

Misplaced

Lara Hazelton

It's a cold December morning and I've been sent to the principal's office. By my husband, who suggested I find out if anyone has turned in the cheque for indoor soccer that our daughter lost. Something always goes missing at school. It seems I'm in here every few weeks looking for lost clothes — hats, especially. I hate digging through the lost and found, a big blue plastic barrel brimming with dark knitted clothing and the occasional shock of pink mitten. It feels shameful, like scavenging in a dumpster. I would rather buy yet another hat, another scarf. As I stand waiting by the desk, the secretary comes in, a short, bustling woman wearing a black fur coat. She barely looks at me as she walks over to pick up the telephone, which I now notice has been off the hook. "He's sitting up now," she says into the telephone. The principal's with him." She listens for a moment. "The ambulance knows where to come? Okay, fine." She hangs up and looks at me.

"Yes?"

I speak quickly. "I'm Mrs. Hazelton. My daughter's in grade one. She lost the cheque we gave her for indoor soccer, and I was wondering if it had been turned in."

She casts a look around her. "I'm sorry, but just right now —"

"It's okay," I reassure her.

"We've got a bit of an emergency on the playground. If you could wait here, please." She opens the closet, takes out her hat and puts it on as she leaves the office.

I wonder what I should do. I could stick around and wait, or else come back later. I could just write another cheque. Twenty-five dollars isn't that much. Then it occurs to me that I'm a doctor, and there has been some sort of accident on the playground. It seems odd to be a physician at this moment when I am so preoccupied with being somebody's mother.

Perhaps I should go out there and do something. I did spend a month as an intern in the emergency department at the local children's hospital, the same emergency room where they will be taking the child outside. Ten years ago I was suturing cuts, checking for broken bones, performing neurologic exams on kids who had bumped their heads.

Maybe some useful skills are still stored in a dusty memory circuit, ready to be accessed.

Then again, I'm a specialist now, a psychiatrist. What if

I try to help and only make the situation worse? Maybe my malpractice insurance won't cover me.

If I go out there, I will have to introduce myself to the secretary again, telling her I'm a doctor. But if I just say that, "I'm a doctor," she will probably think I'm a family physician. Instead I'd have to say, "I'm a psychiatrist." Many people don't know the difference between a psychologist and a psychiatrist, and she might not realize I've been to medical school. She might think I'm offering to provide counselling. It would sound like the kind of joke other specialists love to make about psychiatrists.

Maybe she would think I was bragging or trying to make myself look important. She might think I was making it up. She might wonder why I didn't say something right away.

There wouldn't be much I could do before the ambulance comes anyway. I was trained to practise medicine in a well-equipped emergency room; I'd be out of my element

out there on the playground in the snow. But there might be something I could do. I can do CPR. Then again, it doesn't sound like the kid needs CPR. It's cold, though. They should put a blanket on the kid. I wonder if they've thought of that already. I don't think there is much point waiting around for the secretary. I'm going to write another cheque.

As I leave the office, I pause. All around me in the hallway are children's coats, hats and scarves, tossed at random on the floor or hanging crookedly from metal hangers. No wonder things get lost

so easily here. Why can't kids look after their belongings? Maybe they're too preoccupied with the routine demands of school. Or maybe they think it's not their responsibility.

The exit to the street where my car is parked is down the corridor and to the right. But instead of going that way, I cross the hall and descend the stairs to the left, still wet with melted snow. I push open the metal door, and a blast of cold air hits me. Beside the playground equipment, two figures are huddled. A child's legs are visible beyond the sheltering embrace of the principal, whose hunched back is turned toward me. Further off, the secretary stands looking up the road, her fur coat black against the white of the snow.

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