
OFF TRACK

HADLEY HOOVER

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To Kendall—you keep me on track.

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Even as I reached to scratch my foot, I knew it was futile. Right where a guy's foot ought to be, instead it was the best in rehabilitative fakery. That's *my* term for what's attached to the south end of my left leg; the *docs* euphemistically refer to it as my Assistive Device. I'm an otherwise healthy fellow, just minus one flesh-and-bones foot.

When a fella with an amputation is married to a gal with clout in the medical field, *best* goes with the territory, hence my cutting-edge (telling wordage, eh?) detachable body part. While most people wake up and put on shoes, I require time to don a foot before the second shoe. Unless they notice my slightly stilted gait, most folks never suspect I'm not like them.

Don't focus on the itching, I chided myself in a familiar mantra and lowered my high-tech appendage to the floor mat. We'd been driving for hours, but thanks to Sage's lead foot on the accelerator, at least the scenery was whizzing by. Hey: one phony foot, one lead foot . . . we're quite the team.

Our fifteen-year-old sedan moved smoothly along Highway 21's dotted line like a zipper. *That's good—think about zippers . . . what do I know about zippers? Hmm . . .* I tested the imagery that popped to mind on my patient spouse: "Feels like we're opening a zipper, doesn't it?"

"Huh?"

Not the hoped-for response, but that's what a husband gets when he disrupts his wife's thoughts. "Our car. Following the dotted line on the road. Like the gizmo on a zipper, opening Utah's wonders with each wheel rotation."

"You mean the pull-tab?" *Did her eyes roll?* "We'd need to be centered on the line. Zippers don't open from the side." The jauntiness of her retort robbed it of sarcasm.

She was right; the simile needed work. Too wordy for me. Succinct descriptions, sharp analogies, crisp language—those are the tools of my trade; I earn big bucks spinning baffling plots. Anyone browsing my titles in bookstores or airport kiosks knows I dole out words sparingly. A person can start a Kiel Nede mystery while waiting to board a plane, and actually finish it on the flight.

No ticket stub marking a spot, leaving the reader to wonder on the return trip, *What was this book about, anyway?*

Outside our car, a sensual riot ensued. Since this wasn't my first trip to these parts, I lowered the window expectantly and breathed in the mile-high air; my heartbeat slowed. Traffic? Road rage? Fuggedaboutit; this was Utah.

Always big on scenery, that day the Union's forty-fifth state was even bigger on suspense. Sage had slipped behind the wheel after we refueled in Salina. "You drove five hours; it's my turn," she insisted, but I knew more than fairness motivated her. She was antsy about what awaited us in Milford, and driving offered her the perfect distraction.

Interstate 70 had taken us from Denver to I-15, which we had exited in Beaver. Desert plants' aromas mingled with airborne dust—a surprisingly pleasant scent riding the stiff autumn breeze that hummed in my ears. Hawks claimed rights to road-kill along Highway 21's winding two lanes, scolding us in strident tones for interrupting their grazing while we ate up the miles.

As we climbed a grade, Sage yelped and swerved to the right. Three jackrabbits dashed before us like a furry ellipsis, somehow surviving to tell long-eared relatives about their narrow escape from Death by Volvo.

I realized what I'd been whistling only when Sage pointed to five antelope drinking from a creek bed. A scene unfurled before us—as if theatrically designed to illustrate *where the deer and the antelope play* from my interrupted song. "Who knew 'Home on the Range' was their cue to enter stage-right?" she laughed.

When I resumed fiddling in the general region of my absent foot, Sage glanced toward me, but said nothing. Three decades ago, we made vows that still hold firm. For some couples, if one spouse severed the other's foot on a wood-chopping trip in their third summer of wedded bliss, it would stamp OVER-AND-OUT to the marriage vows. For us, it fell under *for better or worse* promises.

Grasping my ankle at the point where real met imitation, I shifted my attention from phantom itches to the painted shadows on mountainsides. Gray became blue, subtly easing back to mauve-tinted gray as clouds shifted.

Had we not been playing fast-and-loose with the speed limit, I may have grabbed my camera from the back seat, but it was out of reach. I live by the break-only-one-law-at-a-time philosophy so I remained seated, seat belt securely fastened, and refrained from commenting on Sage's speed.

The view reminded me of the San Francisco street artist whose hand never stilled, even as I clicked photo after photo—not

of his sketch but of his face, which intrigued me even more than his rendition of sunlight on the Golden Gate Bridge. One stony-faced mountain mirrored the craggy lines of that artist's cheeks, the years having carved his jutting brow and deep-set eyes into the rock. Rabbit bushes completed my fantasy, sprawling like an untamed moustache above a shadowed cave-mouth.

Sage reset the cruise control and eased her sunglasses up to settle like a crown in a soft brown cushion of hair. I reached to thrust my fingers into that silky nest, cupping the curves of her head. She leaned into my hand. "I love you," we murmured in unison, and matching smiles eased across our faces. We've known each other so long that coordinated thoughts weren't an oddity.

On high peaks marking the horizon, precariously perched rocks seemed eager to tumble in the next strong wind. If ever a state needed signs warning WATCH FOR FALLING ROCKS, Utah was it, but there were few in the more traveled parts; and even fewer in remote Beaver County.

Horses flung their manes, sniffing the air; cattle sharing the fields never ceased eating. Neatly organized hay bales just beyond the animals' reach would feed them, come winter, but today the towering stacks added a golden lushness to the idyllic scene.

Phantom sensations faded. I don't blame Sage for each discomfort or inconvenience that accompanies a foot gone-missing, and she holds no grudges about our early years when my chosen career barely brought in enough moola to put raisins in our oatmeal. We thought we would never get beyond pay-as-you-go mode. But we hitched our wagon to the star named HOPE shining brightly in our *for richer or poorer* skies and held on for the ride.

A pleasant woody aroma filtered into the car, transported on the magic carpet of elusive childhood memories . . . yes, it was the chest loaded with Grandma Eden's quilts. I spotted the source: zigzag rows of prickly junipers. Their cedar-like scents mingled with the scattered pines and scrubby oaks that dotted the ridges.

Around another curve, a late crop glistened, blanketing the earth like green-hued jewels. Cut into fence posts of varying heights, sturdy knob-crusted tree trunks attempted to halt marauding deer and antelope, but the barbed wire hanging like limp ribbons in random places told who won *that* battle.

Sage and I have known times when even our best-laid plans sagged like that wire. Eventually my writing dream caught an up-draft and I bid a joyous farewell to scouting for freelance writing assignments. Coinciding with what she called my "mood and money shift," Sage emerged from graduate school with dual Master's degrees, and then sailed through a PhD program while

working at the first of several plum jobs, each more enticing and career enhancing than the last. Life leaped and landed solidly in the *for better* part of those starry-eyed vows young Zeke and Sage Eden made.

Ah, you caught that, hmm? You thought I wrote mysteries under my real name? Uh-uh; that's *Kiel Nede's* job. Technically, the first name should be pronounced *Key-el*, since it is the tag-end of *Ezekiel*, but at my first live interview for Book #1, the perky gal said, "So, *Kyle*, tell us about . . ." and I thought *Kyle, huh? Works for me*, and let it fly. Wise decision, or I would have been correcting pronunciations endlessly over the years.

My given name—Ezekiel Daniel Eden—weighed too much for a boy to cart around. Remember the old Spiritual about "*Ezekiel saw the wheel, way up in the middle of the air*"? Well, that made no sense to me, and Grandma Eden's bedtime stories of the Old Testament's Daniel and his incredible adventures (Where was the lad's mother?) conversely kept me awake.

Then one day a kid moved into our neighborhood who was *Ted* to his pals and *Theodore* to his parents. *Ah-ha!* Ditching Mom's chosen names, I switched Ezekiel for the less visionary *Zeke* and reduced *Daniel* to a simple *D*, which came without lions and fiery furnaces.

To accommodate my writing life, I then flipped the letters of my surname to become *Kiel D Nede*—the dude who, with each new book in print, appears on night-owl shows. But that massacre of my given name didn't cause Mom distress. Rather, it signaled a fine-tuning of what she had long considered my "little hobby" to what she instantly relabeled the "art form" which transformed me into a writer of modest renown. Mom's boundless joy and pride increased exponentially with each successive title.

Her greatest distress was my unbending rule that she stay mum about her relationship to *Kiel*. There'd be none of that "my son, the world-famous author" business. Though she chaffed, she honored my edict, assuming the role of *Kiel Nede's* greatest fan. When asked what her son, *Ezekiel*, did for a living, she remained vague—"He's a freelance writer"—and quickly changed the subject before anyone could ask further questions. With no outlet, Haze Eden was one frustrated mother.

Rehabilitation left me with plenty of time to write—and write I did, becoming more adept at both gait and plots as time and effort devoted to each endeavor increased. It's hats-off to a talented team of physiatrists and physical therapists for my progress in *gait*. But I credit Sage's miscalculation with an ax for my strides in writing. Losing a foot led to gaining a career. Go figure.

Kiel Nede did the writing, so I decided early on that only Kiel would use crutches in public; Zeke navigated without visible assistance. To accomplish this meant no shorts in public. My bony legs had never been show-stoppers, so no loss there, and hiding my prosthesis averted many stares. Crutches proved the perfect foil to keep my two identities separate. People see and remember disabilities *first*, and anything else *second*. One-footed Kiel allowed two-footed Zeke Eden to walk anonymously through life.

My surefootedness—whether psychological or physical—owed its existence to modern medical advances and a gifted physical therapist named Jamie who never let me quit trying. While we worked and sweated together (guess who did the balking, and who gently, persistently prodded?) we created Kiel Nede's protagonist, Raven.

He absorbed all my frustration, fear, and anger that emerged from my ghastly emotional chasm and became the ruthless hero my readers have come to fearfully respect—allowing *me* to emerge whole, despite one physical deficit. Thus, the first entry on the Acknowledgements page of my first book read:

To Jamie Hamden PT and Raven Crowley. I owe you both so much.

No rule against giving figments of imagination equal billing with breathing mortals, I figured.

We reached the point of our cross-country trip where Milford Valley spills out in understated grace. "Excited?" In reaching for Sage's hand, I effectively closed the curtain on the past. She squeezed back and nodded briskly—a sign I recognized as nervous energy. Since those scant-raisins-in-our-oatmeal days, Sage has shot up the ladder of success. My chauffeur, as we approached our destination, was none other than one of two top-choice candidates for Milford Valley Community Hospital's Chief Executive Officer.

Don't be looking for the actual hospital yet. The new CEO's job is to get plans out of Committee, off blueprints, and literally on the ground. The definitive decisions as to who lands the job would be resolved in the days ahead. Sage had interviewed with the Powers-That-Be several times, each meeting moving her to a higher rung. But we arrived in Milford fully aware that either side could back out.

If this occurred, we would return to our home in Oklahoma to address Sage's second option, for which she had completed a final interview in Iowa prior to our trip to Utah. Iowa lacked the appeal of *coming home* for Sage, though in all other respects, it was a tough call as to which alternative was more tempting.

Unobtrusively I tried to read Sage's emotional state. I knew how much she wanted Milford to work out. If butterflies batted against the walls of her stomach as boisterously as they did mine, we were both a mess.

Sage grew up here so she didn't need to look over the town, but I was along on this trip because she insisted she wouldn't take the job if I didn't think I could feel at home. I repeatedly remind her, "I can live in a box in the middle of nowhere, as long as that box offers power for my laptop and Internet access." But I appreciated the chance to look at Milford through different eyes than as a son-in-law, my role in all previous visits.

As a couple, we have never lived anywhere so isolated as either the Iowa or Utah openings offered us. We have called big cities in seven states *home* while Sage gained her education and experience, building a resume jam-packed with transferable skills. Meanwhile I churned out fifteen—soon to be sixteen—Kiel Nede mysteries, pretty much oblivious to my surroundings; that's how I get things done.

How, I scoffed, could Milford be any more distracting than Boston's traffic, San Francisco's bone-chilling fog, Chicago's 24/7 din, Florida's humidity, New York's pulsing nightlife, Denver's winters that froze my nose hairs or, most recently, Oklahoma's worst storms in over ten years?

We reached the southern fringe of Milford and rolled within reading distance of a sign that hung from a railroad wigwag's pole. It had likely been there for years, but seeing it on this trip, I whooped; Sage cocked an eyebrow. I pointed toward the rectangular warning: 5 TRACKS.

She laughed. "Won't Haze be thrilled? Her son on-location in a railroady town!"

"I vote we keep Mom uninformed. She needs no encouragement." Off to our left, a waterfall spilled over attractively arranged rocks into which was set another sign that welcomed us to Milford. We followed Main Street's curve and continued north.

"There!" Sage announced in a lilting voice. "The Board said the new CEO needs a temporary office and will have some say in its location. This could work. At least a portion of the first floor," she added, now seeing it through my eyes, not the rosy hue of her memory. "What do you think?" She motioned toward the two-story building situated two blocks beyond the waterfall. Since the waterfall's welcome sign had informed me Milford was established in 1873, I was busy doing the math and required a moment to refocus. Sage's question finally pierced my numerically induced fog.

I squinted through the windshield and read aloud from a vertical sign hanging from a brick edifice that appeared sadly neglected. "Horn Silver Hotel. Looks historical," I offered generously, thinking . . . *likely take a ton of elbow grease to make it habitable*. "Big, too," I added pointedly to give Sage pause for thought. "Plenty of room for you and a whole herd of elephants."

Offering merely a shrug in response, she stepped on the gas and continued several blocks north. *A shrug without comment? Hmm; time to dust off my fine-tuned husbandly skills*. "That's what it is for elephants, you know: a *herd*. Elephants travel in herds. If it comes up during your interview, remember: it's a *mob* of meerkats, and a *rookery* of penguins, but a *pod* of whales."

"Yes, yes; I'll keep that in mind." She made a right-hand turn that, one block later, put us parallel to the railroad tracks. A row of houses running north and south backed the tracks—many of them new dwellings, built by folks for whom there must be no finer music than the songs of passing trains. Sage drove slowly, and I almost thought I'd lost her again until she said, "No herds of whales, no pods of penguins. And heaven forbid if elephants want to form a rookery."

"I just want you to do well," I said solemnly. My faux earnestness visibly eased her tension. *Well done, Zeke*. I let my mind roam beyond the wide streets of Sage's hometown, knowing we would cruise before landing at the motel. For half an hour, I would only need to offer the random "I see" or "Ahhh!" during our slow-motion review of what's-new, what's-not in Milford.

Our many trips around the country over the years have been for my career. Sage willingly took the passenger seat, either literally or figuratively. This time, not only was the trip not about me, but I would flit around anonymously like the butterflies I hoped would soon vacate my digestive system.

Nothing had been said in the interview process about the bloke Sage married. Fine with me. Those few remaining citizens who might recall June and Lefty Crowley's bragging (the word seems inappropriate, given their guarded appreciation of a son-in-law who earned a living in "such a peculiar way," as Lefty once referred to my career) were now either residents in retirement homes or occupied quiet graves in Milford's hilltop cemetery.

Parents; God love 'em. Mine—Hazel and Rudy Eden—raised two boys: yours truly and my brother, Gulliver Swift Eden. I'm supposedly the more stable, while he remains the more 'flexible,' I believe is Mom's current term. He goes by Gull and avoids mention of his middle name, though he is one swift dude. Too

speedy, some might say. Flighty, even, when it comes to sticking with careers or partners.

In our family, given names surface only under duress. Mom's nickname has been Haze for years. It fits in ways she doesn't seem to realize, but it is apt since her voice coats most conversations with a miasma of impenetrable chatter.

Though Dad is the sixth Rudolph in the Eden family line, Mom refused to marry "one of Santa's reindeer." Not only did the lovestruck lad instantly become *Rudy* in order to win her hand, but Mom named her firstborn Gulliver without a hint of apology to our forefathers. There would be no seventh Rudolph Eden.

With such evident boldness, it shouldn't have surprised me that, early in my career, Mom assumed the self-designated role of supplying me with story ideas. Her enforced silence on my true identity required some means of venting. At times, I have wondered if anonymity was truly important enough to me if putting up with Mom's gusto was the only viable alternative.

For years Mom has doggedly pursued the idea ("*Here's the plan, Zeke . . .*") that I would write a mystery about a battle between expanding railroads and city planners who want track-free environs. Despite my protests that such a story leaned more toward exposé than mystery, Mom continued to supply endless details of the decade-long saga unfolding back in Rochester, Minnesota, which is home for her, Dad, and Gull.

It's like having a cottage industry for a mother. She reads, clips, and calls to spout verbatim what she has collected and is ready to mail. Then, several days later, she calls again to be sure I received and read each item in the stuffed envelope. And don't try to fudge on adding to the bulging file because she keeps an annotated copy: "*Compare this article to what I sent May 14th—you'll find the contradictions very enlightening, Zeke.*"

Her persistence wasn't new, just more intense this time—probably because the Rochester railroad saga festered beneath the surface of local news, whereas other sensational stories flitted through the public's awareness, never to be seen again.

If I had written a book for every unsolicited idea Mom provided, I would be cranking out titles like popcorn. Her mind is like the popcorn machine in many high school grandstands: *How about a story about fraud in banking?* Pop! *Here's an idea: bellhops hiding drugs in luggage.* Pop! Pop! *Sneaky practices in rental cars. . .* Poppity-pop-pop-poppity-pop-pop! *Zeke! Turn on CNN—undercover deals in meatpacking.* Stand clear, folks—popppppppop! Letters from Mom offered enough ideas to raise

the metal lid on my brain's bucket and spew hot oil willy-nilly along with hot kernels.

It often takes half an hour to recover from Haze's brim-full envelopes or mind-numbingly detailed phone calls.

With fifteen Kiel Nede books (and nary a Hazel-Eden plot in evidence) and prestigious awards for eight titles, I have become the Pied Piper to a growing troop of devoted fans. But could I make them really care about a Midwestern *mêlée* over railroad tracks? Mom scoffed every time I expressed such "negative thinking." My questioning if I have the skills required to keep readers turning pages and recommending such a book to friends and relatives was like spitting in the wind.

Not to sound crass, but sales are what keeps an author's world going 'round. And I like it best when my world spins like a Tilt-a-Whirl gone wild.

A dip in the road jolted me back to Milford. We passed a fenced-and-gated brick structure with the look of a business, but the bicycles, well-tended flowerbeds, canopied swing-for-two, and dramatic lawn art gave it a private home's flair. Tab-hung curtains fluttered alluringly in tall multi-paned windows open to Utah's afternoon breeze. Across the street, an attractive basement house gave no evidence of any intent to change that status; its garden showed loving care and creativity. Milford looked homey, not like a glossy magazine feature titled *COMING HOME*, but the real deal.

The Volvo purred as we crept to the top of the curving hill where the Oak Tree Inn came into view. Papers in Sage's briefcase verified our reservation there. Even though Sage's name is on the deed to the house her parents willed their two daughters, it has been closed up for years; minimal furnishings remain. Thus we would have pursued alternate lodging anyway had not the Planning Board offered such.

Sage pulled into the parking lot that the Oak Tree Inn and Penny's Diner shared. Like contented cats, we pressed hands against the dusty car and stretched our muscles before entering the Diner where signs instructed us to register.

Several railroad employees were signing lodging forms and collecting take-out meals, so we used the restrooms, returning in time to see the men climb into a van ready to deliver them to waiting trains. Then it was our turn; Sage certainly didn't require my assistance for a routine check-in. At my request, the clerk exchanged dollar bills for quarters. After placing our room-service dinner order, I went outside to plug coins in the newspaper stands.

Knowing how one thing leads to another, we resisted the urge to drive beyond the city limits and check over the old Crowley

family homestead. The last thing we needed the night before a crucial interview was to discover that wind had blown shingles to kingdom-come, or that critters had feasted on Lefty's prized trees and bushes. Time enough for such crises after the question concerning our future was answered. Instead we spent a quiet evening, dining on salads and sandwiches, and reading the newspapers.

Nearly overwhelmed by yawns, Sage eventually called it a day and climbed into a bubble-filled tub, warning me she would emerge only when she resembled a prune. I used the last of my quarters and treated my gal to a caffeine-free Diet Coke from the machine outside our room, even putting ice in the plastic cup. What a guy, huh? Only then did I fire up my laptop, send out a few e-mails, and add a couple ideas to a computer file for my current mystery.

I keep pretty tight-lipped about my storylines; not even Sage knows what I have chosen for a new book's plot until I present her with the draft of the first couple chapters to read. Six months ago, when I handed her the sheath of papers representing the beginning of my sixteenth mystery, she read *On Track* on the top page and quickly flipped to the synopsis I always create for my editor and agent. Her hilarity allowed only sputtered exclamations until she recovered. "Oh, Zeke—Haze will faint with joy!" she exclaimed and dove into the story with zest.

Yes, my Work-in-Progress is a mystery about railroads; hence my earlier hoot at Milford's 5 TRACKS sign. Call me a softie, but I buckled after one particular conversation with Mom. It wasn't so much what she said, but how she phrased it. I finally comprehended the joy she gets from "working together" with me. That was cogitating in my mind a few days later when a college buddy mentioned in a phone call how his mom doesn't even want to go out for lunch after he drives across two states to see her.

Contrast my friend's mother with Haze who views—and probably sets up—every lunch date as a prime opportunity to promote Kiel Nede, though it kills her to refrain from THE REST OF THE STORY. She's my personal Chamber of Commerce. Yes, she drives me crazy sometimes—okay, most of the time—but she has a big heart . . . and I won't have her around forever.

After those two conversations, a germ (maybe even a gem) of an idea emerged. How can a son thank his mother for a lifetime of seeing him only through rosy-colored glasses? Maybe other guys' answers would be different, but mine was to write a mystery running on parallel tracks to Mom's idea.

Thus, Kiel Nede's sixteenth book is *On Track* and the first entry on the Acknowledgements page says:

Thanks, Mom, for years of encouragement, advice, assistance and secret-keeping.

When Mom sees it, we'll have to anchor her to Planet Earth.

The tub was draining so I finished up at the computer. Sage's eyes glowed when I produced a bottle of scented oil from my suitcase and offered a day's-end massage. The pillow muffled her final words: ". . . pods of whales . . ." I smiled, kissed her cheek and turned off the light.

The up-and-coming (if the Planning Board has any sense) CEO of Milford Valley Community Hospital snuffled-and-sniffled herself into a deep slumber. With the familiar sounds of his wife's gentle snorts and sweet sighs as backdrop, the author of *On Track* stared up toward the motel ceiling well into the night, wondering if it was too late to bring Milford into the nearly completed story about a Midwestern railroad debacle. It had been fun to weave wherever we lived at the time into each previous mystery, so if we were to move to Milford, the same should hold true. I would have a nervous editor and an agent who would fuss mightily if I pushed the publication date farther out, but hey—who's writing this book?

Reposing in the unfamiliar stillness, I thought about the little burg of Milford becoming our home for the unforeseeable future. Part of me decided *Hey, I'll just go about my business, as usual*, but I knew that was not how small towns work. Though Kiel Nede could remain anonymous, I would need to connect.

Five tracks . . . I fell asleep musing about ten lines of cold steel connected with creosoted wood becoming my ticket to acceptance in this town—the people who had given me the best gift of my life: the woman lying beside me, her arm flung across my chest.