smelling the tang of damp seaweed which clumped atop scattered pieces of driftwood when the tide was low. It was usually less crowded here too, than at neighboring Moonstone Beach, two miles north.

 The woman was wearing a soiled, peach-colored sweatshirt and distressed blue jeans. She had removed her battered canvas loafers, so her feet were bare, resting on the sand. She was staring out towards the waves on the western horizon, her pale face frozen in a sad frown. She had ash-blonde hair cut short, with wild tufts jutting up on top and off both sides. Her eyes were pale blue. Her fingernails were uneven and had trapped some dirt underneath. She appeared to be in her early forties. The woman was startled when Seal raced too close to her while rushing to fetch yet another stick that Norton threw in the water.

 "Oh, please forgive me! She gets so excited every time we come here. Sometimes she forgets her manners," Norton explained by way of apology. "Sorry if she bothered you. By the way, her name is Seal, and I'm Norton Hull. She got her name because she loves the water so much that my wife and I figured that our dog was probably a black, ocean-dwelling seal in some previous incarnation." He chuckled.

 The woman gazed up with a lonely expression of forlorn resignation. Suddenly, she started crying, her anguished face twisted in pain.

 "I hate this world, and I hate my life! I'd be better off dead! I just can't do this anymore!" she wailed. "I'm gonna end it all today!"

 Norton was surprised at the total stranger's stark admission of such misery.

 "Whoa, now...slow down. We should talk about this, don't you think? Let's start with your name, OK?"

 The woman hesitated, then looked away after muttering one word in disgust: "Holly."

 "Alright, Holly, do you mind if I sit down next to you here in the sand and we can talk?"

 "Well..if you want..."

 The dog, dripping wet, reappeared at their seated sides and shook herself vigorously, showering both people with spray after surrendering her latest seized stick.

 "Oh, careful, Seal! Here...go get it again, girl!" Norton stood up and threw the soggy stick as far back into the water as he could -- an action he would repeat over and over during the next hour or so while he talked with and listened to Holly.

 "I'm living in a broken-down van here in the beach parking lot. I don't have a job. I'm basically broke. I hitchhike on 101 north into town for free meals at homeless shelters and church soup kitchens, but I don't want any government handouts. Too many rules and tracking, and dumb questions to answer. Sometimes, I 'dumpster-dive' for still-edible foodstuffs behind grocery stores and supermarkets. I panhandle when I have to, but I ain't no whore. The cops around here know me, but they leave me alone. I don't do drugs or drink. I'm forty-two years old. My husband divorced me after seven years of marriage, going on five years ago now. He quickly remarried some young filly -- probably screwing her on the side while we were still hitched. The courts said I was an unfit mother, and granted Curt custody of our daughter, Melody. I haven't seen her in over eight months. She's fourteen years old now. My parents have basically disowned me. They still live back in North Dakota. I'm a failure, Norton. That's my sorry, sad story. I've come to the conclusion that suicide is the only way out of this mess."

 "Have you ever discussed this with a clergyman, or a mental health counselor, or called a suicide 'help line'?" Norton gently asked.

 "I'm afraid that God has given up on me. I mean, what have I done to deserve this torment? I ain't a perfect person -- never met anyone who was -- but I wasn't evil, or mean, or hurtful to anyone my entire life. All I ever wanted was a simple, normal existence -- be a wife, a mother, get some kind of job after the kids grew up, you know? Instead, I hit a brick wall. Why did God punish me so? Answer me that, if you can."

 Norton thought quietly for a moment, then spoke, choosing his words carefully. "Well, Holly, I appreciate your honesty in sharing all this with me. Will you do me a favor and meet me here tomorrow around this same time? I'll leave my dog at home with my wife. Maybe you and I can figure out together a way to help you. There is a cafe and coffee shop called The Eatery in Trinidad, right up the coast. I'll be happy to treat you to lunch. No strings attached. The weather forecast is for rain tomorrow anyway, so we will warm and dry indoors. In the meantime, will you promise not to harm yourself until we can talk again?"

 Holly looked Norton cautiously in the eye for several seconds. "Hmm..I guess I can trust you. Agreed." She shyly extended her hand and Hull gave it a friendly squeeze. "But if the weather is gonna be lousy, you should come right to my van. You can't miss it -- it's a beat-up dirty white Chevy Gladiator. It broke down a long time ago. I can't drive it anyway, 'cause I got no money for gas, no car insurance, no current license plate sticker -- plus my driver's license is long expired. Pretty pathetic, don't you think?" She snorted ruefully.

 Norton took his leave of Holly after collecting his dog and drove back to Arcata, his mind whirling. How much of this encounter should he tell his wife, Blair? And what plan could he come up with that might help salvage Holly's life, even a little?

 A cool dawn came the following morning, bringing pelting rain and gusty winds -- not unusual for this rough piece of coast. Hull told his wife that he had to go to the hardware store in Trinidad and pick up some insulation tape for their front door, which was leaking cold air and moisture around the edges whenever rainy weather blew in from the west.

 Norton found Holly's van without any trouble in the Clam Beach parking lot. He knocked on its sliding side door. Holly peeked out, then let him in. All of the seats inside the van had been removed. It was packed with stacks of old paperback books, a smelly pile of laundry, a damp mattress with soiled bedspread, a large plastic bucket of water with dirty dishes and mugs stacked in it, and an open garbage bag showing empty food cans and cardboard containers.

 But what most disturbed Hall was not the dank and musty odor inside the vehicle, but rather the dark bruise he noticed on Holly's left wrist. He asked what had happened.

 "Oh that? It's nothing. Some drifter tried to break in last night. I fought him off with my baseball bat. But he hit me with some kind of club made from driftwood before he let it slip from his hand and ran away." She reached behind the van door and showed Norton the weapon. "Exhibit A...probably some stoner looking for free weed. You know, they grow a ton of pot up here in Humboldt County."

 Holly wrapped a poncho over her shoulders and the pair hopped into Norton's tan Explorer. It was raining hard. He turned on the car's heater to thwart the chill. Trinidad was just four miles away.

 It was 11:45 on a Sunday morning, but the lunch crowd had already assembled at The Eatery. Norton and Holly were led to a booth with teal-colored plastic bench seats. The stormy ocean winds raging outside rattled the cafe's windows. In the distance in the Pacific, huge rocky outcrops (some even with trees growing on them) jutted out from the sea. A few crazy surfers in wetsuits were trying their luck on the swollen storm waves. An elderly waitress -- Sheila -- took their order. Norton had a Shrimp Louie chef's salad with hot tea, and a famished Holly wanted the big Hamburger Scramble -- ground beef, diced potatoes, green pepper, onion, cheddar cheese, tomatoes, and bacon chunks all mixed together -- and a large pot of hot coffee. The pair split a basket of warm sourdough biscuits too, with butter, jelly, and honey on the side.

 While they waited for Sheila to serve them, Hull noticed the somewhat sickly pallor of the skin -- including a few blemishes -- on Holly's face, as well as her slightly-chipped front tooth. Poor diet and the stress of mere survival were probably to blame, he figured. He wondered when she last had a doctor's examination or a dental cleaning. But he didn't want to get too personal with this unusual woman so soon by asking.

 The food arrived and they began eating. "You know most of my story, Norton. So how about telling me yours?" Holly asked, ravenously filling her mouth.

 "Sure, Holly. You have been so open with me that it is only fair that I be completely honest with you. I'm sixty-three years old. I will retire with a pension in two years from being a supervisor at the U.S. Post Office in Arcata. I have been married to my wife, Blair, for forty years. She works at the local DMV. She's sixty, and will get her pension in five. We have two grown boys, both of whom moved back East -- Stuart and Steve. Both are married, and we have three grandkids."

 Norton paused to spear another shrimp in his Louie salad with his fork, and then took long sip of his still-warm raspberry tea.

 "Yesterday, you shared your significant life's troubles with me, Holly. I have thought about your plight all last evening. I think I have a plan which might help you. But first you should know that my own life is far from happy and ideal."

 Holly gave Norton her full attention while continuing to eat, her pale blue eyes watching him intently.

 "From the outside, most people's lives may appear normal and content. But behind every door of well-tended homes with active families is a darker secret: dreams unfulfilled, emotions damaged, promises broken, maybe even some lies and betrayal, bitter disappointments and stark loneliness. Existential angst -- maybe you have heard the phrase? The big questions in life are: Why are we here? What is our purpose? Why does evil exist if God created this world for goodness?

 People change to over time, Holly -- and not necessarily for the better. When Blair and I got married, I adored her. I assumed that happiness was a captured prize that I would never lose. But I was wrong. I soon found out that my wife had long, moody passages and was prone to depression. I urged her to see a psychiatrist, but she refused. She would never talk with me about it. Blair thankfully takes several medications to help her condition. But we gradually grew apart over time, while remaining married for the sake of our sons. Our love has, frankly, vanished. All that is left is loyalty, compassion, support, and keeping up appearances. I can never be completely open with her. And now we are going on forty years of this static situation. It's funny, because I know of no couples who are happy in their marriages. After the initial years of sex and affection are exhausted, there is not much left to grow together on when communication shuts down. You are surprised when your loving spouse largely turns into a stranger.

 So what comes next? Children. You eagerly work like an slave for eighteen years per child. Love, patience, time, and money are poured in. You naturally expect some future return of appreciation and reciprocal caring. But do you know what happens? The parents become mostly forgotten. Our two boys rarely contact us. They explain that they are too busy with their own lives to spend any quality time with us. So they, too, turn into strangers. We get a few phone calls a year, and a Christmas card, and that's about it.

 What about work, then? How many people are actually happy with their jobs and their chosen career? Do they truly admire their boss and enjoy being with their coworkers? Maybe, if they are lucky. But most folks crawl with dread through the week, over the years, in quiet desperation. Is this all there is? Watching the clock, and then the accelerating calendar, waiting for it all to end?

 Fortunately, there are vacations, and alone time out in nature or quietly reading, and holidays, and weekend hobbies, and those certain rare and close friendships that provide some fulfillment. But meanwhile, the years keep going by. As you get older, you sense your body changing -- slowing down, falling apart. It's alarming when you inevitably face your own mortality for the first time. Every day afterward, you think about death, or fear getting a terminal disease. Every new ache or pain worries you. You see people just a few years older than you in coffins at funerals. That's when you wonder if life is truly worth the struggle. That's where you are at now, Holly, pondering life's futility and even contemplating suicide -- only you have probably have forty more years of fulfilling life ahead of you if you dramatically shift your outlook and efforts."

 Sheila the waitress returned and asked if we wanted any dessert. Holly asked Norton if she could have some Marionberry pie. "Sure, but none for me. I'm full," he confessed. He let Sheila clear the table and bring the check with Holly's pie slice when she had a minute. "No hurry...but we'll be going soon," he smiled. Everyone was aware that there were other soggy customers impatiently waiting for a nice, dry booth and a hot meal.

 "So, to wrap it up, Holly, everyone is in the same dilemma: how should we NOT waste our lives? Marriage, parenthood, and career all turned out to be nothing what I expected them to be. Three tough shocks and their lingering disappointments hit me. Frankly, my soul lost its moorings. Yet whining and complaining were not an option. I learned that it is simply the way life is. We must endure and carry on as best we can.

 But let me ask you something important, Holly. Did you graduate from high school? And did you ever take any higher education classes?"

 Holly revealed that she graduated from a Bismarck, ND high school, and that she also took a year at a community college there, trying to get a nursing-assistant certificate. "But then Curt came along and we got married. Before long, Melody entered our lives. My schooling stopped. But I really liked science and math. I had a good head for those subjects. I really wanted to be a nurse someday."

 "That's great! That gives me a further idea. Finish your pie and coffee, Holly, and I'll pay the check." He did, then returned and left Sheila a generous tip as they left.

 "I have to stop at the hardware store for a minute, so wait in the car, then I'll drive you back to your van. There are a few more things we need to decide on the way."

 The rain had stopped, but the roads were still slick. Traffic on 101 southbound was slow, with the usual fully-laden logging trucks crowding the single lane.

 "Here's the ultimate reason why nobody should ever take their own life, Holly. This is my firm belief. All major religions back me up on this. We are put on this earth to help each other -- to 'serve' each other, if you will. That's it. We have to stop dwelling on our own inner turmoil and personal miseries. Too much introspection is not good, I've come to realize. That goes for replaying past mistakes as well. We need to come 'outside' of ourselves in a loving, giving spirit. Only then will the world ever get better. That is why I want to help you. Trust me. I want nothing in return from you, Holly. My selfless giving to you is the only reward I'll ever need or want."

 Twenty minutes later, the pair was back at Holly's base at Clam Beach. "Of course, I have to work at the post office for the coming week, so I won't be seeing you until next Saturday. But here's my plan -- let me know what you think: I'll pick you up that morning and we'll drive back to Trinidad. We'll go to a laundromat and do all of your laundry. Then we'll hit the Thrift Store and get you some better clothes and shoes. Next, it's off to the Trinidad Inn. You'll get checked in for two nights. A hot bath for a change, and a real bed with clean sheets and fluffy pillows! You can also order carry-out food to be delivered. I insist on paying for everything, no arguing. The following Monday morning, I'll take off work for the day and pick you up. We'll go to a hair salon and get you properly clipped and manicured. Then we'll drive to Eureka and the College of the Redwoods for my final big surprise. You game?" an excited Norton Hull raised his eyebrows, then grinned.

 Holly was stunned, then caught her breath. "Oh my God, yes!" she gushed. "And a thousand thank-yous for that amazing lunch too, Norton." She started getting misty-eyed as Hull drove away, her thoughts and emotions whirling in and out of her re-invigorated spirit. Holly had never met such a generous and warm-hearted human being...

 A 'renewed' version of Holly was ready that following Monday morning, as planned. Her weekend at the Inn had been wonderful. She felt hopeful and optimistic for the first time in ages. Her hair was neatly shampooed, snipped and coiffed. "You look outstanding, Holly!" Norton exclaimed, beaming. "Ready to begin your new life?" Her wrist bruise was also healing and fading.

 At the College of the Redwoods, Holly met Dean Raymond Forbes in his attractive redwood-paneled office. Norton did the introductions, explaining that he and Ray were old friends and golfing buddies.

 "Holly, we have a well-regarded, two-year nursing program here -- Associate of Science in Registered Nursing. Upon completion, you will be able to take the NCLEX-RN Certification Exam. After passing that, you'll be able to get a nursing job at any hospital or clinic in the United States, and get top dollar for it too. Now, our classes are rigorous, Holly, I have to warn you, and you'll be twice the age of most of the other female and male students. But from what Norton here tells me, you'll be up to the challenge." Dean Forbes smiled in sincere encouragement.

 "But how can I pay for such an education? I have no money, and I naturally don't expect good Mr. Hull here to foot all my school expenses," she wanted to know.

 "That's the beautiful part, Holly. You have been given a special full scholarship through the Rotary Club in Arcata. Norton, being a long-standing member there, arranged everything. You will even be given free room and board here on campus, plus a part-time job in our food services to earn your own extra money. Before long, you can buy a better car and even plan on visiting your daughter, Melody, again. How about that? You can move in and go to work here whenever you are ready. Classes start again in January. That will give you some time to brush up on your medical science knowledge at our campus library, from where you left off several years ago in Bismarck."

 The once homeless and suicidal vagabond stared at Norton and the Dean as if in a dream. If this is a dream, I never want to wake up! she hoped. The only possible way to repay this windfall bounty is to succeed, and succeed she must -- and succeed she would!

 Holly broke down in tears, sobbing with overwhelming humility and thankfulness, then rushed to embrace a likewise very emotional Norton Hull...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

 September 6, 2022