



THE BOOK

A tale of an odd relationship

by

David Drake

They found each other fascinating—
the troubled teen boy and the wise
old man

THE BOOK

The tale of an odd relationship.

**For High School age teens and parents.
(The story is mostly based on a true encounter.)**

**By
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And
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CHAPTER ONE

An Old Man on a Bench

Except for days of downpours or blizzards, mornings always found the old man sitting on a bench somewhere in Walker Park. It was a beautiful area with expansive, green flats for picnics, ball playing, and children's games of chase. There were gentle, softly irregular rises for trails and trees that framed the space up where it met the blue sky and set the shadows playing as the sun crossed from the city to the east to somewhere beyond the fields and hills to the west. A pond with geese and turtles and fish eager to be fed breadcrumbs by the children sat near the center.

The old man – who preferred to be called, 'Old Man' when some designation was truly needed – was a writer and would work his pencil across the pages of his yellow pad until it was filled. That was his signal it was time to head home for the day. All the regulars there in the park knew him – his white hair and beard, his red cheeks and oversized nose, the veins running along the surface of the backs of his aging hands. He was never too busy to offer a smile or chat with those who came within chatting range – joggers, mothers and children, old folks, and even an occasional teenager, although they usually consumed some portion of the park in groups, significantly raising the decibel level with mostly happy sounds.

"I seen you here before," came the opening words from the voice of a teen boy who the old man only then realized was looking over his shoulder from behind the bench.

The old man turned just enough to look up into the

boy's face – nice looking, well-tanned, uncombed blond hair, blue eyes.

"I'm usually here," the old man said. "You here often? I don't recall seeing you before."

He turned back forward and patted the seat beside him. The boy moved to the end of the bench, standing there, hesitant in every movement, as if wishing he hadn't initiated the conversation. He was fifteen – maybe sixteen – the old man figured. He wore the typical teen uniform of the day – dirty, untied, sneakers, well-worn jeans and a white T-shirt bearing the motto, 'Life Sucks'. The back of the shirt completed the saying – 'Bigtime!' – but the old man couldn't see that from where he sat.

"You're always writin'."

"I am a writer. That's pretty much what writers do."

The boy nodded.

"Figured. What do you write?"

"Words."

It had been offered with a sustained smile. The boy responded with one of his own, if short lived.

"That was kind of a smart Alek response. Sorry, son. I write fiction – stories and books. Occasionally, I edit pieces other folks have written."

"I hate to read," the boy said.

It had been matter of fact as if just offering a piece of information to keep the conversation going. No condemnation (out down) of the old man's pursuit appeared to have been intended.

"That's too bad, the old man said."

"Why?"

"Words have so many wonderful things to say – things to teach us, things to make us smile, things to make us think."

"I think a lot without readin'."

"Good for you. I'm sure there must be lots to think about at your age – sixteen, I'm guessing."

"Fifteen. Thanks."

"Thanks?"

"For thinkin' I'm older."

"You're welcome then, I suppose."

"You about fifty, I guess," the boy said, again clearly

indicating he was at least to some extent invested in the conversation.

“And I thank you. Closer to seventy-five, actually.”

“Really! That’s old.”

“Yes, I suppose it is. You have a name?”

“I do. I don’t give it out to strangers. You?”

“Most folks just call me, Old Man. That works fine. How about I call you, ‘Young man’?”

“Never thought of myself as a man.”

“Is it okay if I think of you that way?”

“I guess. Why you write here in the park?”

“I seem to think best out in the open like this and I like to watch people – I write about people so I often get ideas I can use.”

The boy took a seat at the far end of the bench.

“You gonna write about me?”

“Perhaps, although at this point I only have minimal information about you.”

“You talk funny.”

“I suppose so.”

“What would you write about me – from what you minimal know?”

“Well, let’s see. Hmm. Give me a minute, here.”

The old man flipped through his pad to a fresh page and began writing. The young man inched a bit closer and craned his neck to watch. It privately tickled the old man – the boy who hated to read was making a special effort so he could read.

Presently he removed the sheet and handed it to the boy who offered a strange look in the old man’s direction, but accepted it nevertheless. The meaning of the look was difficult to deduce and nothing further was offered to clarify it

“Would you read it, Old Man? I don’t read very good.”

He handed it back. The old man accepted it without any questions and began reading.

“As the old man was sitting on a bench in the park, a young man approached him from behind. He wondered if he should be concerned about the boy’s motive; was he there to cause him harm or to just pass the time of day? The latter turned out to be the case. He was a nice-looking boy with

long sandy blond hair and blue eyes. He was tall for his age and his shoulders had already grown broad, suggesting he had matured somewhat earlier than most. He spoke, even though there seemed to be no reason for him to do that. The old man wondered if he might be lonely or was going to ask for a favor or some kind of help. Five minutes into the conversation his reasons had still not been made clear and he had offered only one brief smile. The old man wondered if he were sad. It took some minutes before he moved to take a seat beside him there on the bench. The old man wondered if he had lots of things to be fearful of. He hoped not. Young people should not have to live with fears or sadness. For some reason that he could not fully understand, the old man liked the boy. He hoped that feeling would work both ways."

The young man turned to the old writer.

"Can I keep that?"

"Certainly."

He handed it back to the boy.

"You really know a lot about people, Old Man."

"After all these years, I should hope I have developed some skills in that department."

The young man nodded, but didn't comment.

"I don't have no friends."

"How has that come to be – you not having friends?"

"People hate me."

"I suppose that would be a good reason. What is there about you to hate. I haven't seen anything like that."

"I fight a lot and hurt people."

"Do I need to be afraid of you? I'm quite certain you could easily have your way with me. I'm old and no longer very strong."

"Oh, no. I won't do nothin' to you."

"Why not?"

"You're okay."

"What makes me okay and others in need of being beaten up?"

"You ain't put me down. You said nice things about me in what you wrote."

"I see – well, no, I guess quite honestly I don't see, but then I've never walked in your shoes."

“You never done what?”

“Walked in your shoes – it means I haven’t lived your life – I don’t know how things have really been for you. I believe that I don’t dare criticize or make judgments about another person until I have taken time to get to know him and his situation – how life is for him.”

“I think you are really strange.”

Only a moment passed until he adjusted his comment.

“I guess that’s because I ain’t walked in your shoes, neither, huh?”

“In response to your first observation, many people think I’m strange and that’s alright with me. I would never want to be just like other people. If I were, there would be no me. As to your second observation, I agree with you. I just imagine our lives have followed very different paths and we have experienced very different things. That probably makes us believe very different things about life and people and how to best get along in the world.”

“I bet your way works good, huh?”

“Usually, I’d say it does. Yes. I’d like to ask you a question, but of course you don’t have to ever answer any of my questions if you don’t want to.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

“Shouldn’t a boy your age be in school? It’s late April.”

“Got expelled for puttin’ a kid in the hospital during English.”

“I suppose that answers my question.”

The boy felt the need to offer a brief explanation.

“He laughed at me when I was readin’ out loud.”

It had been offered as full justification for his action. He seemed to believe the old man would understand why his action had been both necessary and warranted. The old man avoided the issue.

“When will you be returning to school?”

“Never, I’m guessin’. It was my third time being expelled. Like I told you, they hate my guts.”

“Well, then, I hope you’ll drop by again sometime – often even. I’m seldom in the same spot two days in a row. I like to view things through various perspectives, but the park isn’t that big.”

The boy nodded. It wasn't intended to suggest he would seek out the old man again, merely that he understood the offer. He changed the subject.

"You rich?"

"I assume you mean do I have lots of money."

The young man nodded, a puzzled look setting on his face as if asking what else could it mean.

"This will probably only prove to you that I am even stranger than you already think I am. I don't have lots of money, but I consider myself very rich. I suppose you would need to get to know me better in order to really understand that."

"If you mean it don't make no sense, you're right."

"Let me try a simple explanation. It may not really help, either. I have pretty good health for my age. I have friends. I find that the people I meet and the friends I have are mostly kind and helpful. The thing that I love to do most in life is to write and I get to do that every single day. My life is rich in those ways – and that's what I mean when I say I'm rich without actually having much money."

"But you write books. You must make money from that, don't you?"

"Are you ready to receive more 'strange'?"

The hint of a smile briefly turned up the edges of the young man's lips indicating he grasped the old man's meaning. He nodded and shrugged.

"For most of my adult life I worked at other jobs part time in order to earn money, and I used a large part of that money to have my books printed so I could give them away to kids and teens and old people who couldn't afford to buy books. Now that I'm living on my social security, I can't afford to do that anymore, so now I mostly publish them as e-books and let people download them from my website for free or from online bookstores for a few bucks apiece."

"I don't get it. Do you know the people you give your books to?"

"Not usually."

"I'd sure never give stuff to people I didn't know."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yeah, I'm sure of that!"

“And yet, here you are giving away your time and conversation to me and I’m pretty much a stranger.”

“That’s different. It ain’t stuff.”

“I see, well, again I suppose that I really don’t see.”

“What’s a word that means stranger than strange, Old Man?”

“Bizzare, outlandish, weird, crazy – there are others. The one I prefer is eccentric. It tends to mean somebody who lives his life the way he thinks life should be lived even when it may be very different from how other people live theirs.”

“I guess I’m that, too, then.”

“One difference, I believe. Eccentric folks almost never set out to hurt anybody.”

“That’s not me, then. It’s like if I don’t hurt somebody everyday I’m not me. Do you get that?”

“Not really, but a person like that would certainly make a fascinating character in a story, don’t you think?”

“You’re askin’ for my opinion?”

“Yes. Of course. You do have opinions, don’t you?”

“Yeah. Lots of ‘em, but nobody never asked me for one before. I usually get in trouble when I say ‘em.”

“I feel privileged to be the first to ask, then, and I feel so sorry that is how your life has been. Just think what everybody else has missed out on.”

“I think you mean that.”

“You will find I only say what I mean, young man.”

“It’s, Del, short for Delbert, the worst name ever saddled on a kid if you ask me.

“Del. How nice you shared that with me. Is that what you’d like me to call you?”

Del shrugged as if needing to avoid the answer.

“Well, then, it will be Del until you say otherwise. I rather like that. You know, in all of my seventy-five years I don’t believe I’ve ever before known anybody with that name?”

“It’s eccentric?” Del asked.

“I think a more precise word would be unique – it means . . .”

“I know what it means – like one of a kind.”

“Yes. Exactly. I apologize for assuming you wouldn’t know. That was unfair of me.”

“Cause of the not walking in my shoes thing, huh?”

“Exactly. Do you realize you’re a pretty smart person?”

“No, I’m not. Always been dumb and made bad grades.”

“In my experience, grades often don’t reflect smarts.”

Del turned his head and looked the old man directly in his face for the first time.

“How come?”

It was an inexact question, but the old man figured he had the connection.

“I’m going to guess you often have not done the assignments the teachers gave you. I’m going to guess that you never really took tests very seriously, maybe often didn’t even read the questions. I’m going to guess that during class your thoughts are often elsewhere or you are sleeping in the back of the room so you couldn’t be a part of the discussions so the teachers could come to understand all the things you really had learned.”

“So? I can’t see your point.”

“If you didn’t try to answer the questions, how could you know if you knew the right answers or not? If you didn’t do the assignments how could you expect to know the material in the first place? I think the proper term might be unmotivated or uninformed instead of dumb.”

“What if my answers was wrong?”

“That would be wonderful!”

“Huh. Now you’re soundin’ more crazy than eccentric, old man.”

The old man chuckled into his hand.

“Whenever I make a mistake I say, ‘How wonderful.’ That’s because I just learned something truly important – how not to try it next time. Mistakes are like signposts along a road that direct you toward your destination. Instead of letting mistakes tell you, ‘Your wrong, loser’, let them tell you, ‘Nice try, but you need to look into other possibilities, pal’.”

Del stood and faced the old man.

“So, you gonna write a story about me?”

“Here’s an idea. Why don’t you write a story about you?”

“That’s crazy, too.”

“Answer me this: Who knows more about you – you or me?”

“I do, of course.”

“So, which one of us could put together the most accurate picture of you?”

Del nodded.

“But I can’t write. I’m a terrible speller and my English teachers give my papers F’s for grammar – or at least they did when I tried writin’ stuff back in grade school.”

“Have you ever tried to make up stories?”

“Sure. Lots of times. When I can’t sleep, I do that sometimes. I’m usually the hero and do stuff I never really could do – like Spiderman or Superman.”

“Here’s an idea then. Since your schedule seems to be free, how about meeting me here a few times every week. You can make up a story – something that relates to your life – and I’ll take notes and later on I will write it up in story form. Then you can look it over and make suggestions – like a book editor would do. When we get one chapter whipped into shape we can begin a new one if you still want to continue.”

“Then give it away when it’s done?” he asked, perhaps sarcastically - perhaps not.

“When it’s done, it will be yours to do with whatever you want to do with it.”

“It will really be yours – you’ll have really written it.”

“It will be completely your story – one you came up with – created inside that fascinating head of yours. Only the words used to tell your story will be mine and I’ll use as many of yours as I can.”

“I don’t know; it sounds like cheatin’.”

The old man had to wonder how the concept of cheating could possibly provide any guidance for him considering the way he had described himself. Here was a young man who admittedly seemed to take pleasure in hurting other people. He had been expelled from school for his intolerable behavior. And yet, part of him was concerned about cheating. The old man realized that he had a lot of miles to walk in the boy’s shoes before he would come close to understanding that one. He would try providing one more explanation for the boy.

“Let me try it this way. Are you familiar with the story about the Elves and the Shoemaker?”

“Yeah. I know it.”

“If you were to tell it to me, right now, who would the author be – the man who created the story originally, or you because you just retold his story?”

Del nodded and offered a rather genuine smile.

“Okay. I get it. Thanks. I’d like to give it a try, I guess. Why you doin’ this? You don’t know me. You don’t owe me nothin’. You aint’ gonna make a dime from doin’ it. Why?”

The old man’s eyes twinkled.

“Because I’m stranger than strange, remember?”

Del’s face blossomed into a full out, ear- to-ear grin.

“Eccentric! Maybe I’ll learn some things about you, Old Man, just like you’ll learn some things about me.”

“Wouldn’t that be wonderful!”

“We’ll see,” Del said. “I doubt if you’ll like what you learn about me.”

“If it’s the truth, I will treasure it.”

“I don’t have any idea what you meant by that, you know,” Del said.

“Give it time.”

“There seems to be a lot of that with you.”

“I do hope that’s right, Del. I do hope that’s right. One of the things I treasure most about writing is helping others to think about things in ways they may not have thought before. I never tell anyone how they must think, understand, just nudge them to think about new information and new options.”

Del nodded.

The Old Man nodded.

Apparently, they had a deal.

CHAPTER TWO

Del Begins His Story

The boy seemed determined to put the old man to the test. He was back the very next morning. He took a seat cross legged on the ground in front of the old man with his back up against a fireplace. They talked.

Del was more open about himself and his past than the old man had anticipated he would be. At first his thoughts were random, jumping from place to place throughout his life. The old man figured the first things to surface were probably somehow the most important to him. His father had left the home when he was five after a brutal fight with his mother. The boy had tried to protect her, but was quickly flung aside suffering a broken collar bone. Del was used to living with pain inflicted by his father. Since that night, he and his mother had been alone and own their own. It was a relief that the constant threat of harm was gone, but his young, unskilled mother could not earn enough to always put food in his stomach or get the medicine he needed for earaches or colds and flu.

At school kids made fun of him – he had a half-dollar size, dark red birthmark on the front of his neck. They called him, The Blotch. He tried to hide it by wearing high rolled collars and scarves in the winter. Those attempts only seemed to make things worse. His response was to misbehave. That way the attention that came his way was at least for something other than the dreadful purple mark.

By fifth grade Del was taller and stronger and more mature physically than the other boys and he found he was

able to easily inflict pain on them. He also found that once he had established the fact that he could hurt others – slapping, punching, kicking, kneeling until blood appeared – the comments about him stopped and he could send the others running by merely walking toward them at a steady pace with his fists clinched. Of course, that discouraged friendships.

An additional problem with that was that he had come to enjoy inflicting pain and suffering on others. It developed into what seemed to be a basic need – something he had to satisfy every so often or he became restless and irritable. It was as if his power over others might slip away if he didn't continue demonstrating it. His mother – knowing nothing about how to be a good parent – would defend his actions and do what she could to protect him from punishment at school and from the police. On several occasions, he had been removed from his home by the social welfare authorities because his mother was clearly not supervising him and could not control him. He always returned with nothing changed.

He repeated fifth grade because he refused to do his work. He easily learned the things his teachers talked about. He even enjoyed learning that way, but reading was nearly impossible for him. His previous teachers chalked his academic problems up to his generally negative attitude and his basic refusal to cooperate. He had never been tested to see what problems he might have in that area. He related to the old man that when he looked at a word the letters wouldn't sit still – they swam around the page. He couldn't remember which end of a word was the right place to start reading it. (Psychologists would have diagnosed a reading related Learning Disability, for which there were specially designed programs that could have fixed much of the problem, but he had not been referred for such an evaluation.) Del's personal evaluation of his problem concluded – plain and simple – that he was dumb, and that, like his father, he was born to hurt people.

Being that much older, larger and stronger, only made him more of a threat to his classmates. A punch landed on an age mate was serious enough. One landed on a child a year younger and more fragile was often devastating. The school put him in a class for children with Behavior Disorders – a

place where boys with similar unbridled aggressive problems were gathered together where they fed on each other's anger. There, they regularly beat each other up to establish the official pecking order and, having become associates there, roamed together after school hours as gangs of young thugs, preying on the other children and old people. All in all, that arrangement had not been one of the most enlightened moves educators could have made.

Del had one rule for himself – never attack a girl or a kid who was significantly younger than he was. It was as close to a positive social value as he held. It caused some problems with his fellow BD classmates, but at least when they were with him, they abided by it. He was the strongest; he was the scariest; he was by far the smartest.

By the time he entered junior high, he was wise enough to see that the kind of friends he had were not the sort that could help him get along out in the big world. In fact, they kept sucking him into their trouble. He was smart enough to see how many of their older brothers were in constant trouble with the police and many had been sent to jail. He gradually withdrew from them and by eighth grade had become a loner. He spent lots of time watching and thinking about girls, but, despite his good looks, his unsavory reputation kept the most desirable ones at a distance. He didn't make that connection and continued to blame his lack of success on his 'bloch' and his stupidity.

After the young man's half-hour-long, non-stop monologue, the old man spoke.

"You speak very well."

"What do you mean?"

"Despite some grammatical problems, like you said, your thoughts are well organized and for the most part you speak in complete sentences. Your vocabulary is in many ways well above your age level."

"Really?" That don't seem right."

"Why not?"

"I'm even too dumb to read. How could I be all that other stuff?"

"Well, you are not dumb. Your reading problem has to do with something else entirely. A few years ago, I edited a

book for a doctor that talked about reading problems and how to fix them. I have some magic I'd like you try."

"I'm fifteen. I don't believe in magic, Old Man."

"I'm seventy-five and I don't either, but I don't have a better word for it. Will you try it?"

"Will it hurt?"

It had been the last response the old man had expected from the king of the hurtful bullies, but it suddenly did put lots of things into perspective. Del had been living his life making certain he did not get hurt anymore – the way his father had apparently quite regularly hurt him when he was very young.

"It won't hurt. The biggest danger might be the possibility of a paper cut."

Del smiled.

"I'll risk that, I guess. What's this all about?"

With a pencil, the old man outlined a three inch by six-inch rectangle on his yellow pad. He creased it along those side lines and carefully tore it from the pad. Then, tracing the first line, a half inch down from the top edge, he drew a two-inch-long line in from the left margin. At the end, he drew a short line up to the top edge. He again creased it on the two lines and tore that small rectangular section cleanly from the paper. He pointed to the empty space.

"I'll call this sheet a 'card' and that open part at the top left, the 'slot'."

He took a book from his back pack that sat on the ground by his feet and motioned the boy to scoot close to him.

"Put this book on your lap and open it to any page."

"Won't do no good."

"Do it for me, then. Who knows? We may actually witness something magical."

Del shook his head and got that look that silently said, 'How dumb can all this be?'

An interesting thought came into the boy's mind: 'This old man was bossing him around and, yet, he didn't have the slightest urge to punch him.' That felt very strange – perhaps scary, even.

When the book was in place and open, the old man placed the 'slot card' on the first line so only the first word was showing in the slot. He moved it to the right across the line

stopping at the end of each word.

“See how I did that?”

“Yeah. So?”

“Please do that yourself, now – for me.”

Del sighed and rolled his eyes.

He slid the slot back to the first word.

“As long as you’re there, read the word,” the old man said.”

“IT,” Del managed without so much as a second’s pause.

“Now slide to the second word.”

“WAS.”

“Go ahead now, right on across the line, one word in the slot at a time.”

“A”

“BEAUTIFUL”

“MORNING”

“THERE”

“IN”

“THE”

“DEEP”

“VALLEY”

“KNOWN”

“BY”

“THE”

“LOCAL”

“TRIBE”

“AS”

“THE”

“HIDDEN”

“VALLEY”

“OF”

“ZAM-BOO-LA”

He stopped and looked at the old man. He looked back at the page.

“I think I just read that sentence.”

I’m quite sure you just read that sentence. Nice going. Now let’s see, if you don’t believe in magic, I guess there is only one thing left to believe in.”

“What?”

“That smart, capable brain sitting inside the skull of a young man named Del.”

Del put the card back on the page and reread the sentence, sliding the card considerable faster that time. He moved on to the next sentence, and the next and the next.”

He paused and looked over at the old man.

“This really is almost like I’m reading.”

“There is no ‘almost’ to it, my friend. You are reading. Clearly, you’ve learned lots of words in the past and from the way you handled, Zamboola, apparently, phonics rules as well. It was just the process of holding the letters and words in place and keeping them organized that was the problem.”

“I’ll be damned – er, darned. Sorry, I’ve noticed you don’t cuss. I’ll tell you one thing, Old Man, you made me believe in magic. How did you . . .? How does it . . .? You mean I can really . . .” I wonder if it would help Kyle? He talks about reading just like it’s always been for me. Can I show him?”

“I think that would be wonderful. Just don’t promise him that the magic will work.”

“Why not? You did.”

“I had lots of information about your reading problem that you supplied for me and I was able to match that up with a method I had read about. I don’t know those things about your friend Kyle so I couldn’t guarantee anything for him. Remember, I really didn’t guarantee anything for you. I just asked you to try it.”

“That makes sense. You’re not just smart, Old Man, but you’re wise. How does a person get to be wise?”

The old man’s eyes twinkled.

“It is a two-step process, son: First, make lots of mistakes during your life time trying to do new things, and, second, learn a good and lasting lesson from every one of those mistakes.”

“I suppose that’s another one of those things that will make sense to me some day down the road.”

“See, you are already becoming a wise person.”

Del managed a grin. He turned on the bench and more directly faced the old man. He made some tentative moves with his arms and shoulders that faintly indicated a hug might

be on its way. In the end, it wasn't and Del sat back looking at the ground. His expression suggested embarrassment or disappointment.

"Two more things, my young friend."

Del turned his head and looked into the old face again.

"First, I will never rush anybody into offering me a hug. Second, I will never refuse a hug when it can genuinely be offered. Understood?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you for understanding. Hugs are more in my fantasies than they are out in my life right now, if you get my meaning."

"How could I not get your meaning when you stated it so well? Hugs will never be required between us, but will always be allowed and welcomed."

"Did I ever tell you that you are a very strange old man, Old Man?"

"Did I ever tell you that you are a very perceptive young man, Young Man?"

The exchange drew a quick grin from each of them punctuated by nods.

"Can I keep the slot card?"

"Of course. I imagine you could make a more substantial one out of an index card."

"I already thought of that – a cereal box. I'm also going to make a smaller one to carry in my wallet."

"Do you have access to any reading material that would peak your interest?"

Del lowered his voice, mimicking the old man's tone, playfully illustrating the unfamiliar form the old man's question had taken.

"Do you have access to any reading material that would peak your interest?"

He grinned waiting to make sure the old man's reaction was positive.

It received a series of belly jiggling chuckles.

"I got magazines – never read the words – just enjoyed the pictures. I guess I you get the idea."

"I'm old, Del, not dead. Yes, I get the idea. You might enjoy other kinds of books, too."

"Like?"

“If you like pirates and adventure I think you’d like, Treasure Island. A man named Robert Louis Stevenson wrote it for his own son as a gift a long, long time ago. And, since you and I seem to be getting along so well, you might like a book about a runaway teen age boy and an old man. They meet in a swirling blizzard near Christmas time and have great talks about life and families, and parents. It’s called, Ripples and was written by Tom Gnagey.”

“Where can I get ‘em?”

“I think it’s time we get you a library card. I’ll be glad to help. You have any kind of Identification?”

“A state ID card and I still have my school ID.”

“You’re set then. How about tomorrow morning? The library opens at nine. I’ll meet you there.”

“But I want to start reading right now.”

“You may borrow the one I handed you with the slot card. No unclad girls or gory violence, but you may still find it interesting.”

Del raised his eyebrows and nodded. It said both thanks and you’re really okay, for a really, really, strange Old Man.

“Can I ask you something, Old Man?”

“You know my deal about that. You can always ask anything so long as you grant me the right not to answer it.”

“Yeah. I remember. You called me your friend two times this morning. Did you mean that?”

“Let’s see, do I say things I don’t mean?”

“I remembered that, too, but saying somebody is your friend is a bigger deal than most things.”

Clearly it was a much bigger deal for Del than the old man realized. It seemed to require and deserve a special answer.

“Yes. I meant it. I like you. You are an interesting person. We seem to be getting along rather well. We talk easily, between us. It’s not just anybody who will put up with an eccentric old codger like me, so when I find one who will, I’m not about to let him go.”

“Thanks.”

It gave the old man something to think about. When a person has lots of friends, one more or less, is usually no big

deal. When you have no friends, one more becomes a huge deal. It made him realize how fortunate he was – both for his well-established group of old friends and for the newest addition to that list.

“So, Del went on, “when can we start that book you talked about me writin’?”

“I believe we already have – if you still want to write a book about yourself.”

“ ‘Already’ because of the stuff I told you about me, huh?”

“That’s right.”

“How’s it going to work?”

“Well, like I said, during the next day or so I will put what you’ve related to me into the form of a story. It may not be fully accurate. You can decide whether to leave it like that – what is called a fictionalized version – or you can tell me how to fix it so it is just the way you want it.”

“I still ain’t sure why you’re doin’ this for me. All the men who have done nice stuff for me before have wanted something from me.”

“Well, I don’t know about those who came before me, but I assure you all I seek is your friendship and more of our fascinating conversations.”

“It’s hard to trust a man – dad – all the others. How were the men for you when you were growing up?”

It had clearly been an important question – apparently one about possibilities.

“I was fortunate to have been born into a wonderful family. I knew I was loved from well before I really understood about such things.”

“How could that be?”

“My parents kept me warm when it was cold and they fed me when I was hungry. They kept my body clean and talked to me constantly – always in gentle, pleasant tones. When I didn’t feel good they took steps to make me feel better. When I needed to be held they held me. When I needed to be more independent, they carefully allowed that. They kept me safe from serious dangers.”

“I think I understand. All those things made you feel – what’s the word – precious, even though you didn’t think about

it.”

“Del, that idea has never been said better. It is exactly what I meant. I am so impressed with your word choice.”

Del smiled, letting it almost immediately fade into a face of greatest sadness.

“It wasn’t that way for me I guess. I always knew I was a bother to my mom and I couldn’t never be good enough for my dad. He’d beat on me and she’d ignore me – send to me to my room or outside. My feelings about stuff wasn’t nothin’ like yours.”

“Can you characterize your early feeling about life in a word or two – characterize means . . .”

“I know it – like describe, right?”

The old man nodded. Del thought silently trying to find exactly the right word.

“I think there would be two feelings, Okay?”

“One, two, three – whatever it takes to be accurate.”

“Well, one is definitely ‘fear’. The other one is ‘unpredictable’ – I think that’s a word.”

“Indeed, it is and a very good one. Fear, I understand. Tell me more about unpredictable.”

“I could never figure out the rules at home. They kept changing. Every day I had to do stuff just to try ‘em out and see what they were going to be.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“Yeah. Some days it was okay for me whistle in the house and some days I’d get my butt beat for doing it. Some days I could use swear words like mom and dad did and they thought it was cute, but other times dad would slap me across the room for doing it.”

“My. That must have been terribly difficult for you. Is it still?”

“No. Mom and I have a agreement – we just ignore each other.”

“I’m sorry that is how things have developed.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Did you have kids, old man?”

“I had a son. He and his mother died when he was twelve.”

“You been alone all this time?”

“If you mean without a wife and son, yes. I’ve really never been alone because I have always been able to find nice, friendly people to be a part of my life.”

“Like me, huh?”

The old man’s eyes moistened at the wonderful thing that had just taken place. Clearly Del had taken him at his word regarding how he viewed the lad in positive ways. He had to wonder if it might have been the very first time the boy had ever let himself think of himself as a nice, likeable – liked – person.

“What’s wrong, Old Man? I’m sorry if I shouldn’t have asked about your family. That’s probably a really sad thing to have to remember about.”

“No. No. One of the interesting things that happens when you get to be my age is that tears just seem to develop out of thin air sometimes. Like I told you, I wouldn’t have responded to your question if I had not chosen to.”

Del nodded, but remained somewhat skeptical.

“About your response, Del. Yes, people just like you have filled my life with joy and purpose.”

“Joy, I get. Purpose, I don’t get.”

It had taken the form of the old man’s response about fear and unpredictable.

“Let’s see, how I can explain that? I’ll try it this way. Every time I encounter ...”

“Encounter is that like meet?” Del inserted, wanting to be sure he understood right from the beginning.

“Yes. Every time I encounter another person I try to leave them somehow better off than when I met them.”

“I really don’t get that.”

“Example: How does it make you feel when a stranger smiles at you?”

“Good, I suppose. Never really thought about it. It doesn’t make me want to pound on him, at least.”

“If my smile at somebody makes them feel good or a little bit better, I figure I have left them better off than when I met them.”

“I think I see. What other things?”

“I like to build people up. That can be done in lots of ways. I might say something like, ‘Love that sweater’, or

‘What a beautiful dog you have there’, or ‘How old is your precious little baby?’”

“I can see how that would be. What you get out a doin’ that?”

The old man smiled.

“It makes me feel really great inside to think I may have helped to brighten somebody’s day. When I’m ready to go to sleep at night I think back over my day and recall how many times I was able to do those sorts of things. It makes me believe that I have left the World a better place than I found it that morning. That may just seem like the strange ramblings of an old man, Del. I understand that.”

“No. It makes sense. Never thought about it that way. I think when most folks compliment somebody it’s to get somethin’ out a them. Like when I tell a girl she’s cute it’s ‘cause I hope she’ll do stuff with me.”

“And I understand. That doesn’t mean I approve, you understand.”

“Yeah. I get the difference.”

“I bet your boy was a good kid, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, he was. That didn’t mean he didn’t get into trouble sometimes or that he always acted just the way his mother and I preferred that he act. It takes things like that for a youngster to learn right from wrong and which kinds of behaviors are acceptable and which are not.”

“Like that ‘mistakes are wonderful thing’ you talked about.”

It had been a perceptive connection.

“Yes, very much like that. His mother and I always tried to help him learn good lessons from his mistakes.”

“You never beat him, did you?”

“No. Never. In fact, I never considered beating him.”

“Your boy was lucky.”

“I hope that was true.”

Del stood up.

“I better go. Nine in the morning at the Library, right?”

“Right. Have a great day, Del. I’ll be eager to hear about it tomorrow.”

“I got more questions about you. Can I ask them tomorrow?”

“I will consider it a privilege to share such things with you.”

“You know I don’t get that, don’t you?”

“Sometimes I’ve been known to say things just to help others think about new ideas.”

“Thanks, you, know.”

“I do. The same to you, you know.”

They parted to Del’s broad grin.

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CHAPTER THREE

The Library Card

Nine o'clock arrived. By 9:20 Del had a library card. By 9:30 he had checked out two books, Ripples and a book offering things boys needed to know about growing into men.

They walked together the several blocks to the park. Del had apparently taken the old man at his word about wanting to hear about his day and began relating the events in order."

"When I left you, I went home and gave my mom a hug. I used to do that when I was a little kid. It left her speechless. I didn't say nothin' about it. Then I spent some time in my room with my magazines. Mom fixed me a sandwich for lunch. It's been forever since she done that. I sort of wanted to hug her before I left this morning, but that seemed like too much – twice in ten years, ya know."

He managed a smile and continued.

"I went to the ball field at school and sat in the bleachers and watched the kids play baseball. I always wanted to play, but never did. Figured I wouldn't be no good. After school the cheerleaders came to the field and practiced. It was hot and they weren't wearing much. I always really like watching them. You said you understood about things like that and the magazines, right?"

"Right."

The old man was fascinated by how open the lad was about his 'physical' interests (and more!). He could only imagine the encyclopedia of misinformation about such things that he had acquired from his equally unknowledgeable male

peers. Perhaps the book would help set some of that straight.

The recounting of his day stopped abruptly once the old man chose a bench and sat down.

“So, back to the book, I guess,” Del said. “I don’t suppose you had time to write out anything last night, did you?”

“Well, in fact I did.”

The old man opened his backpack and removed a folder, handing it to Del who opened it and shuffled through the pages nodding as if offering his approval. Okay if I read it later? I been thinkin’ up stuff to tell you.”

“Of course,. I do have several questions before I continue writing.”

“Shoot!”

He took a seat on the bench beside the old man and faced him appearing both comfortable and eager. The old man had to wonder how many times those two things had actually coincided before in the young man’s life.

“What name shall I call the young man in the story? Sometimes it’s best to use a fictional name.”

“Like a alias?”

“Yes. Like that.”

“Let’s call him Willie. The only real friend I ever had – til you – was in kindergarten and his name was Willie.”

“Okay. Willie, it will be. Now, this kind of a story can be told in either the first or third person. Let me explain. First person reads like the author is telling his own story. For example, it might say, ‘The last time I let myself be frightened was the day I sent big John Williams to the hospital with a broken jaw’. In third person, it is told like a story being viewed from the outside, ‘The last time Willie let himself be afraid was the day he sent big John Williams to the hospital with a broken jaw’. See the difference?”

“Yeah. Let’s try the first-person thing. I have a lot of feelings that need to be in it and it seems like first person could do that better.”

“How astute of you!”

“I guess astute means smart or something.”

“That’s right – smart with a twist of cleverness, I’d say. What I’ve written so far I went ahead and put in first person

guessing that's how you'd want it."

"How astute of you," Del said offering an easy smile that suddenly turned sober. "We may have a problem about that."

"Oh? Can you explain?"

"Well, I cuss a lot. I often use the worst words there are. I think I use cuss words to show my emotions, if that makes sense.

"It does. So, what's the problem?"

"Well, you don't cuss."

"That doesn't mean I don't know all the words. I even know how to spell most of them. You tell things like you would normally tell things. Later we can determine if there might be more appropriate ways to say things – to get your honest message across to the reader. That leads me to the final question I had about the book writing. You need to establish the target audience – the group you intend to have read the book. It could be just for teens or it could be just for adults or it could be for both."

"Why?"

"Book publishers have rules about the kind of language and the sort of topics that can be used in books for adults, but not for teens. I suppose that's odd in this case since, in general, I imagine most teens would be far less offended by profanity than many adults."

"You sure know a lot about people."

"I'm beginning to believe you do, also."

"Some things, I guess. I'd like to know a lot more about girls."

"And you will. That takes time and patience."

"I've never been patient. It's got me in trouble lots of times."

"With girls?"

"No. I didn't mean that."

"Examples?"

"Well, like in first grade. I had to go to the bathroom and I raised my hand like my teacher said we had to do. She said I had to wait until recess. Now, I wouldn't have raised my hand and asked if I hadn't really had to go, so I marched up to her desk and peed all over it.

“And once in Jr. High the lunch lady didn’t know I got free lunches and she made a big, loud deal about it when I came to the pay table at the end of the line. I took her money box and threw it across the cafeteria.

“And once in high school a teacher took me to the principal’s office and told him a lie about me and I interrupted her with what the truth was before she could finish it. The principal told me to shut my mouth and I kneed him in his balls and karate chopped the back of his neck while he was bent over. He fell to the floor and was out for a couple of minutes. That’s what got me kicked out for good.”

The old man would have called it impulsiveness, but he could see that from Del’s point of view it was merely impatience. He had never thought of the two terms sitting along the same continuum (scale of definitions from least forceful to most). His new young friend was teaching him many interesting things. It was not the time to pursue that, however.

“Do you know the term, ‘injustice’?”

“Not for sure.”

“Unfair, but in a major way.”

“I know about that. Like having a dad that beat me for little things like spilling my milk.”

“Yes. I think that certainly qualifies. I get the idea there have seemed to be lots of those injustices in your life.”

“You got that right. That’s what I get mad about the most. It’s like a injustice turns off my brain and lets my violent emotions roam free. Sometimes I get uncontrollable over it.”

“Like when you beat up your principal?”

“I suppose, but I think he deserved it. The teacher did too, but I don’t hit females.”

“I thought you said you got expelled for breaking a boy’s arm.”

“Oh, that. Yeah! Well, it was a tossup which one, I guess. On the way out of the building, this kid made fun of me because the security guard and two guy teachers had a hold of me and were forcing me toward the door. I went off on the kid and in like thirty seconds I’d left him bleeding from the face and laying there with a broken arm.”

“Looking back on that, how do you feel?”

“You sound like the school shrink.”

“You’ve had some counseling?”

“Couldn’t really call it that. We talked for a half hour one time. I pointed out to him how everything he said to me was stupid and only proved he had no idea what kind of a life I had. He wanted to make another appointment. I told him if he did that I’d break every window in his house and if that didn’t get it out of my system I’d start breaking bones in his body until I felt better. He never called me back.”

“You tell me those things and yet all I’ve ever seen is a quiet, kind, respectful, young man. Am I missing something?”

“No. That’s how I am – quiet. I mostly stick to myself and leave everybody else alone. I’ve never had what you might call a big mouth.”

The old man’s puzzled look told the boy he really didn’t understand, so Del expanded his explanation.

“Think about it. In my life time, I’ve only got in big trouble a couple of dozen times for fighting and hurting people. I’ve probably been around a thousand or maybe five thousand people who I’ve never touched or said Jack to. Think about the percentages there. Twenty-four out of five thousand must be a pretty tiny percentage.”

“About one in 200 I calculate, but I think your logic got mired down in a host of moral dilemmas.”

“You know I have no idea what that means.”

“Yes, I do and I think we should put off its discussion until later.”

“Okay, but I won’t let you forget to get back at it.”

“I’m counting on that. So, what things did you want to say for the book, today?”

“I was thinking about how scary it was to be a little boy at my house. Every day I knew I was going to get a beatin’ for something. Mom was always saying, ‘Wait ‘til your dad gets home’. That meant she’d tell him I’d been bad and he’d lay into me without ever knowing what it was about. Sometimes he’d slap me all around the room. Sometimes he’d take his belt to my bare butt. Like I told you, sometimes he’d pick me up and throw me across the room.

“Then, sometimes, mom would get mad at me and say she was going to leave and never come back. A few times

when I was real little she even put on her coat and left. I remember once I ran down the street after her screaming and crying and nobody on the whole block tried to help me. You know how scary it is to think the most important person in your life is going to leave you all alone. I decided there and then that I was on my own in the world, so I'd have to look out for myself and that's what I've been doing.

"Once I made that decision, I felt a little better about things. I stopped hoping mom and dad – well, mostly mom – was going to be there for me. I just assumed she wouldn't be. When I gave up hoping she'd take care of me, you see, it sort of released me. It's hard to describe, but knowing I was the only one I could count on was a very – what's the word – reassuring thing. Would that be the right word?"

"Reassuring means comforting, or supportive."

"Yeah. That's it, I guess."

"Didn't that seem like a big responsibility?"

"Yeah. That's when it first come to me that I had to be tougher than anybody else. I'd seen it everywhere. The baddest guys had the most power and got hurt the littlest. So, I worked hard to get that rep – you know 'rep'?"

"Yes, I do. What would you say my rep is?"

The question clearly surprised Del, but still, he didn't miss a beat.

"That's easy. You are kind and gentle and way too trusting. Frankly, I'm surprised you ain't been mugged here in the park. Old men need to be a lot more careful than you are."

"You mean you think I should live my life being scared of what might happen?"

There was silence before he responded.

"I guess you got me there. I was just goin' on about not wantin' to ever have to be scared and here I am tellin' you that you need to be more scared. I guess I'm not sure what to tell you."

"Sounds like you believe you need to take care of me."

"Damn, er, darn right. Somebody has to."

"I've done a pretty good job for many, many, decades – at least I have survived a lot of years. Tell me this. Are you saying that having a rep as a kind and gentle and trusting person is bad?"

Del offered an uncomfortable smile.

“Sounds that way, don’t it?”

“Yes. What I think I’m hearing you say is that having a cruel and hurtful rep is good and that having a kind and gentle rep is bad. Sometime it might be interesting for you to think each of those approaches to living out to its logical conclusion. What I mean is figure out what kind of a world we would have to live in if everybody lived by one or the other of those – cruel and hurtful vs kind and helpful.”

“I already see where you’re going with it. Sometimes what seems right on the surface ain’t right where it really counts.”

“More?”

“Well, it may seem right to be kind, but kind never won a fight.”

“I must say that’s not where I thought – or hoped – you were going with it.”

“What did you think?”

“That it would seem right to be kind and helpful because fighting and cruelty never brought peace to the world.”

“I suppose that sort of says who we are – how you and me is different, deep down inside.”

“You speak as if that is a permanent condition that can never change.”

Del looked directly into the old man’s face, his own wearing a stern, almost hostile look.

“I’m not going to try and change you and I don’t want you to try and change me.”

The young man’s tone had been for the first time sharp and unpleasant.

“Well, I have just one more thing to say on the topic and then I’ll leave it,” the old man said. “When two people interact in an honest way, they are bound to change each other even if they aren’t trying to. I know of no way to avoid that.”

Del grew silent. His face grew red and his breathing rate increased. The old man became concerned. It appeared the only way Del had to cope with such a challenge to his beliefs was to get angry.

“I gotta go, old man. Don’t know if I’ll be back

tomorrow.”

“I certainly hope so. Like I said before, an eccentric old guy like I am must not lose his friends and I certainly count you as a friend. You know, people can be friends even when they disagree about important things.”

Despite his announced departure, Del sat still for a long minute staring straight ahead. Then he stood up, gathered his books and the folder and walked off toward the street. He offered no goodbye and the old man figured it was best to just leave it at that. He hoped the lad would return. He would continue writing the book, regardless.

For the first time the old man began to feel sorry for Del. Up to that point he had focused on trying to understand him. He wondered how a supposedly civilized, caring world could allow such circumstances to invade a young life and turn it, all quite realistically, into a hate-filled, power mongering, young man. Even more, how it could allow a child to grow up oblivious to the good and kind and wonderful side of the world. Although the parents were certainly guilty of the so-called sins of commission, society was guilty of sins of omission (the parents had done inexcusably hurtful things to him, but society was also at fault for not having provided appropriate protection, guidance and alternative, positive experiences for him).

Tears appeared on the old man’s face. He understood it was not his mission in life to ‘fix’ every wayward adolescent male he came upon – and it seemed he had come upon lots of them during the past fifty or so years. Still, there was something special about this one. He clearly had exceptional, untapped intelligence and great, deeply buried sensitivity – even if they had typically only been used for his own protection and in his own defense. The dilemma that had plagued the old man for decades surfaced again – just how far was it appropriate to lead a youngster to change his beliefs and behaviors. The old man had never been one to force his views on others and yet he had to wonder if it would be fair not to at least show the lad some alternatives that he was certain would improve his life and the lives of those with whom he came in contact.

He also wondered if at his age, he was really up to

another relationship like that. It had crossed his mind that if he had known from the outset the extent to which Del was wounded emotionally, that he might not have allowed himself to become so heavily invested in the boy. He would have, of course, even if it weren't in his own best interests. Life, in the old man's opinion, was all about making the world a better place for everybody to live and grow and love. That was nothing he could just turn on and off. He became suddenly tired and had to smile about it.

He had things to write and immediately made several pages of notes so they would not slip away before he got home to his word processor. With that finished, he put the pad down and just sat for a long time, watching the children at play and the mothers interacting with the youngest of the lot. He thought back to his own parents and the balance they had found between allowing him to be himself and grow in his own direction, and yet become a person who was not so strange as to be unacceptable to those around him. Until he and his wife undertook the raising of their own son, he had little idea of the huge amount of work, planning and care that went into the process. Unfortunately, it was clear that Del's parents had not invested themselves even a tiny bit in appropriate parenting activities.

The old man's lifetime of experiences had proved one truth to him: Remodeling a youngster into an acceptable, self-fulfilling person, was a thousand times more difficult than raising a well-adjusted, contributing human being in the first place. Of all forms of ignorance mankind allowed, ignorance about how to raise happy, productive, mentally healthy children was far and away the worst in his opinion. The 'how to do it' has been known and easily available for generations and yet many parents fail to avail themselves of the information decade after decade. It was one of the few topics that raised the old man's blood pressure.

He went home and took a nap, knowing full well the problem would still be there when he woke up. That day he hoped his nap would last a long time.

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CHAPTER FOUR

An Unlikely Hero

That evening the old man prepared the next few pages and stashed them in his backpack. If Del didn't put in an appearance he would get back to work on the story he had been blocking in prior to the recent encounter.

The old man arrived in the park at his usual time and returned to the bench where Del had first entered his life. He had no idea what sort of search pattern the boy used in locating him. Three geese lived near a pond in the center of the park and from his vantage point he could see them stretch and flap and honk themselves into another day of doing what geese do. The dogs that frequented the park had learned, early on, not to mess with the geese and that morning were content to sit close to the old man and watch with obvious interest from a safe distance.

He got out his pad and began reviewing the work he had done on the new story. Ten minutes later the dogs moved on. Fifteen minutes later the geese took to the air and began circling the park as if it were theirs to protect. Twenty minutes later Del slid onto the other end of the bench. He didn't speak so neither did the old man – at first.

Presently, sufficient time seemed to have passed and he opened with what he hoped would be an innocuous (safe) enough topic.

“Geese already took off. They are magnificent creatures. A study in contrasts, really, I suppose. So, clumsy on land and yet so graceful on the water and in the air.”

It drew a glance toward the heavens, but no comment.

The old man took the new book pages from his backpack and placed them on the bench between the two of them. It was like a game of chess, yet with no clear feeling of competition. The old man went back to working on the story.

“What’s that you’re doin’?” Del asked at last.

“It’s a story I was working on BIMD.”

“BIMD?”

“Before I Met Del.”

The old man offered a smile. Del managed no initial response. Presently he offered a question.

“It about some other kid?”

The tone may have conveyed some indication of jealousy.

“In a way, I suppose, although not a real live kid. It’s pure fiction about a boy who came upon an old, rundown tree house in a woods, and found it had magical qualities.”

“I don’t believe in magic.”

“Yes, I recall you telling me that earlier.”

“And you said you didn’t either so why you writin’ about it?”

“A writer often has to find a way to get his reader’s attention before he can deliver the message he hopes to communicate. Many children become immediately curious when magic is involved.”

Del offered a simple nod. He picked up the sheets on the bench and again shuffled through them somewhat aimlessly.

“I don’t like the book about me.”

“Oh. What aspect bothers you?”

“The ‘me’ aspect. I hate the boy in the story. He’s a awful person. I don’t want people to read about that person.”

“Then why don’t you make it a transformational piece?”

Del shrugged, not an indication of an answer to the question, but that he didn’t understand the message and wasn’t sure it was even worth learning about. The old man understood. In fact, he understood well before he had delivered the words. He loved to see the boy learn and think and draw new perspectives.

“Transformational means just what it sounds like – transform means to change or grow. You know that. A

transformational story begins one way and ends another.”

“More?”

“Your story, for example, could begin describing a kid that you and probably the readers really won’t like, but somewhere along the way in the story, the kid decides to make some changes. The story traces and describes those changes and presents the reasons they came about. A transformational story provides hope and the possibility of a new beginning.”

“Like the bad boy becomes a good boy?”

“Yes, like that. Perhaps that’s too simple a characterization, however.”

“But I ain’t a good boy. It would be like lyin’ right?”

“Is it your plan to never be a good boy as you put it?”

“Changin’ is pretty hard. Doubt if that’s in the cards.”

“So, changing would be harder than building an easier life for yourself?”

“Easier life?”

“You have indicated that you are often in trouble and have no friends. That sounds to me like a difficult – hard – way to live. If making a few changes would keep you out of trouble and allow you to have friends – girlfriends even – I’d think life would become easier.”

Del delivered a quick glance into the old man’s face.

“I hate it when you do that?”

“I know you do?”

“Then why do you do it? You’re supposed to be my friend.”

“One of the things friends do for each other is to honestly tell it like it is.”

“Even when it makes the other person mad?”

“Especially, then.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Do you understand what kind of things typically make you mad?”

“Lots of stuff.”

“That’s not really an answer, you know.”

“Like bein’ put down, then. How’s that?”

“Very important, I’d say. You said you hated the book. Now, tell me why?”

“Because it makes me mad.”

“Because . . . ?”

“Huh? Oh! . . . Because when I read it, it sounded like one big put down.”

“From things you’ve told me, I get the impression you are a brave young man. Would you agree with that?”

“Yeah. About the bravest kid I’ve ever known about.”

“Here’s the big question, then. Are you brave enough to look at yourself and figure out how to change yourself into somebody you’d like to read about?”

Silence, punctuated by a less than pleased quick glance into the old man’s face. At last he spoke, not really sure he wanted to hear the answer to his question.

“So, how do we do this transformational thing?”

“You just keep telling your story. Once you believe you have described the guy you don’t like, and how he got that way, then you begin talking about the kid you are trying to become and eventually about that kid you did become.”

“Trying. That’s the main thing in all that, right?”

“Have I mentioned how astute you can be?”

It was reason for a short-lived smile and nod.

“Astute don’t get the job done, Old Man.”

“There you go again.”

“There I go again, what?”

“Being astute about being astute – and its limitation, I suppose, really.”

“You have a sense of humor. I’m not used to that. Sometimes I’m not sure when you’re being serious and when you’re trying to be funny.”

“Actually, I think you are doing pretty well – if your smiles indicate anything.”

“I don’t know how to make jokes.”

“Then, I think you have an entry for your transformational list – trying to see the humor in things and trying to express them.”

“What else should be on my T-list?”

“I can’t tell you, Del. You need to discover that yourself, otherwise it wouldn’t be your list, it would be my list for you.”

“I guess I can see that. Can you tell me how to start?”

“I can make a suggestion. It has three parts. First, keep track of the kinds of things you do that tell you and other people that you are a ‘bad’ person. I’m using that term because you have used it to describe yourself. Write down exactly what they are – what behaviors, I mean – like hitting people when you get mad. Second, write down what you think there is inside you that made you react that way – like you don’t like to be put down. Third, write a description of what behavior you need to display instead so you and other people can think of you as a good guy.”

“Sounds like a lot of work.”

“Good. Yes. You seem to grasp the size of the undertaking. Are you willing to take six months or a year out of your life so the following 85 years can be a whole lot happier than the first 15 have been?”

“Did I tell you how much I hate it when you do that thing that good friends do for each other?”

“I believe you have.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Ready to get back to the book?”

“As somebody I know might say, ‘I thought we were already back to the book’.”

“Touché! Do you know that word?”

“No, but I think I’m about to.”

The old man smiled broadly and reached over to pat the young man on his leg.

“It sort of means, ‘You got me’ or ‘You bested me!’”

Del was about to put himself on the line.

“And I thought it meant, a set of buggies – two shays – get it?”

The old man laughed out loud – a shay being a horse drawn carriage. His little belly jiggled and eventually several tears appeared at the edges of his eyes. Del smiled both amazed and pleased. The old man’s reaction had been set in motion by several factors. The boy, who hated to be put down, had risked just that, if, in fact his ‘joke’ had not been seen as being funny. And, of course, in a simplistic, pun-like way, it really had been funny. The old man would not have expected the lad was capable of that (shaym on him!).

“I sensed you drawing away just a bit when I reached

out to pat you, before. I apologize if I made you uncomfortable. I was raised in a family of touchers, huggers, kissers, and patters and I often inflict one of those behaviors on others without giving it proper thought.”

“No. It was okay. I’m not used to that – from a friend, you understand. I believe that would come in the category of needing to try new things – good things.”

“Yes. I believe that is the idea. It seems you have seldom been touched except in anger and for the purpose of inflicting pain. Gentle touch can be so wonderful – pleasant, reassuring, leaving a positive message between friends.”

“I would really like that. Like hugs, I guess.”

“Exactly. Your mother seemed to appreciate the hug you gave her.”

“Yeah. It amazed me, actually.”

Recalling it produced an enormous smile on the boy’s face.

“I didn’t hug her this morning because I’ve been feeling like crap since I read the book pages.”

“Is that past, now?”

“I think so. Now, it’s like a challenge or a game.”

The old man chuckled.

“What, Old Man?”

“I was just thinking that this is the first time I’ve ever felt so good about having somebody say my writing made them feel like crap.”

The old man’s smile continued. Del allowed no expression, saying:

“That was like a joke you just said, right?”

“Well, at least it was one old man’s attempt at making a joke and since I appreciated it I suppose it qualifies, doesn’t it?”

Del released the smile he had been holding pending clarification. They shared a chuckle.

‘How nice’, the old man thought.

‘This is so great!’ the young man thought.

At some point, Del’s crappy day had changed for the better. It wasn’t something he could point to, but it had happened and he realized it. For a moment, he let himself wonder if, perhaps, the old man was indeed magical. It

passed. He unleashed a huge question.

“I know my dad never loved me, but I’ve started wondering if maybe my mom did – does. She’s a really bad mother, but not such a bad person when she’s away from being a mother. She never went to high school. She never knew her dad. I think she married my dad because he got her pregnant with me. I figure that takes a very selfish man to get a girl pregnant when everybody past nine knows how to prevent it. He couldn’t have really loved her to let that happen.”

There was a pause and he looked off into the distance before stating his real question.

“Do you think being able to love or not is inherited?”

“What an enormous question. Truly, I don’t know the related science well enough to answer it based on fact. I can tell you this, I have known very loving people who came from very unloving families. I’ve seldom seen it work the other way – unloving people coming from loving families. I know that can’t be a very satisfactory answer, but it’s the best honest one I can offer. We can search for a more scientific answer on the web.”

“You done okay, Old Man. It’s what I thought, but there was always a part of me that worried about it, ya know?”

“I think I can understand that.”

“You ever hate anybody?”

“Not since I grew past four or five. Little kids are selfish – fully self-centered. They want it, they take it. Somebody takes something from them they do whatever they can to retrieve it – scream, hit, bite – with no feelings of guilt or remorse.”

“Remorse?” Del asked.

“Regret or shame.”

“I never used to feel that. I’d hurt somebody and I’d tell myself, ‘Good for me. He’ll never put me down or come at me again’. I could see them in pain and bleeding and I could see the fear on their face, but I never felt sorry for them - only good for me. That make any sense.”

“If you mean do I understand what you are describing, yes. If you mean do I understand how any human being could react that way, no, not really.”

Del nodded.

“I figured that. I guess I know some things about people, too.”

“Oh, I have no doubt about that, Del.”

“Really?”

“Really!”

Silence followed for a few moments.

There was a commotion down at the pond some fifty yards down the gentle slope directly in front of them. It seemed to be a group of boys – age nine or ten – it was difficult to tell from where the old man sat. Del clearly saw something the old man didn't. He shot up off the bench and tore down the hill faster than the old man would have predicted – although he had no idea why that may have been his impression.

The old man stood and began making his way after him, far more slowly and carefully. By the time he got to within easy view of the area, he saw Del giving CPR to a sopping wet youngster that he had apparently dragged out of the water. One boy had taken off toward the street – presumably to get help. The old man called 911, even though he figured it had probably already been done.

He stopped beside them.

“Did you call 911?” Del asked not looking up.

“Yes. Just now. The boy go for help?”

“Yeah. The fire station, You think I'm doing this right?”

“Perfectly, the way I remember about it. Just don't press too hard on his fragile young ribs.”

Del nodded and eased up just a bit. It was at that moment the boy sputtered back into consciousness. Water drained from his mouth. He coughed and struggled to sit up.

“Roll him onto his side. Don't let him sit up yet,” the old man said, reacting more from common sense than anything he knew for sure. “That position should allow any remaining water to drain from his system rather than roll back and choke him.”

By the time the paramedics arrived the lad was sitting up, back against a fireplace. The three boys were all wiping their own tears away. Del had no idea how to handle that so he just stepped back. The old man gathered the on-looking

boys into his arms and offered words of reassurance – words verified by the medical folks.

After a brief examination, the victim was pronounced recovered and taken home to his mother.

The other boys simultaneously began telling the tale about how the situation had developed. Apparently, a huge mud turtle lived in the pond. It had surfaced near the shore and was bound up in a large plastic trash bag, which encompassed its head and front legs. The good-hearted young victim waded into the water to remove the sack and free the turtle unaware the bottom dropped off dramatically just beyond three feet of the shore. He was soon in way over his head and couldn't swim – none of the four of them could swim. They began calling for help – all of them having the good sense not to go in and try to help. It was that commotion that first caught the attention of Del and the old man.

The boys left to spread the story far and wide, hoping to take for themselves whatever fame or heroism might be associated with the story. Del slipped to the ground, back against a large oak tree. He was sopping wet and filthy to the waist from the mud bottom.

“Better get out of those wet duds and into something dry,” the old man said. “You live close?”

“About fifteen blocks south.”

“Well, my place is one block west. If you are agreeable we can go there and wash and dry your things.”

Del flashed an odd look.

“Sure you're not one of them funny guys?”

It took a moment for the meaning of the words to take shape for the old man. ‘The poor lad,’ he thought. ‘His associations with men had certainly been wrought with pain, distress and fear, and apparently rightly so.’

“I am as straight – I believe that's the proper term these days – as any man you'll ever meet. But, since that seems to be a major concern for you, I can just give you my address and house key, and direct you to the laundry area to the rear of the kitchen. You can go and take care of yourself.”

“You'd trust me with your house key?”

That suddenly became a more major consideration than his previous reservations about the old man's real

intentions.

“Of course. I believe we have established that we are friends. Friends trust friends.”

“But I could steal you blind.”

“Yes, I suppose you could. Is that your plan – to steal me blind?”

“No.”

“Okay, then, let me get out my key.”

“I’d rather we’d go together, I guess.”

“That will be up to you.”

Del nodded and began to stand. The old man offered a hand. It was accepted reluctantly. It had certainly not been needed and the old man was unable to offer any real help, but Del seemed to get the message – it was an act of friendship – even something more, perhaps. It brought a smile to the young man’s face.

Once at the house, the clothes were soon in the washer and Del was in and out of a shower and into the old man’s robe.

“Tea, coffee, or hot chocolate?” the old man asked.

“What?”

“You’ve got a chill. Warm liquid will help restore your body’s equilibrium.”

Del smiled.

“There you go sounding like yourself again – ‘Restore your body’s equabrilium’.”

The old man let the mispronunciation slide. He delighted in Del’s playful side and hoped it would free itself and find its way to the surface more and more often.

“The question remains,” the old man said referring to the beverages.”

“I make great hot chocolate. You got it in packets or make it from the ground up?”

“Either/both, actually.”

“How about packets, then? Faster.”

The old man nodded and pointed to a cabinet next to the sink. The drinks were soon prepared and the two of them were sitting across from each other at the little, round, kitchen table.

“Don’t know if I should ask this or not,” Del said.

“You know the rule.”

Del grinned and nodded. The matter had originally been offered as a major concern.

“Do you have bread for toast? I like to dunk.”

The old man smiled about how the morning conversation had moved from the foundation of love to making toast. The essential counterparts of life, he decided. Man’s search for the answers to life’s most baffling questions is always waged among the practical concerns of survival and pleasure.

“Bread and butter in the fridge. Toaster where you see it on the counter. That was probably unnecessary, wasn’t it?”

Del grinned again. Could it be that was becoming a habit? The old man certainly hoped so.

Toast was made. Toast was buttered. Toast was dunked – on both sides of the table.

“I love how the butter swirls there on top of the hot chocolate,” Del said entranced by the process. “If you try and pick it up with a spoon it always runs right back into the cup.”

The old man nodded, but made no comment, hoping to encourage the young man to continue thinking and talking – most of all, perhaps, wondering.

“Do you like it,” Del asked as if his skill really had anything at all to do with the instant product.

“It is very good. Yes.”

Del was clearly pleased.

The clothes were transferred into the dryer and they moved into the living room.

“You got a nice place here, for a old man.”

“Thank you. I find it very satisfying and comfortable – for an old man.”

Del’s grin said, ‘There you go again with the words,’ but he made no comment.

The old man was interested in how comfortable he felt with the boy there in his apartment. Very few people ever visited there. It was his sanctuary. He typically met his friends elsewhere. Sharing the place was a new experience. He momentarily harbored the off-the-wall question about how the characters in his current story felt about sharing ‘their place’ with the intruder. The mere fact of the thought amused

him and he chuckled out loud.

“What?” Del asked.

“Oh, sometimes when I’m happy I just chuckle. I don’t seem to need anything more than that.”

“It’s good to be happy, right?”

“I find it simply grand. How about you?”

“Happy? Not sure. Never thought about me being happy. My up time is more feeling safe than happy I think.”

It had been an incredible personal insight. The young man continued to astound the old man.

Del browsed the shelves of books – hundreds of books.

“It’s like your own library in here.”

(And then there were those wonderfully concrete, innocent – naive – moments. What a fascinating contrast.)

Del rescued his clothes from the dryer – cleaner than they had been in weeks – and was soon dressed.

“I love putting on hot clothes. Do you?”

“Well, yes, actually. I suppose I do. When I was small, my mother would often iron my shirt just before it was time for me to leave for school. That always felt like love to me.”

“Iron a shirt?”

“Back in the old days, clothes needed to be ironed with a hot iron to get the wrinkles out of them. I guess that these days most clothes are made from wrinkle-free material. Ironing has probably not been a part of your life.”

It had been an interesting morning. The old man hadn’t probed to see how Del felt about saving the boy’s life. He figured an appropriate time would surface later on.

Del left after gaining the old man’s promise to be at the park the next morning.

CHAPTER FIVE

Being a Hero Seemed to Carry Some Responsibility

The two of them had been sitting and talking for half an hour or so. Because of Del's insistence the day before, the old man had returned to the same spot above the pond. It was a particularly beautiful morning there in the park. A small group of youngsters made their way across the grassy area from the right. They stopped down the slope at the edge of the water. There was a good deal of pointing and animation during their discussion. The old man assumed it related to the previous morning's events.

Presently, they moved up the slope in the direction of the bench. As they came close it became clear that four of them were the boys from the day before. There were five additions that had apparently come along to get the whole scoop. The boy who had been pulled from the water crossed the final five yards by himself.

"You the guy who jumped in and pulled me out?"

Del looked first at the old man who shrugged and nodded – a mixed message if there ever had been one.

"Yeah. That's me."

The boy extended his hand and took a step forward. It took a moment for Del to comprehend what was going on. He met the boy's hand and they shook – after a fashion. It was clearly not a practiced move for either one.

"I just wanted to thank you, you know?"

"Sure. No problem. You okay?"

"I'm fine. Mom's worse off than I am. Took me an hour this morning to convince her to let me come back to the park.

My name's Richard. My friends call me Richie."

He waited.

"Oh, I'm Del. My friends call me . . . Del."

The boys laughed thinking it had been intended as a joke. Del seemed to understand and managed a smile and series of staccato nods although he truly wasn't sure why, what he had said, had been humorous. The old man figured it represented a good deal of restraint on Del's part.

"Well, just wanted to thank you, you know. Thanks."

The conversation had moved from awkward to uncomfortable. The boys turned and left amid a choir of hushed chatter among them.

"That was nice of the boy," the old man said.

"His mom probably made him do it."

"You don't think he meant what he said?"

"I suppose he did. Hard to know about people – especially kids."

"Well, I'm sure his family is very happy and thankful."

The time seemed right to the old man.

"I'm interested in how you feel about saving the boy."

"How I feel? I don't know. Couldn't just sit here and let him drown."

"I noticed."

It had been intended as humorous, but only brought a puzzled look to Del's face.

"You must have some feelings about it," the old man pressed.

Del shrugged.

"Good, I guess."

"You ever saved anybody's life before?"

"Maybe. Kept a couple a guys from being beat to a pulp at least. Could be they'd a died if I hadn't taken up for them."

"Why?"

"Cause they was bein' beat on something awful."

"I meant, why did you intervene – stand up for them, come to their aid? Were they friends?"

"Never seen 'em before, but they was six on two. That's unfair regardless of what they done."

The old man nodded. The fairness-card had surfaced

again.

They talked on for some time. It seemed hard to hook onto a really meaningful – book worthy – topic that morning. Again, they were approached. A policeman and a woman.

Del's first impulse was to make fists and stand making ready for whatever unpleasant thing lay ahead.

"Del," the policeman said with a smile.

"Mike," Del responded with not so much as a slight indication of a smile.

It was like the opening two moves in a chess match. The officer spoke again.

"Del, this is Mrs. Ortega, Richard's mother – the boy I understand you saved down at the pond yesterday."

She extended her hand. Del met it, doing better that time. He nodded. Whether it was to acknowledge the woman's gesture or the truth of what the officer had said was not clear. Regardless, Del learned an interesting lesson – it is difficult to shake hands when your fist is clinched. The old writer tucked that away to use later. It seemed like a pointed metaphor about the first step in achieving peace.

"My husband and I want to do something for you, Del, to show our appreciation."

Again, Del looked at the old man and again he received a nod and a shrug.

"I don't want nothin'. He's just a little kid. He needed help. Ya can't take nothing for that. It wouldn't be right."

The old man wondered where his newly found social awareness was coming from.

"Well, we'll find something. Will you tell me where you live, at least?"

"Mike here knows. He's dragged me outta bed a lot a times."

The woman frowned. Mike short circuited the sticky situation."

"Del and I go way back. Like he said, I have the information if you need it. That okay, Del?"

Del looked puzzled – dumbfounded, more appropriately. It had sounded like the cop was asking him permission to give out his address. It just didn't compute, but Del nodded feeling it was the required response.

The officer patted Del on his back and winked at the old man.

“Good work, by the way, Del. I’m proud of you.”

Mike and the mother turned and left across the grass.

Del returned to the bench – limp and bewildered.

“Did you get that?” he asked.

“You mean do I understand what just happened?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I believe a very grateful mother just went out of her way to come and thank you in person for your brave deed on behalf of her young son.”

Del managed the indication of a smile – it was in regard to the wording of the old man’s phrase, not that he had not fully understood it.

“I guess she really loves her son,” Del managed.

“Oh, I’m sure of it.”

Del nodded.

“That’s nice. She said he had a dad.”

“Yes, I heard that.”

“I’m glad he has both – a mom and a dad. I think that’s the best way.”

The old man couldn’t control his curiosity.

“Where is all this people-friendly consideration coming from, Del? All of a sudden you sound like Mother Teresa.”

“Whose mother is she?”

“It means a very kind, and thoughtful, and helpful person.”

The young man grinned – again, not the response the old man expected.

“Come from your book, Old Man.”

His eyes sparkled as he emphasized the word ‘your’.

“I truly don’t understand.”

“Like me, huh?”

“I don’t understand that, either.”

“I don’t never hardly understand nothin’, so it’s like me.”

The old man nodded, but allowed his puzzled brow to remain. That, Del understood.

“Your book, Ripples.”

“I didn’t say I wrote that book.”

“I saw your picture on the back of some books in your

house and they had the same name as Ripples author has. It's your book, okay."

The old man smiled having known it would probably come out in the end.

"Is that sort of like a 'touché', Old Man?"

"Sort of, I suppose. By any definition, you got me."

"Why didn't you tell me you wrote it?"

"I truly didn't intend to deceive you – trick you. It is just that through the years I have found that when some folks find out I have written lots of books they begin treating me differently."

"Differently?"

"Yes, like knowing that, somehow builds a wall between us. Let me try it another way. I really want to be your friend, not a writer that you happen to know."

"I get it. And you're right. I do feel different about you, now. It's not a bad different, though. It's like a proud different. I never knowed a special person before. It's like knowing who you really are makes me feel better about myself – that make any sense?"

"I suppose it may. I just hope it won't get in the way of our friendship."

"Do you know how great this is?"

"Perhaps you should explain what you mean."

"A real somebody thinks I'm his friend. I almost pee my pants every time I think about it."

"Well, I do hope you can avoid that. I take it you found the book interesting."

"It's like a – what's the word – a manual about getting along in the world – and it's just for teens, really. I didn't know anybody cared enough about kids my age to spend time doing something like that."

"Like that?"

"Writing a book filled with all that good stuff just for kids my age."

"It pleases me that a friend of mine approves of something I've written."

"I'll need to read all the others. You need to make a list for me."

"I will be pleased to do that."

“Here is how you would say it Del began – he lowered his voice a register: ‘There are two things. First, before we met I didn’t know how to read. Second, before I could read I couldn’t have read your books. Third, before yesterday I didn’t know your name – it’s on your books, you know.’”

“I think that’s three things.”

“And there are even more I could add. So, what shall I call you now that I know your name?”

“Number one,” the old man lowered his voice mocking Del, “I write under a half dozen pen names so I suppose you could just pick one.”

“What’s a pen name?”

“It’s another name an author uses for some reason instead of his own.”

“How come you do that?”

“I use a different one for each type of book – one for mysteries, another for teens, and others for adventure, ghost stories, romance, general fiction, and so on.”

“Why?”

“That way when a reader wants to find a new mystery I’ve written they can look for that pen name. If I wrote all kinds of books using one name, they could easily think one of my ghost stories was going to be an adventure novel or a romance. The pen name helps keep all that straight for the reader.”

“I guess that doesn’t really answer my question about what I should call you?”

“I’m quite content being called, Old Man, but I want you to call me whatever feels comfortable.”

“I don’t know much about comfortable, but I’ll think on it.”

The old man hated to call the morning to a halt, but had to get to an appointment.

“I have a doctor’s appointment I must get to so I’ll need to leave now. Be back tomorrow?”

“You or me?”

“My question was about you. I plan to be here the way I have been for most days during the last several decades.”

“Yeah. I’ll be here. I’ll need the title of another book before you leave.”

The old man supplied it – Crossroad, pen name, Tom Gnagey.

“A doctor’s appointment. You sick?”

“No. Just an annual checkup – a physical exam.”

“You go to doctors when you’re not sick?”

“It’s my way of trying to prevent getting sick.”

The concept was clearly foreign to the boy, but he nodded for whatever reason.

“Need me to go with you?”

“I appreciate the offer, but I can handle this.”

Del’s expression offered more than a hint of his disappointment. The old man responded.

“Look, Del. We are friends. We aren’t an old married couple.”

Del managed a quick grin.

“Well, if you ever need me you know where to find me.”

“Actually, I have no idea where to find you.”

Del frowned – it was a big-decision-making frown.

“I live in a dump. Don’t want you to see it.”

“That is your decision. I will live with that. I hope you understand it is not my intention to pry into things you want to keep private.”

Del nodded and extended their eye contact for a long moment.

“I could certainly use your company now on the way back to my place, however,” the old man offered as a compromise of sorts.

They made the short trek together.

“I’ll go to the library, I guess. It won’t hurt, will it?”

“What won’t hurt?”

“The physical exam.”

“Oh. Well, mostly it won’t hurt. Parts may be a bit uncomfortable, but nothing I haven’t experienced before.”

It was obvious that the young man was not convinced of the reasonableness of such a visit, but he kept further comment about it to himself.

* * *

The appointment went well for the old man. He was found to be appropriately fit and healthy for a man his age. The time at the library went well for the young man. He found

a number of the books on his list.

"I got on the Librarian because they don't have all your books."

It was the opening phrase from Del as the old man approached the bench the next morning. The young man was already there waiting.

"You get on okay with the doctor? Was he gentle with you?"

"First question: I got on fine with the doctor. Second question he is a she."

"You let a woman doctor see you naked?"

"I have never found that damaged me in any way."

"Geeze!"

The boy thought about it for a few moments.

"I guess it would be okay. About as close to being naked with a girl as I'll ever get, the way things are going."

"I have no idea how to respond to that," the old man said. "At any rate, I was found to be fit as a fiddle."

"That means healthy, I guess."

"It does, in old man language."

"Can I ask you about naked?"

In a million years, the old man would not have anticipated that question.

"You know the rule about questions. Shoot, as somebody I know would say."

"How old should I be before I get that way with a girl?"

"I can't make that decision for you. You just have to use your best judgment."

"I find I really don't have best judgment when I'm close to girls. How old were you or is that one of those you won't want to answer questions?"

"Let me say it this way. When I was your age, romantic behavior was quite different for most young people from how it is today. Being, 'that way' together was reserved for after marriage."

"So, you waited that long?"

"I did. Wasn't always easy, but we talked it out, made the decision and together we helped each other stick to it."

"That must have been really nice."

Again, in a million . . .

“I have some other questions sort of like that, but they can wait. Is that okay?”

“Is what okay; asking the questions or waiting?”

“Both I suppose. Guys talk about that stuff all the time, but I’m not sure they really know how it should be, you know? Mostly, I get the idea they just lie about what they do.”

“I’m glad you seem to understand how that is. Depend on reliable sources.”

“I got that book about growing up at the library. It was mostly for younger kids. I learned some stuff I didn’t know, so it was worth reading it. The pictures really helped me understand lots of stuff.”

“Good. I’m glad it was helpful. I’m sorry you don’t have a father or older brother to help you understand those things.”

“I got you, now.”

“Well, yes, that’s true. The mechanics of male/female things haven’t changed through the years, but the beliefs about romantic relationships certainly have. I may be way behind the times that way.”

“I think it’s good to get lots of information so I can make up my own mind.”

“I most certainly agree with that. There it is again, by the way.”

“What it is again?”

“The young man’s budding wisdom.”

“Like growing?”

“Yes, like growing or maturing.”

“I like it when you do that.”

“That?” the old man asked not at all sure to what he was referring.

“I take a stab at what I think one of your words means and then you say yes, but add something that makes it . . . more accurate or clearer. I’m going to be that way with my kids.”

The old man wasn’t sure how to respond. He didn’t need to.

“You said it to me once before, but I didn’t really get it. Now, I do. You never put anybody down. You always try to make them feel better. You could say, ‘No, Del, that’s really not the definition’, but instead you say, ‘yes,’ and then fix it up.

I can see that once I get to the place that I feel put down – like I always did in school by the teachers – I don't let myself hear anything else. That make sense?"

"Perfect."

"Yes, perfect or 100 percent correct – I'm practicing how you do it."

The old man smiled. It had been like a volcano had erupted within the young man that morning unleashing all sorts of knowledge tempered and re-formed by his fledgling wisdom.

The old man wondered if he were allowing himself to get too close to the boy – allowing the lad to become too dependent on him and how he viewed and approached the world. It posed a distressing possibility that would need careful, private consideration. If he were hurting the boy, he needed to find a way to draw the relationship to an end.

CHAPTER SIX

The Letter That Changed Del's Life

Several days passed with the routine essentially being repeats from one to another. Del would talk. The old man would write. They'd share a few smiles and sometimes even chuckles.

On Monday morning, as the old man opened his front door to leave for the park, he found Del sitting on the steps – a first. They exchanged smiles.

“This is an unexpected pleasure, Del. What's up?”

“I got a letter.”

He handed it up to the old man who donned his reading glasses and began scanning down the page.

“Read it out loud, please. Mom and I ain't sure what it all means.”

The old man began reading.

“You have been selected to receive the Mayor's ‘Young Hero’ award on the steps of City Hall, at 9:00 a.m. on the 24th of this month. Our city is proud of you and wants to recognize your act of heroism in saving the life of a child. Please respond so the arrangements can be finalized.”

The old man refolded the sheet and handed it back to Del, who accepted it as he stood up. They made their way down the front walk together.

“What do you think about it?” the old man asked.

“I ain't sure. What does finalized, mean?”

“Agreed upon, I suppose in this case.”

“Oh. I guess that's okay. How do I respond?”

“A letter would be a good way. That's how they

contacted you.”

“Will you help me write it?”

“Of course. Do you realize this is a really huge honor? In all of last year only one of these awards was made – none so far this year as I recall.”

“What is it?”

“Probably a certificate or a plaque with your name on it and something about what you did and the thanks from the Mayor on behalf of the citizens of the city.”

“Just for pulling a kid outa the pond?”

“Saving a life is always seen as a very big deal.”

“I guess I didn’t know that. Should I let them do it to me?”

“Give you the award, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t know. Just seems scary.”

The old man had to wonder if it were the first time in recent years that he had admitted to being scared, but didn’t pursue it.

“I assure you, the mayor won’t bite.”

Del offered a smile only after the old man broke one, himself.

“What will people think?”

“You ask that like it is not a good thing.”

“I ain’t never found it’s been good to be liked by the big guys.”

“Big guys?”

“The people with the rules and laws on their side.”

“And why not?”

“It’s them and us with like a wall between us. Once you climb that wall you’re never trusted anymore by your own.”

“Tell me this. Who do you really want your own to be – in your future, I mean?”

“I don’t get it.”

“Remember the transformational thing we’ve been talking about? On which side of that wall do you want to spend the rest of your life?”

“Like it means I have to give up the guys on my side before I can be transformed?”

“Don’t think in terms of who you have to give up. Think in terms of who you want to become like. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah. If I’m like you I won’t want to be with the kids I’ve always run with.”

“Here’s something for you to think about. I am like me, and yet I’m spending a lot of time hanging out with you. Is that really possible?”

“I don’t get it – oh, you mean you can still be you even when you’re with me. Just because I’m hanging with bad kids doesn’t mean I have to behave like a bad kid. That’s pretty hard to do, you know.”

“Why is that, do you think?”

“They’ve been all I have. I didn’t never really like them, but they was who there was to hang with. Like it was them or be alone. I hate to be alone. If a guy doesn’t go along with them he’s out – alone – and that ain’t good.”

But if you begin to have friends on the other side of the wall . . .”

“I get it; then I will have friends to hang with – new friends. I have no idea how to get good kids to be my friend. I got a terrible rep. Funny. I worked all my life to build up a terrible rep so kids would be afraid of me and now I want to get rid of that rep so I’ll be liked. Life is strange, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. Life is strange. But at least you now have a great opportunity to begin making that change.”

“How? What do you mean?”

“The award. Everybody is going to know you are a hero – one of the good guys. An instant good rep. You may be invited to talk to groups of folks about being a hero and you’ll have a chance to meet lots of new folks that way.”

“I ain’t gonna talk to no groups.”

“Well, of course, that won’t be required. It will always be your decision.”

“It’s like in that Crossroad book of yours.”

“How is it like that?”

“Almost everybody in that story had come to a crossroad and had to make a big decision about which road to take in his future.”

“You got that, did you? Lots of young people don’t see

it right off.”

“Seemed pretty obvious. I think they all made pretty good decisions in the end. You did okay in that story.”

“Thank you. I’m always pleased when my readers feel that way, although I never require it of a reader.”

“Why not?”

“I believe that everyone has the right to have his own opinion so long as that opinion doesn’t hurt or harm other people.”

“You must hate me.”

“Whatever makes you say a thing like that, son?”

“All I done all my life is hurt folks. You just said you didn’t like that.”

“You must remember, I have never known that hurtful Del. All I’ve ever known it this really fine young man sitting here beside me. I really like the Del that you’ve let me come to know.”

“Reality check, Old Man! I’m five feet eleven inches tall. About one inch of that is the nice Del you know about. The rest of me is the bad Del that spends his life hurting people.”

“Really. You’re saying that you still spend time hurting people. Have you been keeping that part of these last few weeks a secret from me?”

“Oh, no. I ain’t hurt nobody since . . . since you started talking to me that first day here in the park.”

“The way I remember it, is that it was you who began talking to me.”

“Really? That doesn’t sound like me.”

“Regardless, that’s how it was.”

“It must have been your magic, then, I guess.”

It was accompanied by a huge grin.

“Maybe it was the bald spot on the back of my head that made me seem like a safe person for conversation.”

“No, not really. It was because you were a old, helpless guy sitting here all alone that made me check you out to see if you had anything I wanted to take from you. Sorry about that.”

“I appreciate your honesty. That’s kind of a put down, you know.”

“How?”

“That you clearly didn’t think I had anything worth taking.”

“That’s a joke, right?”

“Right.”

“I’m getting better about jokes, huh?”

“By leaps and bounds, as they say.”

“Who says?”

“Just an expression. ‘They’ is an undefined group that gets both credit and blame for many improperly footnoted events in this world.”

“I get it. Like, ‘They say the cure for aids is right around the corner’. It doesn’t really say who it is that says that so you can’t never track it down to see if it’s really true.”

“Exactly.”

The old man was amazed at the boy’s quick and accurate take.

“I guess I’ll let them do it to me.”

“That will need an explanation, Del.”

“The hero award. I’ll let them give it to me. You be there with me?”

“I wouldn’t miss it. Of course, I’ll be there. I’m sure your mother will want to be there, too.”

“You think?”

“I guess you’ll just have to lay it out for her and tell her that you hope she’ll go with you.”

“We’ll see. Nothin’ like this has never come up for us before.”

“I’d think not. What are there, about 500 thousand youngsters in this city and you are the only one receiving the award? It’s something that doesn’t ever come up for virtually every kid in the city. I sort of said that backwards, but I guess you got my meaning.”

“You make it sound like I’m important or something.”

“I do believe it is beginning to sink into that wonderful gray matter of yours.”

“Gray matter – like my brain, you mean.”

“Right.”

“I never been important before. It’ll be like me and you is both important people, and we are friends. Can you believe

that?”

“Well, you must understand that I have never received an award for being an important person. Seems to me it will be my honor to be the friend of the really important person, here.”

“Well, you’re really important – all those books. Even without the books you’re a good guy and I think that makes you important.”

“For that, I’ll accept the designation – the name or description.”

“Thanks”

“For?”

“For telling me what designation means without putting me down about it.”

“Putting you down about it?”

“Yeah. I think I said it before. Like making me have to admit I didn’t know by askin’ – that’s like a put down.”

“And here I thought that would be one of those, ‘How Wonderful’ moments.”

“Because?”

“Because by asking you would be learning something new – how wonderful!”

“I see. Thank you or maybe, how wonderful.”

The young man giggled like – well, like a young man his age should. The old man was pleased.

Del became serious.

“I need to know how to do it, you understand.”

“Do it? You mean the ceremony.”

“Yeah.”

“Arrive there fifteen minutes ahead of time. Somebody will be there to meet you. Shake hands with them. That person will tell you exactly what you will need to do. It will all be pretty simple.”

“Will I have to say something?”

“I’m sure a simple, ‘Thank you’, will do. You can say more if you want to.”

“I don’t want to. Wouldn’t know what to say.”

“That’s fine. Once the mayor has handed you whatever he has for you the audience will clap. You might want to just nod out at them and flash your wonderful smile – it’s a way of

thanking them without using words.”

“Nobody said anything about a audience. I never been in front of a audience before. I don’t think I’m going to like that.”

“Tell you what. You just pick out one friendly face in the group and keep looking at it. That way it will be like there is just one person there”

“Like you?”

“I was thinking of your mother, but that’s your choice of course.”

Del nodded and thanked the old man for his help.

“Do you think I’m a hero?”

“The dictionary will tell you a hero is somebody that performs an act of bravery without considering the personal risk that he may experience. It seems to me that all those things applied in your case.”

Del nodded again, but didn’t respond.

The old man spoke.

“Let me know when you’re ready to write the letter – your response to the mayor.”

“Now’s good.”

The old man handed over his pad and pencil.

“What? I don’t know what to say.”

“I’ll bet you do.”

It garnered a strange look from the young man.

The old man began providing some prompts.

“Dear . . .”

“Mayor?”

“Yes. In formal letters like this we would usually say Mr. Mayor.”

Del wrote – well, printed actually. The old man didn’t ask but suspected he couldn’t write or read cursive.

“Then I guess something like thank you?” the boy asked.

The old man nodded.

“Right. Thank you for what?”

“For the award, I guess.”

The old man nodded and Del continued writing. He handed the pad back to the old man as if finished. The old man read it out loud.

“Dear Mr. Mayor. Thank you for thinking I deserved this award.”

“That was a very good addition – the thinking phrase, Del.”

He passed the pad back.

“More?”

“Perhaps. How do you feel about receiving it?”

“Proud, I guess. It seems like it puts a lot of new responsibility on me, though.”

“In what way?”

“Everybody’s going to think I’m a hero – like a good guy – and I really don’t know how to be that way.”

“You surely seemed to know the other day when you went racing down the hill toward the pond.”

“That was different.”

“Not much different, I’d say, but that’s probably a topic for later. How about just saying what you said to me.”

Del offered a furrowed brow.

“That you don’t feel like a hero.”

“Oh. That would be cool, I guess. It’s the truth.”

He wrote some more – far longer than seemed reasonable to the old man. Presently he handed the pad back.

“I don’t feel like a hero, but it really feels good to think somebody else does. It’s like I have something new in my life that I need to begin living up to. I’ll do my best. I’ll be their fifteen minutes before nine.”

“That okay?”

“It exceeds okay. It is magnificent.”

“Really? Thanks. It just sort of bubbled up from inside me.”

“We just may make a writer out of you yet.”

Del grinned, but made no commitment regarding it.

“You need to sign it. Do you remember about that from school?”

“The, yours truly, thing, you mean?”

“That’s what I was referring to, yes.”

He signed the letter.

“I don’t got a envelope, but I got money for a stamp.”

The old man pulled his back pack up onto his lap and

soon had both an envelope and stamp in hand. He handed them to Del.

“I don’t know Mr. Mayor’s address.

“Look at the top of the letter he sent you.”

“Oh. There it is. I remember how to put it on an envelope. My address in the upper right corner, too, right.”

“Right.”

With those details finished, he applied the stamp and then counted out the appropriate change into the old man’s hand to cover the cost. He hesitated and spoke.

“How much for the envelope?”

“The envelope is on me. I’d have been happy to provide the stamp as well.”

“I pay my way.”

“I see. Thank you.”

“I guess I should go mail it, huh.”

It was clearly the most important thing on the boy’s mind and the old man nodded.

“A good thing to get taken care of.”

Del stood.

“See you later. Thanks for your help. It seems like I’m always telling you thanks.”

“And you are always welcome.”

Del took off on a trot obviously knowing just where he was going. Suddenly he stopped, turned, and returned.

“I don’t have any dress up clothes. I guess I can’t go after all.”

“I’ve been thinking about that, myself,” the old man said. “You get the letter mailed and meet me at the corner of 5th and Madison. It’ll take me a while to get there so that should work out fine.”

“Why?”

“I know a place that has some pretty nice clothes for guys your age. I’m sure we can get you appropriately outfitted.”

“I don’t have that much money.”

“That doesn’t matter. It wouldn’t be any good. I figure a certified hero deserves a gift to help him celebrate and I want to do that for you.”

“Like a birthday gift, you mean?”

“Sort of like that, yes.”

“I guess that’s okay, then. Fifth and Madison in about twenty minutes.”

He was off again.

Twenty minutes came and went. Thirty minutes passed. The old man had taken a seat at the bus stop and waited patiently, wondering what had come up. At about the forty-five minute mark Del showed up alongside a woman.

“Sorry about being so late, but I went by home and told mom about it all. She said she had saved back some money and wanted to buy my outfit. This is my mom – Ginger. Mom, this is the old man I talk about.”

The old man stood and offered his hand.

“So, good to meet you. I am enjoying getting to know your son. The clothes are down those steps right over there.”

The sign said: Pre-owned Clothes Searching for a New Home.

Del was soon outfitted – shirt, slacks, socks, and shoes. The old man had spent time talking with the woman who ran the store, allowing his mother to handle the selections.

They brought the things to the counter. The owner rang them up, item by item.

“Comes to \$15.75,” she said.

Ginger’s expression indicated a problem. The old man spoke to the owner, offering a wink out of view of the others.

“I think you forgot to subtract the Monday discount, Mary.”

He held up five fingers, again out of view.

“Where’s my old head?” she said. “I sure did. Let me figure in that discount. Let’s see. Looks like five dollars even.”

Ginger looked relieved and broke a smile as she counted out five one dollar bills. Mary understood the old man would be good for the difference – the way he had been on many previous occasions.

Outside, Del spoke.

“I’m gonna walk mom home – has to go through a bad neighborhood up there a few blocks. See you in the morning, I guess.”

“I am looking forward to it. It was so good to meet you, Ginger. You two be safe, now.”

They left in opposite directions.

The old man felt exceptionally happy about the way the morning had turned out. There had been wonderful new insights into Del’s potential. He had finally met the young man’s mother – who, in truth looked more like his sister. He had been able to help provide something important for someone who couldn’t have had it otherwise. All in all, it had been a very good morning.

Del felt pleased – some about himself and how well he had constructed the letter, but mostly about the fact his mother had bought him his outfit. Five dollars was a lot of money in their home and he understood it meant she would have to do without something in order to make it up. For that reason, he had been torn between letting the old man pay and allowing his mother to do it. The fact that his mother really wanted to was unbelievably important to him. He believed it was important to her, as well. He’d find a way to earn five dollars and slip it into her purse when she wasn’t looking. That would be a first for him – putting money into her purse when she wasn’t looking.

The big event was just a few days away. The old man hoped nothing would come up in the young man’s life that would interfere. With Del, nothing ever seemed to be a for sure thing.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

“I’m Not Going to Say Anything!”

The award for young heroes had become a pretty big deal there in the city. It was the Mayor’s wife’s pet project. There were several hundred chairs set up facing the four, wide, cement steps leading up to the front doors of City Hall. There was a podium up on the landing – the landing serving as a stage for the event. There was a wide, gold, drape, backdrop hanging a few feet behind the podium.

Del and his mother had stopped at the old man’s place so they could walk the six blocks together. The old man was pleased at how well the young man had cleaned up – his new clothes, shirt tucked in, his face and hands sparkling clean, his blond, shoulder length hair combed and probably brushed, judging from the way it shone in the sunlight.

“I’m not going to say anything, you know,” were his opening words as they met on the sidewalk.

“Like I said, a simple ‘thank you’ should be all that’s needed.”

“I’d like to just run away, you know.”

“I’m certainly glad you didn’t.”

“Ma says she’s proud of me.”

He and she exchanged a face to face smile.

“How nice. I’m sure she is. As I recall that police officer – what was his name, Mike – said he was proud of you, also. I hope you know that I am.”

Del nodded not thinking it had required any more of a response.

“You’re sure I don’t have to talk, right?”

“If you want, I can speak to the mayor beforehand and inform his honor that it is your desire not to speak.”

Del grinned at his mother.

“That’s how he talks when he talks like he talks.”

She smiled. Del continued with a question.

“You know the mayor, Old Man?”

“We’ve met. I really know is wife better than I do him.”

“Is that okay with the mayor?”

It had been offered in complete seriousness.

“She and I have been on several committees together.”

“Oh. Okay, then. I figured you was too old for that kind of stuff.”

The old man ignored the boy’s dilemma since it appeared he had already handled it to his own satisfaction. Del had not followed up on the offer to contact the mayor. They arrived twenty minutes before the scheduled time. Many people had already taken seats.

“That’s a lot of chairs!” Del said, stopping dead in his tracks as the area come into view.

“Remember what I said about cutting an audience down to size?”

“I remember. Just look at one person. That’s going to be you, mom.”

“The very best possible choice, I’d say,” the old man said.

“So, what do I do now?”

“See the lady in the black dress up there to the right of the podium?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the mayor’s wife. She’s in charge. You need to approach her and introduce yourself. Call her Mrs. Greenburg. She will lead you through everything step by step from there.”

“Is she nice?”

“Very nice.”

“She looks a lot like a teacher – the glasses hanging around her neck that way.”

“I guarantee she won’t bite.”

Del broke a short-lived smile into the old man’s face. He turned and administered a still tentative and unpracticed hug to his mother. The old man’s eyes moistened. The boy

turned and offered his hand for a shake. The old man accepted it, most certainly surprised by the first time ever gesture. Clearly the boy had been thinking through the morning – practicing in his mind, perhaps.

He turned toward the stage and hesitated.

“I will be happy to introduce you, if you want,” the old man said.

“I think I need to do it by myself, don’t you?”

“It is strictly your call, son.”

Del, made his way slowly to the steps. The mayor’s wife – almost as if forewarned about the boy’s likely hesitance – walked to meet him, hand out, saying all the right things as Del climbed the steps.

“You must be Delbert. I’m so pleased to get to meet you.”

Something about her words and the look on her face and her gentle touch as they shook hands immediately put Del at ease. She put her hand on his back and escorted him behind the large gold backdrop. The old man pointed to chairs and he and Del’s mother were soon seated.

“I’m really nervous,” his mother said.

“It is exciting, isn’t it,” the old man said hoping to shift her idea of nervousness into that of excitement. It seemed to work.

An usher handed them each a printed program. She stroked it as if it were a precious treasure – well, it was, of course. The old man immediately saw a ‘red light’ looking up at him from the paper – Delbert, it read, rather than Del. As he understood it, such an error had been cause for broken bones in the past.

For just a moment his inclination was to go find the boy and ‘fix’ things. On second thought, he understood the boy had to be on his own on that. It could not be his job to follow him around giving him directions about how to behave.

As the clock on the bank across the street struck the hour, three people emerged from behind the curtain – the mayor, followed by Del, followed, quite unexpectedly, by Officer Mike.

Del’s eyes darted around the audience until he located his mother. He smiled. She smiled back, tears already

streaming down her face. The old man handed her his handkerchief figuring he could use the back of his hand.

The crowd hushed as the mayor took his place behind the podium. Mike stood as if at ease beside Del. Del did his best to neither run away nor faint. Del found his mother and nodded. His mother pointed to her face – her smile – and Del immediately managed to construct one of his own. It had clearly been something about which the two of them had spoken. According to the program it had been Officer Mike who had nominated Del for the award.

The mayor began.

“As a part of my duties I am honored to present many awards during the course of a year, but none gives me greater personal satisfaction than this, Young Hero Award. It renews my faith in the younger generation and helps me believe that we old folks are going to be able to pass the reins of government over to a loving, competent, compassionate new generation.”

He turned to Del, who with an encouraging hand to his shoulder from Officer Mike, stepped forward and shook the mayor’s hand.

The mayor recounted Del’s actions on the morning of the rescue. Although nothing he said was not true, his description of the young man seemed more like an argument for sainthood, than a brass plaque.

He changed his focus from the crowd out front to the young man standing beside him.

“And so, Delbert – who I understand prefers to be called simply, Del – it is with the greatest pleasure and honor that I present this award to you. You are an inspiration to all of us – young and old. Thank you.”

The plaque was exchanged. Del accepted it with a simple nod and looked down at it, running his fingers across the engraving, much like his mother had done with the program, earlier. The old man began clapping. The crowd joined, immediately. It had been to serve two purposes: first, provide the recognition that was due the lad and second, to cover any awkward pause that might have caused embarrassment for his young friend – his young friend that under no circumstances whatsoever was going to say so

much as one word.

Much to the old man's surprise, when the mayor backed away from the podium, Del moved toward it. He looked around the gathering. The applause stopped as those gathered there clearly hoped to hear something from the boy. Del began to speak.

"Hi."

He offered an awkward wave from beside his face. A quiet group chuckle arose from the crowd.

"My legs want to run away, but my head tells me I have to stay here."

There was another pleasant murmur from the gathering – that time louder. A few folks clapped, assuming it was the boy's attempt at humor. In reality, it had merely been Del being honest.

"It's like the opposite from that day on the hill by the pond Mr. Mayor was talking about. That time it was my head that stopped guiding me and my legs that just took off down the slope all on their own."

He had commandeered the attention of those gathered in front of him.

"I have an old friend who says to be a hero means that you forget about your own safety and just do what needs to be done. I think it is like a reflex that just kicks in all by itself, so I suppose I can't really take credit for what I done."

The mayor playfully reached for the plaque as if to take it back. Del swung it up and well out of his reach.

"Not in a million years, old man!"

The crowd broke into laughter and clapped. A few even stood up showing their great pleasure in Del's response. It went on for some time.

When the joyful clamor subsided, Del turned back toward the Mayor.

"Sorry, about that. I didn't mean to disrespect you. Another reflex, I guess."

The mayor spoke. "I never take offence when somebody speaks the truth."

He pointed to his white hair.

The crown chuckled. Del nodded and responded directly to the mayor.

“In that case, Not in a million years, NICE old man.”

Again, the crowd erupted in applause. They had come expecting to be bored stiff, so were delighted at the unexpected entertainment.

Del, of course, was only being honest. He had no intention of being humorous. The best humor often emerges in that way.

“Well, thank you. I will always . . . what’s the word, Old Man,” he called out a bit louder, pointing.

The old man stood, cupped his hands to his mouth, and called back, ‘Cherish’.

“Right. I will always cherish this.”

The crowd roared. The mayor stepped forward and shook Del’s hand with some vigor. Del turned to Officer Mike who was immediately there with the hug of all hugs. He whispered in the boy’s ear.

“I’ve never for a minute didn’t believe you had this kind of thing in you. I’m so proud of you.”

“It’s amazing,” Del whispered back.

“What’s amazing, kid?”

“That I’m hugging a cop and haven’t shriveled up and died yet.”

Those words would forever remain private between them, and neither would ever forget them.

Fully unexpected by Del, a line formed and many of the people there passed by and shook his hand, each one having some kind words to share with him. The last two in line were his mother and the old man.

Three way hugs are awkward at best. That one was the best awkward hug ever before experienced by three folks.

They said their goodbyes to those on the stage and the mayor’s wife and walked toward the street.

“I should have wore a tie, I think,” were Del’s first, post-ceremony words.

“We will remember that, next time,” the old man said, thinking he was making a joke.

Del took it all quite seriously as if he fully expected such things to continue to happen throughout his life. After all, he WAS a hero.

* * *

Del chose to go home with his mother rather than hang around with the old man. That pleased the old man. He figured in the past few days' mother and son had talked together more than they had in the previous five years. That had to be a good thing.

He had every reason to think the young man would come to the park that next morning. He wasn't wrong although it was all backward. When the old man arrived at the top of slope that looked down upon the park, he began surveying the area for a bench that seemed in all ways comfortable for him that day.

About half way down the slope facing the pond he saw a set of familiar shoulders and the back of a head rising above one of the benches. It was Del, of course. He walked to a spot just behind the bench and then, recreating Del's first words to him that day they met, the old man said, "I've seen you here before."

Del turned and smiled.

"I know what you just done – that's almost what I said to you that first day."

The old man was intrigued.

"Almost?" he asked as he cornered the bench and took a seat stashing his backpack on the ground. Del continued.

"Yeah. I said, 'I seen you here before'. You said, 'I've seen you here before'. That's a grammar thing I'm thinking."

The old man was amazed at the lad's memory since he, himself, was not fully sure he could remember what he had for breakfast that morning. He managed a response.

"What a memory. I believe you're correct and, yes, it is a grammar thing."

"I been listening to people talk," the boy went on as if it had already been established as the topic of conversation for the morning.

"That seems reasonable, I suppose," the old man said searching for the direction Del already clearly had in mind.

"Yesterday on our walks, I listened to how you talked and how me and mom talked and figure it's pretty different. Ever since I met you I've been thinkin' about it, really. You and teachers and bosses talk one way and me and my friends and mom talk another way. It's like two languages, but we

can still understand each other – well most of the time.”

He grew quiet as if waiting for the old man to say something wise.

“Another astute observation. I’m not sure where you want to go with the topic.”

“I want to talk like you do.”

The old man smiled to himself. No big deal: cure cancer, do away with world poverty, fix Del’s talking – certainly all in the same category! All in a day’s work for, Super Old Guy!

“Do you have a plan in mind?” the old man asked.

“Of course, I do. You probably already knew that, didn’t you?”

“I must say I had an idea.”

“Here’s my part of the plan.”

The old man interrupted.

“Your part of the plan suggests there is to be a my part of the plan.”

“Of course. That’s how we do things.”

The old man figured that was how they did things although he had not really ever thought about it.

“Well, then, let’s hear your part.”

“Whenever I say something wrong, you correct me. That way I’ll learn how to fix it.”

“That could be overwhelming, son.”

“You mean I talk that bad?”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant at all. Let me try it this way. You are good at thinking through analogies.”

“Don’t know, analogies?”

“Comparisons, parallels. Like a story that illustrates or explains something else.”

“Okay. Yeah. I’m good at that.”

“Here is one for you to think about. What if your fourth-grade teacher said, ‘Today we are going to learn all the multiplication combinations beginning with one times one on up to twelve times twelve?’”

“That would be impossible.”

“Why?”

“Too much for a brain to catch onto in such a short time. Oh. I see – sort of. Explain more.”

“How would it be if we pick out one kind of problem in your grammar and work on that? Then, when you are feeling comfortable with that change, we can move on to a second one and so on?”

“That makes sense. Me and you is a good team, you know. Where do we start.”

“Right there – the, ‘me and you is a good team’.

“So, you sayin’ we ain’t?”

“No. I’m saying in that sentence you offered two good places to start. ‘Me and you,’ should always be, You and me or You and I. In formal English, we always refer to the other person first.”

“That seems pretty simple.”

“Good. Shall we begin there?”

“Okay. Seems way to simple, though, for two guys as smart and YOU and Me.”

The old man chuckled. Del smiled, pleased that he had made his point.

“It gets more complicated, but what I’ve said is enough with which to begin.”

“With which to begin?” Del said as if mocking the old man’s way of speaking.”

The old man nodded.

“I know, you’d have said, to begin with, but that’s a more complicated application that we can put off a while.”

“Okay. You said there were two things about what I said: ‘Me and you is a good team.’”

“Do you know about singular and plural?”

“Singular means one and plural means a bunch.”

“Pretty close. Let’s think of plural as meaning any amount over one.”

Del nodded.

“Do you know about nouns and verbs?”

“I think so. Nouns are things – like tree and bench and old man.”

“And verbs?”

“I think they tell what’s going on – like run, or sit, or fly, or eat.”

“Very good, actually. In proper grammar, nouns and verbs have to get along. Think about the two verbs is and are.

Would you say, 'He is tall,' or would you say, 'He are tall?'

"He is tall."

"Do you suppose 'he' is singular – meaning one – or plural – meaning more than one?"

"Singular."

So, will the verb 'is' be singular or plural if it is used with a singular noun?"

"I get it. Let me try. You'd say, 'Jack and Jill were kids,' not, 'Jack and Jill was kids' because there is two kids."

"Right, except there blank two kids? Is the phrase 'two kids' singular or plural?"

"I get it. Two kids so I should of said, 'There are two kids' not 'there is two kids'."

There is a book about fixing your English grammar written mostly for teenagers and young adults that leads the person one small step by one small step through a lot of the most common errors people make. People who are willing to follow the directions and take just fifteen minutes every day to study the book can really clean up their English in less than two months.

"That's good, right?"

"Well, I would never say speaking poor English makes a person in any way a bad person, and I hope you understand that. But, yes, I think speaking proper English is a good thing and I point to several good solid reasons to fix it, too."

"Like?"

"Like young people who speak proper English are more likely to get hired after an interview than those who don't. Bosses are impressed by proper English. Speaking proper English makes people appear to be smart even if they're not. Kids who know proper English always find school a whole lot easier. Young adults who find themselves raising a child can assure that kid a much easier life if the English it hears its parents speaking is proper English. Kids learn to speak their language by modeling how they hear their parents speak. Speak well, and the kids will speak well. Understand what I'm saying?"

"Of course, I understand. I just speak poor English – I'm not dumb."

The old man clapped.

“I do believe you understand what I was trying to say all quite perfectly.”

“So, how to I get that book?”

The old man took out his pad and jotted down the name of the book. Talking Better for Fun and Profit, by Tom Gnagey.

“Yours.”

The old man nodded.

“It’s an e-book. Here’s how it works. Every time you begin a new step in the book you tell the people who are a part of your life what you’re working on that week and ask them to help you by pointing out both your errors and your successes. Most folks are happy to help young people who are trying to improve themselves.”

“But, I only got you and mom.”

“Here’s an idea that you could run by your mom. What if you both used the book together? You could help each other. It might actually help her be able to get better jobs, you know. And, you know I will be delighted to help. I think there is one other person in your life you’re forgetting about who would be really happy to help out.”

“Who’s that?”

“Officer Mike.”

“I hardly never see him.”

“And that’s because . . .?”

Del looked a bit sheepish.

“Because I always try to keep away from cops. I see him coming and I’m up the closest alley or squattin’ down behind a car or van.”

“Is that something you could change?”

“What would the other guys think, though? Me hanging with a cop.”

“Which other guys – the ones you want for friends or the ones you seem to be forced to hang with?”

“I used to really hate it when you did that, you know. I almost never come back once because of it.”

“I’m glad you changed your mind and returned.”

“Why?”

“Well, for one thing, that end of the bench where you sit would be so lonely.”

“That’s a joke, right?”

The old man nodded and continued more seriously.

“I’ve come to enjoy your company and like you as a person. I would have missed out on so much if you had not come back.”

Del nodded, looking down toward the pond. Then he turned back and looked at the old man.

“Me, too. You know. I still can’t figure what there is about me anybody could like, but me and – er, mom and me decided I might never find out if I don’t stick around you a while longer.”

The old man’s eyes moistened. The young man noticed, but didn’t understand or comment. He figured it was somehow connected with why the old man liked him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Opportunities

“You’ll never in a gazillion years guess what happened last night.”

It was Del’s opening volley one morning at the park about a week after the award ceremony.

“Well, then if I’ll never guess I suppose it would be futile to try.”

Del smiled what had gradually become his very natural, very warm and friendly smile.

“Mr. Atherton, the principal came by my house.”

“I do imagine that was a surprise.”

“I seen him, I mean I saw him, at the hero thing. He was standing back behind the chairs. He didn’t come up to me afterward so I figured he was just there hoping I’d make a fool of myself. I didn’t make a fool of myself, did I?”

“You most certainly did not. You comported yourself with aplomb and cerebral proficiency.”

“Translation please.”

“You presented yourself with self-confidence and a quick mind and wit.”

“I guess that was okay. Thanks. Anyway, back to Atherton – Mr. Atherton. He just showed up at our place and talked with mom and me. He said he thought it would be a good idea if I’d take some classes this summer that would get me ready to take some tests – GED I think he called them. He says if I pass them I will get a high school diploma that I can use to get a job or even get into a Community College.”

“So, what do you think?” the old man asked.

“I can tell you what I never thought. I never thought he’d be goin’ out of his way to try and help me – not after all the sh . . . stuff I pulled at school.”

“How did you leave it with him?”

“I said I had somebody I had to talk to about it first.”

“And that would be?”

“You! I don’t know nobody else.”

It had been both a compliment and a matter of fact statement.

“It is not a decision I can make for you.”

“You think I can do the work?”

“Apparently, Mr. Atherton does and he knows your academic skills and potential a whole lot better than I do.”

“Okay, maybe that’s true, but you know me and that’s the part I’m scared about.”

“Scared, how?”

“I’ve been known to sling books at teachers for putting red marks on my papers and I’m not real big on following rules.”

“Tell me this, Del. How could all that change if you’d change your feelings about red marks?”

“Huh?”

“Red marks represent what?”

“Mistakes. Stuff I did wrong.”

“And in the past, you have assumed that making mistakes were put downs – and that Old Del just never dealt really constructively with put-downs, did he?”

“I guess not and I do see where you’re going with this. I have to start thinking of red marks as being one of those reasons to say, Oh, Wonderful. That’s where you’re trying to steer me, right?”

“Why, Del. Me? Try to steer you someplace? Whatever do you mean young man?”

Del smiled.

“You know the first good thing about that?”

The old man wondered if he needed to take notes. First, implied others to follow. He opted to just cross his legs and cock his head as if ready to listen.

“The first thing is that I knew that was a joke right from the start. That’s one of the best things you’ve done to me.”

'Done to me,' the old man thought to himself. He had not thought of their relationship in that way. He nodded and waited for the second whatever it might be.

"The second is that whole thing about put downs and how they make me go off on folks."

"I've helped you become angry?"

It had been a question.

"No. You missed my point. Or maybe that was a joke. Anyway, you've helped me see I mustn't go off on other guys when they do that to me, but I'm not sure how to really do that – keep myself under control. That was really a question, you know."

"Yes. I know. And that's the third thing that has changed since we've met."

"What?"

Del looked intrigued clearly wanting to hear what the old man had to say.

"You have recently begun asking real questions rather than just making big bold statements and then sitting back to see how I might respond. This new approach is far more efficient, don't you think?"

"You knowd – knew – what I was doing, huh?"

"I knew. I also know that most teen agers use that same ploy – method – especially when they want to hear what their parents or teachers think about something."

"Why do you suppose that is?"

The young man had clearly accepted and acknowledged the fact without question – without seeing it as a putdown – another big step that clearly escaped him at that moment.

"It is really difficult being a teenager," the old man began. "It's been said a billion times before, but it's an in-between stage – certainly not a kid but not a full-blown adult either. But, many teens, especially boys, I have observed, seem to believe they are automatically supposed to know a lot of things they really have no way of knowing. So, to ask questions about those things would be like admitting he didn't know something – that would be like the putdowns we've talked about. Add to that the idea that lots teens think adults believe teens should know things they don't know for sure,

and you get a situation that works against everybody.”

“How everybody?”

“Teens think they should know something so they don’t ask for fear they’ll look bad. Adults think the teen should know something so they don’t provide the information.”

“Like a standoff where nobody is really to blame,” Del added.

It had been a perceptive observation – a good way of characterizing it.

Del tried to steer things back to the original topic.

“You had started talking about how to keep from thinking something’s a putdown.”

“Oh, yes. Sometimes my old head finds a topic and just runs with it all quite willy nilly.”

“Willy nilly?”

“Random. As if without choice or planning.”

“Gotcha.”

“You just did it again, you know?”

“I just did what?” Del asked.

“Came right out and asked for information, apparently both admitting you didn’t know something and accepting the answer without maiming anybody.”

“I’m guessing maiming means really hurting somebody.”

“And you’re educated guess would be correct?”

“What do you mean, educated guess?”

“Let’s see. You could have said that you thought maim meant giving a gift to your girlfriend. But you didn’t. Why not?”

“Because that wouldn’t have had anything to do with what you were trying to say.”

“So, how did you come up with the idea it meant ‘hurt’?”

“Because, that fit into what you were going for.”

“And that, my young friend is the difference between a willy nilly guess and an educated guess.”

“You mean that an educated guess has to be built on what you already know about something.”

“Very good.”

“Okay,” Del said the hint of a smile breaking on his face. Now, if you will stop willy nillying around and get back to

put downs.”

“We have had a time of it trying to stick to that topic, haven’t we? Okay, if I call you a girl, can that be true?”

“No, not last time I looked anyway.”

Del offered another smile. The old man raised one eyebrow and continued.

“So, if if somebody said to you something that isn’t true it usually means one of two things. The other person is ignorant – meaning doesn’t have the correct facts – or he is trying to make you mad. If he just doesn’t have the facts, would it be right to beat on him?”

“No. Never thought about it like that before.”

“Let’s look at the second option.”

“That he’s actually trying to make me mad, you mean.”

“Right. Who gets mad, you or him?”

“I do.”

“So, who has control over you getting mad?”

“I’m guessing you’re steering me toward saying I should have control.”

“So, if you make yourself strong enough to control your temper and tell yourself you are more powerful than he is – that he can’t upset you – then who really wins?”

“I do, I guess. Never thought I’d think backing down would be like winning.”

“Backing down is like retreating. Standing firm and remaining in control is like marching right up to the other guy face to face and saying, ‘I am so in control of myself you could never say anything that would make me act in an angry fashion’. My grandmother used to tell me not to let other people push my buttons. That only I should be able to do that.”

“I get that. If somebody tries to push my, ‘get mad button’, and I let him, I lose. If I don’t let him push it, I win.”

“Yes. Exactly. It was one of the important lessons I learned when I was young.”

“And if he’s just ignorant, getting mad at him wouldn’t ever help him learn what he needs to learn - what he didn’t know in the first place.”

“That’s the way I see it at least. It often tickles me to watch somebody stand there stewing in their own pot of

emotions while they see that what they are trying to do isn't working. You can usually actually see them – or hear them – getting the message that they are losing the battle.”

“Then it's like you are really pushing their buttons. That's good stuff, Old Man. You're fuller of good stuff than anybody I've ever knew about.”

“It takes practice, Del. I'm not saying it just automatically begins being easy to guard that button.”

“That's like most good stuff, I guess.”

“More, please,” the old man said.

“I heard a saying that goes like, ‘Anything that's worthwhile takes work’.”

“A good saying and I'm coming to see that you really believe that.”

“You believe, it right?” Del asked as if needing to be reassured about something about which he already thought he was already certain.

“Most certainly I believe it.”

“Okay, so when I see red marks or think somebody is just trying to upset me I need to say, ‘Ah, wonderful,’ because I'm about to have a chance to learn something new and important – maybe the correct answer in school work or maybe about the power I have inside myself to stay in control and come out of a standoff the more grown up guy of the two of us.”

The old man picked up his pad and pencil and began writing.

“What's that about?” Del asked, clearly puzzled.

“I want to write down what you just said before I forget it. It was wonderful. Someday I will find just the right spot for it in a book or story.

[I think you just did, ‘old man’.]

“Wow. I said something you wanted to keep. Is that like I taught you something?”

“That is exactly like you teaching me something. Thank you.”

Del grinned a cheek splitting grin. They both looked down the slope toward the pond sitting in silence for several minutes. Eventually Del spoke. It was a genuine question. He was getting better at that by the minute!

“So, what about the GED thing?”

“It sounds like a wonderful opportunity. Did Mr. Atherton say anything about going back to regular school?”

“He said he understood that would be a lot of pressure for me. I’m behind and I have my rep to deal with. Of course, he don’t know how much I’ve growd up the last month or so. That shouldn’t a been ‘growd’.”

“Grown.”

“Grown, thanks. Anyway, I think he’s right. I can’t get over how nice he was. I maimed him and he’s trying to help me make a good life for myself. I’d a never believed it if I hadn’t got to know you first.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“I got to know you’re a good guy who just does good stuff because you think people should do good stuff to each other.”

The old man was again intrigued by his use of ‘to’ in that context. Del continued.

“If he’d a showed up at my place a month ago I’d a probably killed him – double maimed him, at least, all before he had a chance to open is mouth.”

Del was on a roll and had still more to offer.

“Me and – He and I sat out on the front steps and just the two of us talked a long time. I didn’t even care that some of the guys saw us there like that. I showed him how I could read just about anything now. He examined my slot card and nodded and then you know what? He said, ‘I’m sorry we missed that.’ I’m not really sure what all he meant by it, but a high school principal said, ‘I’m sorry,’ to me.”

“I can see that was very important to you. I’m glad that happened. I think he meant he felt bad that the school system had failed to figure out why you were having trouble all those years. It was his attempt to offer an apology.”

Del nodded.

“So, you think I should I let them do the GED to me?”

Someday the old man figured he would need to deal with ‘who does what to whom’ aspect of the boy’s thinking pattern, but that could certainly wait.

“It sounds to me you believe it would be a good thing to do, Del.”

“I know what you’re doing. You’re putting it all back on me – about the decision. You do that a lot. It’s okay, now. I used to really hate that.”

“Why do you suppose you hated it?”

“And the old man does it again,” Del said.

They smiled into each other’s faces. Del went on.

“I hadn’t thought about it before, but how’s this? See, there’s another question. Good for me!”

The old man chuckled and nodded.

“Back when I didn’t think I was worth anything I probably didn’t think I could make good decisions so when you threw it back at me it like scared me and it made me mad because you weren’t doing your part – giving me a answer.”

“An answer,” the old man said offering a correction. “The use of ‘an’ before words that begin with a vowel, remember?”

“Oh, yeah – and I know that should a been ‘yes’. “That’s another, How Wonderful, I guess.”

“And how do you feel about it inside?”

“That’s really interesting. I don’t feel mad. Maybe I even feel good. Still confusing. That okay?”

“Of course, it is. I’m just pleased you didn’t attack me.”

“I know that was a joke, but you know I’d never try to hurt you, right?”

“Yes. I’ve known that for probably longer than you have.”

Del nodded, thoughtfully.

“You’re probably right. Part of your magic, I suppose.”

They exchanged smiles. In a move, fully unexpected by either of them, Del reached out and patted the old man’s leg. To the old man, it appeared to have been an automatic response – made without any conscious thought on the boy’s part. That he would treasure. It appeared to be a very comfortable and natural response to the young man - one that begun almost before he realized what he was doing.

“I’ll do it then, the GED. Mom says she thinks it’s a good idea. She wishes she’d a done it when she was my age, but then she got pregnant. Talk about scary!”

“I don’t follow, Del.”

“Being pregnant at fifteen. I mean I don’t know anything

about taking care of a baby. How can any fifteen-year-old? What was your word – ignorant? No way a kid that age can have all the information needed to know about how to do a good job at raising a kid. I couldn't support one. My own life would just have to stop in order to take care of the kid. She gave up a lot for me, you know. And, mostly I've treated her like crap. I've been a really lousy son."

"Here's a thought," the old man said. "I once knew of a boy and his mother that attended the GED classes together."

A long, long period of silence followed. Then Del spoke.

"Some problems about that, but I think I could handle them."

"Problems?"

"Like if I do better than mom she will feel bad. If she does better than me, then I might feel bad. That second thing I believe I can handle now. What if she can't do the work? She's been out of school for sixteen years. Wouldn't that be awfully embarrassing for her?"

"Your mother is not dumb, Del. I know that from two sources. The boy she gave birth to is actually pretty smart. That means she is most certainly smart as well. Second, I have spent some time with her, so I know from personal experience that she's no dummy. I think she is depressed, but she's certainly capable of doing the GED classes. You just need to speak with her about it. It will probably take a lot of encouragement. The high school will pay for yours. If we need to find a scholarship for her, I'm sure Mr. Atherton will help us do that."

"Why is she depressed? No. Let me try to answer that one. All that stuff I said about being pregnant at 15 for a starter. That had to be scary and depressing. Then I've been about the worst son any mother has ever had – at least since I hit Jr High. She must feel helpless about me and the money thing – she can't get a job that pays enough to support us and I just keep getting more and more and more expensive to take care of, I suppose."

The old man chose not to respond. They remained silent together for a few moments then Del had another question.

“How do you help a person get un-depressed?”

“Help them find something wonderful and important to live for or to work toward. It has to be something they can believe they can achieve. They need to know somebody loves them no matter what. Sometimes it also takes medicine to get the job done. I tend to think in your mother’s case it is more situational than physiological.”

“You know you are going to have to explain that to me.”

“Some depression is caused because chemicals produced in the brain go haywire. In that case, drugs – chemicals, medicines – are needed to get things back on track. You understand that?”

“Yeah. That makes sense.”

“Other depression is a reaction to bad things that happen in life and the person can’t see any way of fixing them – they feel totally helpless. That is what I mean by situational.”

“I think I got it. Maybe I can read up on it. So you think the GED idea will help or hurt her depression?”

“Let’s just think about that. She will get to spend lots more time with the one person in the world she loves the most. She will know that she is improving herself and that her son is doing the same for himself. She will eventually be prepared to get a much better job and come to see that there can be the chance for her son to even go to college. You’ll be far too busy to get into trouble so she can stop worrying about that. She’ll get to see how really smart her son is when she needs your help with the school work. Hmm? I’ll just bet you can answer your last question like you did the one before it.”

“I can see that I got to start making a whole lot of really big mistakes,” Del said in all seriousness.”

“You lost me, son.”

“You say wisdom comes by learning from your mistakes and I want to be wise like you are, so, I’m figuring I still need to make lots of mistakes.”

“Believe me, Del. Just in the normal course of living we all make plenty of mistakes. The secret is the second part of the equation – learning an important lesson from every one we make. There is also another part to that formula I probably didn’t mention, but most of us live among people who also make lots of mistakes. If we consider all those carefully, we

can learn good lessons from them as well – and we're not very likely to get into trouble ourselves if they are somebody else's mistakes from which we're learning good lessons."

"I guess I've been like a gold mine to other kids then, haven't I?"

"I'm fully lost, but eager to have you help me understand."

"If the guys around me learned something wise from all the dumb stuff they've seen me do in my life, it's like I've given them a pot of gold – a pot of wisdom, I suppose."

"You may have given them the raw material, but unless they took time to really think it through and learn well from it, it's nothing more than a pot of sand."

"Thanks, you know," Del said.

The old man nodded.

"Sometime soon we need to talk about love. I got lots and lots and lots of questions about love. And, I'm talking about love and not sex. Lots of kids mix those things up. I suspect my mom did.

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CHAPTER NINE

Moving On

Several months passed. Del and his mother were attending GED classes every weekday from five to nine pm. It had been going very well. Dell was impressed with how quickly his mother learned things. He was determined to do better than she did, but never for the purpose of making anything of it. They had begun getting along well – better than either had ever imagined could be the case.

Del had taken a part time job babysitting – well, it really wasn't babysitting. The mayor's wife had set him up with family friends. They had two boys ages ten and eleven. The father was on duty with the Army and they wanted to be sure their children had a good male role model around while he was gone. Del loved the position. It made him feel important and trusted – two things he had really never experienced before. He took his responsibility very seriously and went about it in a thoughtful way. In his often, odd way, of phrasing things, Del told the old man that life was about as un-depressing as it could possibly be. The old man assumed that meant things were going great.

That morning the old man had selected a bench nestled within a stand of small trees and shrubs. At nine in the morning it was already 92 degrees with a predicted high in the low 100s. He had traded shoes and sox for open sandals, and trousers for knee length walking shorts (at least those were the names used back in his day.). It was noticeably cooler in there out of the sun and surrounded by the greenery.

Del arrived bare chested, in shorts, and with his T-shirt

flung over his shoulder. He was barefoot, carrying his tennies.

"I figured you'd be back in here," he said, taking a seat on the bench beside the old man. "Lucky it's all hidden or we'd have to fight off the hordes."

"Hordes. Good word. Masses of people. Where did you come by that?"

"In a book about the Mongols – really tough, old time, Chinese worriers."

"So, you're into history this week."

"Not really. The cover the book had a picture of a mostly naked woman riding a horse on it. Wasn't what I'd hoped for, but I got interested in it once I started reading."

"Things continuing to go well, I assume," the old man said, fishing a bit.

"Sure are. We both finished the Math Module last night. I made 100%. Mom made 95. I'd say we did great."

"Wonderful. Wonderful."

The old man applauded clearly genuinely happy about the report.

"So, what's next – module, I mean?"

"English. Mom thinks she'll need a lot of help with it. That's ok. It's like when I help teach her I learn it better myself."

"It's interesting how that works, isn't it?" the old man said.

Del nodded, apparently feeling that was a full and sufficient answer. He wanted to move on. The old man noticed he seemed nervous – fidgety. The reason was soon to be revealed.

"I think I sort of have a girlfriend," he said not really looking at the old man.

"Girlfriends are nice. Do I get to hear more?"

The old man ignored the uncertainty in Del's initial statement.

"Met her at class - Jordan. She's like a helper to the teacher. She's sixteen, pretty, but not a beauty queen; smart but not a brainiac. It's been my experience that gorgeous girls tend to be snobs and really smart girls think they're better than everybody else, so I'd rather know one like her. We have a coke together at break sometimes. I think she likes me, too.

Not sure how to find that out.”

It had been one of those questions without really being a question.

“Well, this may seem like a far-out approach, but you could just ask her.”

“Just ask her? If she likes me?”

He seemed genuinely surprised at the suggestion.

“What would I say?”

“Maybe something like, ‘It seems to me we’ve been getting along pretty well. I really like you’. That will force some response that should give you a good clue about her feelings.”

“What if she tells me to get lost?”

“You wanted to know how she felt about you, right?”

“Yeah, but I guess only if she likes me.”

“Most high quality questions can’t guarantee an answer.”

Del thought about that and eventually nodded.

“Should I offer to buy her drink for her at break? So far we’ve each taken care of our own.”

“Do you want to buy her drink for her?”

“I’d buy her the whole city if she’d kiss me.”

“That will probably not be necessary. First kisses with a girl seldom come in places with lots of people around – at least that’s how it was back in my day. Maybe you could suggest taking your cokes to a more secluded area.”

“I think it’s mostly like that these days, too. That secluded thing is a good idea. I think about it a lot. Only kissed a couple of girls before. I’m probably no good at it.”

“Trite as the saying is, ‘Practice makes perfect’.”

“Trite?”

“Over used. Worn out. Unimaginative.”

Del nodded his ‘thanks’ nod. It was in some way clearly different from his general run of the mill, yes or agree, nod. He went on to think out loud.

“It’s like a lot of things. You’re supposed to be good at it right off, but you can’t learn how to be good at it until you’ve practiced it. That stinks!”

“What makes you think she knows so much about kissing?”

“She’s sixteen and a half and pretty. I just imagine that tells it all.”

“And you’re going on sixteen and handsome. Does that tell it all?”

Del gave a quick glance into the old man’s face and flashed a smile. He remained silent.

“Here’s another idea,” the old man offered. “If you do get to the place that a kiss seems to be imminent – soon to happen – you might just tell her you are new to kissing and ask her to help you learn about it. In my experience, girls generally like to both be helpful to guys and to know they are among the first kissers a boy has had. Can’t guarantee that with her, of course.”

“Really? I figured they’d expect perfection right off.”

“It’s all in how you approach it, I believe. Be gentle. Be patient. And wait for her lead in things. Remember, most girls don’t like guys who force things on them. They like things to come about mutually – by shared consent.”

“What if she never leads into a kiss?”

“Be honest with her. Say something like, ‘I think about kissing you. Do you ever think about kissing me?’”

“Again, you’ve laid it in her court and the response is hers to make. Whether she says yes or no, she will appreciate your approach and respect you for how you have gone about it.”

“Most times I think I’d rather be kissing than be respected, you know?”

“Oh, yes. I remember how it was. It is one of the most serious hazards of being a teen age male.”

“More.”

“People are generally motivated to take action by three forces within them: thinking, emotions, and hormones. The best results usually come about when you use those three things in that order: think it through first, add emotions such as love, or fear, or joy, and only react to the hormones when the first two suggest it is the safe and sane way to proceed. A typical problem for young men is that they approach that sequence in reverse: act on their hormonal drives first. That seldom delivers ideal results and often fosters outright disasters.”

“By hormones you mean sex feelings, right?”

“Right. That and what has been called macho feelings – the need to prove you’re stronger or braver or more fearless than anybody else. Teen boys usually believe nothing bad can ever really happen to them, even when they see it happening to others. They just wade in without thinking. It’s sometimes called the ‘Invincibility Syndrome’. All things considered, it is a wonder any teen boy ever lives to see twenty.”

“That was probably a necessary thing back in the cave man days, huh, where they had to protect their families – get the other guy before he got you.”

“An astute connection and, yes, I believe that is how it developed. The men who had that directive built into them survived to father children and those that didn’t were killed off early in life. The macho gene got passed along.”

“You know so much. I talk to my class about things you say, sometimes. I told them what you said about how we get to be wise. This week I can tell them about the Thinking/ Emotion/ Hormone scale. I need to have something ready.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The guys always ask me what you’ve had to say. I need to have something ready to tell them.”

The answer unleashed an uncomfortable wave of responsibility throughout the old man’s being. He had not intended to be saving the entire teen age population of the city – just his young friend. But, that’s how it was – advice you give gets passed on so you better be sure it’s great and true advice the first time it’s offered. It is why the old man always based his judgments on provable facts rather than mere here-say or lore or gossip.

He and Del had talked about that several times. Like most young men, Del was confused about how to know the difference between facts and lore – truth and untruth. The old man gave him a simple place to start:

“If a statement begins with, ‘They say . . .’ it is most likely not fact. That kind of a reference can’t be easily tracked down – where do you go to find ‘they’? Now if it begins, ‘Thomas Jefferson said,’ or ‘The researchers at John’s Hopkins Medical Center have discovered,’ then you have a

legitimate resource you can follow up on if you choose to. 'They' get credit for most everything that can't be proved."

The old man understood it was far from a full answer to, 'how to know what's true,' but it was always a good starting place.

"Gotta cut our visit short this morning," Del said slipping into his shoes and shirt. "Mrs. Landon wants me to go to the zoo with her kids and her. Can you believe it" I've never been to the city zoo? I read up on the animals so I won't come off looking really dumb."

"An admirable thing to have done. Want another approach you could use from time to time?"

"Sure. Always. What?"

"Instead of feeling like you always have to know everything, ask the boys what they know about things first. That makes them feel good about themselves and also lets you just provide what they don't know instead of rehashing what they already know. Most everybody likes to be able to play the role of the expert. Just be sure to ask questions you're pretty sure they will know. . . ."

Del finished the thought ". . . because you don't want to put them on the spot and make them feel dumb – that's like putting them down."

The old man might have phrased it differently, but it would not have really said it better. Nobody likes it when somebody makes them look or feel dumb and nobody likes or respects the person that makes them look or feel that way.

Del was on his feet and ready to leave.

"Probably be back in the morning. You be here?"

"That's my plan, but at my age all plans are tentative depending on forces beyond one's control."

"I don't like it when you talk that way. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"I suppose that is an important topic we need to discuss at length in the near future."

"I don't want to, but I see your point – the mother bird pushing the baby bird out of the nest thing."

"Something like that, yes."

The old man continued to be amazed and pleased at the depth of the young man's understanding of complicated

ideas and concepts.

Del reached down somewhat awkwardly and patted the old man on his shoulder. The old man placed his hand on top of the boy's hand and held it there for a long moment. They both understood. It meant you are a very special person to me. It may have even meant 'I love you'.

The old man had accumulated several hundred pages from the conversations that had gone on between Del and him during those past three months. He felt it was time to begin assembling them into one well organized, book length manuscript.

That evening he began the arduous task of sorting through the pages and trying to establish a sensible order from it all. As he slipped the final two pages into place he realized it was going on ten o'clock – an hour past his usual bedtime. He looked at the stack of pages and felt good about what he had been able to do. Most certainly some reorganization would be necessary, but in general, it was there – The Book – the story of the young man named Del (The boy had given up the use of the name, "Willie" early on.). He had no idea what title Del would decide to use and that was to be his decision.

As he turned off the light in his study and made his way through the living room to the kitchen for his late night hot chocolate, his phone rang.

"Hello."

"This is Mike – Officer Mike. I'm afraid we have a problem – well, several really. Del's mother was mugged on the way home from class tonight. The way I understand it, Del had stayed after class to be with a girl for a while. He said he had given his mother specific directions about the route she was to take. She apparently ignored it and took a shorter route. A witness identified one of the young men involved and Del got wind of the name. He took off on the run. I'm afraid he's going after the kid and who knows what terrible things he has in mind to do to him.

"How's his mother?"

"She will need to stay in the hospital overnight. She resisted the mugger and that only made it worse, of course. She was as scrappy as her son when she was his age. Looks

like she has a broken jaw and probably some ribs. It's nothing life threatening. I wanted you to know. I hope he shows up at your place before he gets himself in a lifetime of trouble."

"I'll keep a light on for him. Thanks for the heads up. Keep me posted, please."

"Will do."

"Sounds a lot like a situation that came up some twenty years ago, doesn't it, Mike? I don't have what it takes to go looking for the lad this time, however."

"And thanks, by the way, if I never properly did that. That night the last thing I'd have ever envisioned was me ending up a cop."

The old man hung up and returned to his den where he turned on the light. Del had taken to arriving at that door off the back porch during the past several weeks. It was going to be a two cup of cocoa night, he could see that. He made four, hoping the boy would put in an appearance – sooner being better than later.

Eleven o'clock came and went. No Del and no call from Mike.

Midnight came and went and still no Del or call.

The old man had taken to his recliner in his bedroom and dozed off. It was going on three o'clock when he roused. It may have been the rapping on the window that had awakened him. He struggled to his feet and pulled back the drapes. To his great relief, it was Del's face that greeted him out of the night. He moved to the den, unlocked the back door, and moved out onto the back stoop to meet the young man. It seemed to require a full out bear hug – mutually conceived – and took place immediately. Del spoke first.

"Need to call Officer Mike."

"Okay. Certainly. Come inside."

"It was then the old man noticed for the first time two boots, upside down, tied to the outside of the porch railing. He moved closer and saw they belonged to two jeans-clad legs that in turn belonged to a young man who was strung up there – feet up, head and shoulders on the ground, hands behind his back. He was conscious, but didn't speak."

"Phone first, then the explanation," Del said.

He placed the call. Almost immediately there was a

knock at the front door. The old man answered. It was Mike.

"Where's your cape. You flying through the night skys these days?" the old man said only partially as a joke.

"Was parked in the alley across the street. I was sure he'd end up here one way or another."

"You will not believe what he has waiting for you."

Officer Mike crossed himself.

They moved to the den.

"That was fast," Del managed clearly surprised. "I guess I can explain it all to both of you at once."

"It?" Mike asked. "Am I going to like, 'it'?"

Del began his explanation without responding to Officer Mike's question.

"I heard one of the officers say two witnesses said it was Benny Avoca who did it. I've known him all my life. He has relatives in Florida. I figured if he thought the cops were on his trail he'd take out for there right away. I went after him. I figured he'd gas up his truck at his cousin's gas station on Chestnut Street. I waited for him there. When he pulled in I went up to him and asked him if he knew who I was. You should have seen the terrified look he got on his face when I stepped out of the shadows.

"I gave him a choice and he made the right one and admitted what he'd done to mom. I had three adults lined up there to hear his confession. I got their names and addresses on this sheet of paper. I brought him along. He's sort of waiting for you out back. I didn't beat him a single lick. You won't find a mark on him. I wanted to. I wanted to squash him into a puddle of slime, but I didn't."

He turned to the old man.

"Thinking, Emotions, Hormones – in that order."

He turned back to Officer Mike.

"I guess that's it. He's tied to the railing out back."

Officer Mike hurried through the back door and stopped on the porch, resting his hands on his hips and doing his best to keep a grin at bay when he took in the sight that greeted him there.

Officer Mike and Benny, also, went way back.

"So. With all that blood running into your head down there I assume you are thinking real good about now. Right,

Benny?” he said.

Benny nodded, such as he could with his face planted against the petunias.

“You attacked Del’s mother?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You going to pay her hospital bills, right?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You understand you are under arrest and why?”

“Yes, Sir.”

He went down the steps into the lawn and cut the young man loose, stood him up and cuffed him. The old man turned on the porch light. Mike looked Benny over, face, neck, chest, back.

“Please note there is not so much as a mosquito bite anywhere to be seen,” he said at last.

Del and the old man nodded. Mike read the young man his rights and escorted him around the outside of the house toward his squad car. Two others were arriving as they got to the street. Del and the old man followed. He handed him over to the other officers and suggested they look him over as well. It seemed to Del that Mike was doing a lot of things aimed at protecting him.”

“Thanks, you know,” Del managed at last.

There were handshakes and then Mike looked at Del.

“A really, really, dumb thing you did, you know. I’d bust you down to buck private if I had the power.”

He took several steps on toward his car then turned and grinned.

“Good work, son. I’m proud of you on so many levels, tonight. You’ll need to drop by the precinct in the morning and complete some paper work – PRIVATE!”

He pointed to a squad car.

“Officer Adams, there, will take you to the hospital. You need to be with your mother.”

Mike and the car with Benny drove away.

Del turned to the old man and they shared another hug.

“I may not make it to the park in the morning, things being like they are.”

“I would not expect you to show up. You just take care of your mother. I am interested in that second choice you

gave Benny, but I understand some things are best left unstated.”

Del smiled and shrugged. It would never be discussed.

The old man turned toward his house then immediately back to Del.

“And that thing you are thinking about yourself is hogwash. We’ll deal with it later.”

“Thing? What thing is that?”

“Feeling guilty about being with Jordan rather than walking your mother home like usual.”

Del sighed and shrugged, acknowledging the old man had figured his feelings exactly. Magic? Wisdom? It didn’t matter to the young man. He felt lucky to have two such fine men in his life – and a mother and a girlfriend and a great teacher at school and two young boys who looked up to him. Life was certainly looking up in many ways. He had tucked one topic away in his head to ask about later. The old man clearly knew both Officer Mike and Principal Atherton. Just how had the old man come to know them? He figured he already knew the answer.

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CHAPTER TEN

“I Kissed Her!”

A week passed. Del’s mother was doing well. The large, ugly, metal device that had been clamped on her face to hold her jaw in place while it began healing had been removed. Two, permanent, metal screws had been inserted. Her abrasions had healed and her bruises were gradually disappearing. Del had arranged with the teacher to have his mother do the school work at home while she was recovering. He was becoming a very good teacher and enjoyed helping her. He and Jordan had begun spending time together away from the school.

“I kissed her. I asked her if it would be okay and she said yes and I kissed her.”

That was how Del opened the conversation that morning.

The world there in the city had cooled considerably since the week before and the old man was back into his more familiar shoes and long, baggy trousers. Del opted to continue wearing as little as the law allowed.

“Sounds like a pretty good song lyric, Del – I asked her if it would be okay and she said yes and I kissed her!”

“You can write that, if you want to. I’m going to stick to kissing. She said I was an okay kisser. I’m sure that means I have lots of stuff to learn, but that seems to be just fine with her. I think she’s pretty good at it, but then I really don’t have much to compare her with.”

They exchanged a smile.

“Your mother? How is your mother doing?”

“She’s really doing pretty well. People in the apartment building have been bringing food by – casseroles,

sandwiches, pies and cakes. We don't even know them and they're doing that, can you believe it?"

"Well, yes I can, but I understand why you can't."

"I've been keeping a list of who's brought what. I don't know how I'll ever repay everybody."

"You mean you are planning to put them down?"

Del saw that special look on the old man's face that said he was putting him on. He knew the look. He was never sure what it was going to be about.

"I'll bite. What am I missing," Del said, relaxing a bit and moving to the ground, cross-legged?

"They provided the food because they wanted to be helpful. Most folks don't expect to be repaid for being helpful. Some may even take offense if you try. They will wonder how you came to misinterpret their altruistic intent. Since they don't know you very well, they probably have no idea what to say to you that will be helpful or comforting so they just do what they can – bring food."

"So, it's like they're saying, 'We're sorry about what happened and we aren't sure what to do to help out'."

"Yes."

"But I feel like I should do something."

"Make sure you let them see your wonderful smile every time you pass them in the halls or on the street from now on. Stop and talk with them even if it's just hello, how you are doing. Be on the lookout for little ways you can help them – opening doors, carrying groceries up the stairs, things like that."

"I don't understand why they are doing it in the first place."

"The Family of Man," the old man said and stopped.

"Didn't help."

"Most of us take good care of our family members – like you taking care of your mother. When we come to realize that all of us belong to one bigger family – the Family of Man – then we do what we can to take care of those people who are close to us."

Del sat silently.

"I suppose if everybody took good care of each other like that, then it would really be a pretty great neighborhood –

city, country, world – wouldn't it."

"That's the way I see it."

"That's why me, then, huh?"

"Now, I need more, Del."

"You taking all this time with me. I never could figure it. In the beginning, I kept waiting for you to make some move – to try and get something from me, you know."

It was the old man's turn to use Del's patented shoulder shrug. He said nothing. Del continued.

"I'm like part of your family of man, huh?"

"Absolutely – a very important part, as it turns out."

Del grew silent again. Presently he spoke - thoughtfully.

"So, if I have it figured out right, you help me because you believe it's the right thing to do. So, it ain't – isn't – right for me to think about repaying you. It still seems like I should do . . ."

He stopped in mid-sentence. It was like a light came on inside his head.

". . . I see it, now. I should do stuff for somebody else who needs something. Maybe two or two dozen somebody elses. That way good stuff just multiplies itself all over the place."

The old man smiled to himself. The realization that Del had just put together was, of course, the main purpose he spent so much time with young people who seemed adrift, fighting the uncertain tides of life. Once a person comes to realize his true place and purpose within the Family of Man, life changes immediately, for the better. One's purpose changes immediately, for the better. The effect one has on the world begins changing immediately, for the better.

"Officer Mike and Principal Atherton?"

Five words out of the blue that asked a very important question the boy had been carrying around with him for some time.

"I'm sure you have all that figured out," the old man said in response. He offered a single nod.

Del nodded in return and smiled a short, knowing smile. No more would be said about it.

"I told my teacher about your book about Talking Better.

She downloaded it and looked it over and said she's going to start recommending it to her students. She agrees with you that poor English grammar really holds people back from getting good jobs and making good money. She'd like to meet you."

"I suppose you've told her where my office is here in the park."

Del nodded.

"I figured that would be your response. After English, we do our last module – Science. I think that's going to be pretty hard but I know I'm up to it. By the way, mom and I think that because we worked through your book about talking better, the English module was a lot easier for us. Thanks. You know anything about science?"

"Some things. My office is always open."

The old man smiled and steered the conversation in another direction.

"I pretty well have the book organized. When you have time you'll need to look it over and make additions, take things out, things like that."

"I can hardly believe we've done all that in such a short time. Our teacher is going on vacation next week so there won't be classes. I'll use that time to go through the book."

* * *

A week later Del had gone through the pages with care, and all quite seriously had made the additions and such he wanted to include. He delivered his final edited copy to the old man on a sunny August morning in the park.

"Got it done, well, as done as it'll get. Seems like no matter how many times I go through it I always find new things to add in or change."

"That's the bane of a writer's existence, Del. No piece is ever really finished. At some point an author just has to say 'enough is enough' and pretend it's complete."

"Sort of like life, huh?"

The old man figured he understood the reference, but knew how wonderful it would be to hear the young man say it.

"More, please."

"A person has to keep changing what he believes because new information comes up and new experiences

teach him new things he needs to add into the way he thinks and lives and believes. I'm living proof. Just look at how I've changed over the past three or four months. Nobody who knew me before would probably even recognize me now."

The old man had been right. It had been wonderful to hear.

Del had more to say. (Big surprise, huh?)

"I think it would be a good idea if I would write the very ending of the book by myself. We can just keep it the way I write it – like an honest piece of myself – this is what I am now, but expect me to improve a lot more as I learn more about life. What do you think?"

"I can't think of a better way to finish the book."

"It's a scary thing, putting myself out there without any help. It's like walking down Main Street naked – just me with no way to hide anything."

"That is exactly how it is for us writers, Del. You have to know that some readers and critics will like your work and others won't. What is important, I think, is that what you write is honest and that, in the end, you are pleased with it. In those ways, it is just like a person's life. Live it honestly and thoughtfully, so you can remain pleased with how you are living it."

"Can I ask you something, old man?"

The old man pulled his glasses down to the end of his nose and looked at the young man across the rim. Without a word spoken, Del understood. He nodded somewhat sheepishly and went on.

"You've taught me a whole lot of good things. I was wondering if I've taught you anything."

"Oh, only about a gazillion things, I suppose."

"I really don't understand."

"You have renewed my belief in the younger generation. I read the headlines every morning and am often tempted to give up – to let myself believe the world is falling apart right in front of my face and nobody besides me even seems to care. Wars, gangs, mass shootings, religious hatred, rock idols whose behavior disintegrates and comes to disgust and disappoint everybody who loves them. And then along came Del, just oozing with wonderful potential and a

capacity for love he didn't even understand he possessed. You've given new meaning to life and new purpose to my old bones."

"Wow! I had no idea. You really mean all that don't you."

It garnered a second look over the old man's glasses and teased broad smiles from both faces.

"It's hard to do that sometimes," Del said.

"To do . . .?"

"To mean what you say – well, really, to say what you mean. Like when Jordan changed the way she wore her hair she asked how I liked it. I really didn't like it, but I knew if I was going to be honest I'd hurt her feelings."

"I understand that dilemma. Remember what we talked about regarding not accepting put downs or letting what others do hurt your feelings?"

"Sure."

"Help her come to understand that, also, and you can then build a completely honest relationship."

"But what do I do until that happens? I really want to keep kissing her and if she thinks I'm putting her down I probably won't get to pucker up again until I'm thirty – and that's almost dead."

"My only advice is to find a way to be honest. If you are important to her she will find a way to accept it. Be tactful, of course."

"Like?"

"Well, let's see. Maybe something like, 'I really liked your hair the way you wore it before. I thought it set off your pretty face in a wonderful way. I'm glad you're trying it this way though. It will give you a chance to see how well you like it. I want to always be honest with you, so honestly, I liked it better the other way'."

"I'll bet you had girls climbing all over you when you were my age, huh?"

"I dated some, yes, but when I met Jenny my senior year in high school, there was never another one that got a second look – lots' got first looks, mind you, just no second looks."

Del chuckled out loud. The old man smiled, partly at

the young man's reaction and partly at some of those really fine first looks he remembered.

Del changed the topic.

Mom and I hung my plaque up on the wall in the living room last night. After it was on the wall a funny thing happened. We looked at each other and it was like mental telepathy. We both just started cleaning up the room. It was a mess like you wouldn't believe – I mean you really wouldn't believe. We spent about three hours. Could have had it done sooner, but one of us would find something that reminded us of something and we'd stop and remember about it together: there was my first skateboard under the couch, a ball cap with only half a bill that I had when I was in Jr. high, some jeans mom used to wear that were way too small anymore. She said she couldn't understand how they shrunk that much just lying there on that chair. We laughed about it. That was the first time I ever remember my mom trying to make a joke. It was one of few times I remember us laughing together about anything.

I found a hole in the paneling that was made when dad threw me across the room when I was real little. The time he broke my shoulder. I just moved the chair a little bit so mom wouldn't have to look at it. I think she knew what I was doing, though. At the bottom of it all there was a Baby Book with my name on the front. Mom opened it up and there wasn't anything inside. Mom held it close to her and cried. She said, "I'm sorry." I guess that was because she never put anything in it about me.

I sat her down on the couch beside me and found a pen and opened the book to the first page and I asked her to fill in all the things she could remember. Of course, she knew the date I was born and how much I weighed and how long I was. Can you believe that after all these years? Once she got going it was like a game and she began remembering all kinds of things. She knew about how old I was when I first rolled over and was sure about when I took my first steps. She started talking about a lot of things she didn't put in it but that was okay. It was like I was hearing about some other kid only I knew it was about me.

"Anyway, we got the living room looking better than I

can remember it ever looking. Mom and I decided we'd take one room every day and clean it up. Then when it's all fixed up, we're going to have you come over for lunch. Will you come?"

"Of course, I will come. How nice of you to think of me."

"I told her I wanted to do my own room alone. I told her it was because I was the only one responsible for making it so filthy. That was true, but I really didn't want her running across some of my magazines – you know, 'magazines'?"

"Oh, yes. I know magazines. I remember well the day my mother found my stash under my mattress."

"Really? You? What did she do, if that's not too personal?"

"I knew she had found them because they weren't there when I was ready for them one night – and, I got fresh sheets that day. I overheard her and my father discussing it the next day. I remember my father chuckled out loud and said something like, 'Isn't it great to know our little boy is growing up into a normal young man'.

"The next night the magazines were back under my mattress. There was only ever one conversation with me about it. Dad came into my room an evening or so later and said, 'If you have any questions about what you've seen or read about girls in your literary magazines, I hope you know I'm always available to talk about it.'

"I remember feeling very relieved and thanking him. I think that was more for not coming down on me about it than it was about the offer to talk – although I did have questions for him a few times. He let me know my interests were normal, if not necessary – I had wondered about that sometimes. I also remember asking him if mother was okay about it. He said something like, 'She'll be fine. You have to remember that your mother has never been a teen age boy so there are some things she will never be fully able to understand. And, by the way, son, you need to always remember that you have never been the mother of a teen age boy so you can't fully understand her, either.'"

"Wow! That was some great talk. Of course, my dad never . . . well, you know."

The old man nodded. The talk had really been less about how teen boys normally like to find out about females, and more about taking time to stop and take into account other people's perspectives – viewpoints based on the kinds of experiences they have been able to have or not have. Sometimes it is difficult to believe that we don't know all there is to know about what makes other people tick – why they act and react the ways they do. It is most generally best to keep that in mind when dealing with others – and, when trying to figure them out. The walking in their shoes thing, as Del would certainly remind us.

"I think I just learned a lot about why you turned out like you did," Del said.

"This, I most certainly want to hear."

"Your mom and dad – you called them mother and father – took time to talk together about how to raise you up and kept track of how things were changing as you grew up. It's like they planned about how to raise you. They just didn't let it happen however it happened. I don't know if I made myself clear."

"Yes, you did. Let me recall a story. When I was a young man – I had just started teaching in a college – I attended a state-wide meeting of other people in my field and I proposed that before people could get married they should have to pass a test on what is known for sure about raising well adjusted, happy and productive children. I was laughed out of the room. To this day their reaction baffles me at many levels."

"I think you're right. You have to have a license to own a gun, or drive a car or be a barber or a doctor or a life guard, and I can't see how any of those things comes close to being as important as knowing how to raise up a kid."

"Well, that at least makes two of us that agree on that. Where were you back on that day at Columbia University when I needed some support?"

It had been a joke, of course, but Del felt moved to respond in a more serious vein.

"Back then, I wasn't born yet. I still wasn't anything. I think about that sometimes, how for most the history of the universe I didn't exist and now that I do I'm just about the most

important thing there is in it to me.”

“I suppose that can be a topic for another day – our place and role in the universe.”

“I’m having to struggle just to find my place in my family and in school. The universe is going to have to wait.”

“As it should – and, I’ll just bet it will. It’s been waiting for you for a long time.”

Del smiled and nodded. Suddenly he saw there was a whole lot more to life and being a member of the Family of Man than he had ever thought about before. Still, he really did need to talk with Jordan about her hair question and get to cleaning out his room before his mother did – his mother who had never been a teen age boy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The End?

“I got the end of the book written. Like you pointed out, it really never seems to get finished just exactly right. But, I decided this is going to be it.”

Del handed over the pages to the old man and slid onto the bench beside him. Suddenly it appeared to the old man that the young man had become more man and less young.

“It’s sort of like a timeline – a step by step summary of how I’ve come to be who I am – the transformational thing. You think that was the right way to go?”

“I do, but remember, this is all your call.”

“Before you read it, I want to thank you, you know. There probably isn’t another person in the universe who would have taken the time to help me do this.”

“That’s something we really can’t ever know, is it,” the old man said.

“I did say ‘probably can’t ever know’, Old Man.”

He smiled the smile of all smiles.

“I think that’s a first class touché, Young Man.”

An extended period of silence followed, each one privately remembering special things that had happened between them. Eventually, Del spoke.

“You don’t have to answer this if you don’t want to and I know, I’m about to get looked at over the top of your glasses. Here’s my question or maybe more my assumption. I’m not the first kid you’ve helped write a book, am I?”

“If I had helped others how would you feel about it?”

“That’s a great – astute – question,” Del said snapping

a grin. "I have spent time thinking about that. At first I was really jealous at the possibility. I guess I didn't want to think you had ever shared yourself with anybody else – I just wanted you to only be mine. I really hated the idea you'd had a son, too. But now I'm okay with all of that. I think it's great if you've also done this to – I mean, for or with – others."

"Thank you for thinking it was a great question. Let me say yours was a really great answer that shows both maturity and wisdom."

Del nodded, both acknowledging the truth in the statement and his appreciation that the old man recognized it.

"By way of answering your question about whether or not there were others let me just suggest you see if you can find a book titled, "I Think There Is a Cop Inside Me." It was written by Mike somebody when he was seventeen. And then one called something like, "We Must Teach Our Precious Children Well."

"I can guess that was written by a kid named Atherton," Del said suddenly putting a lot of things together for sure.

The old man nodded and shrugged. It had become a meaningful gesture to Del. It meant 'yes, son, but that really isn't the whole or most important part of the story'.

"When are you going to read what I wrote – or is writ, right, there?"

The old man's belly began to shake as he laughed out loud at the wrote, writ, right, trail of words. Del joined him. Both recognized that Del's being able to laugh at himself indicated a wonderfully important change.

After the old man wiped his wet cheeks he picked up the pages and adjusted his glasses.

"You can read it out loud if you want to," Del said.

It really hadn't been offered as merely a possibility. The old man understood, cleared his throat and began.

I was both a very unlucky kid and a very lucky one. I learned important lessons about life from both of those conditions. My mom was fifteen and my dad twenty when I was born. Neither one attended high school. I don't know what my dad did to make a living – not much I'm thinking. He was a sad case – mixed up inside I think and unsure how to be a dad or a husband. All that came out in uncontrollable

anger that he directed toward both mom and me. Fortunately, he left us before I was five. If he hadn't, I probably wouldn't have survived to be six. Maybe I should thank him for that - leaving.

Like my dad, I reacted to my life the way he had to his. I became very angry and very frightened. I hated people I had no reason to hate. I hated myself – just because I hated myself. Kids made fun of me – some for a birthmark and some because I'm sure I was just an odd kid. I was unable to learn how to read. If you can't read you can't do any good in history, or geography or anything else that counted on books or instructions written on the board.

I hated being made fun of and being put down. I hated the people that made fun of me and put me down. I even hated people I thought might make fun of me and put me down. It was like it was the whole world against me. That's terrifying for a little kid. I figured the only way to protect myself was to be badder and more hurtful and meaner than everybody else. If I could keep people afraid of me then I had a better chance of remaining safe and not being put down and made fun of. I did a real good job doing that. All the people I was afraid of came to be afraid of me. All the people I hated, hated me. It was a terrible way to live, but it was the best way I knew how to live.

I'll let you just imagine the kind of things I did to people, because the worst you can imagine won't be as bad as it really was. I really hated the Big Guys – the people who ran things and were in charge of things. The people who made the rules and said I had to obey them without ever having got my say about anything. Cops, teachers, clergymen, hall monitors, smart kids, principles, and anybody elected to office.

It was just mom and me for most of my life. We really weren't a family, we just sort of shared an apartment and did our own things. Mom was always depressed – I didn't know that at the time, but I can see it now. I figured she was only good for two things – buying me what I needed and leaving her purse around so I could take her money when I wanted some. We never spoke. We never ate together. She never told me what to do because she knew I wouldn't do it. She gave up on me early. I gave up on her early. I think I took out

my hatred for my dad on her because she was there and he wasn't. I have no idea where he is or even if he's still alive. Part of me wants it to stay that way. Part of me wants to see him again. I have things to say to him and I wonder what he might have to say to me.

Then, one day in a park, my life started to turn around. I came upon an old man on a park bench. I was looking him over to see what I could steal from him, fully ready to hurt him and roll him down the hill into the pond if that's what it might take to get what I wanted. That didn't happen. He had a backpack on the ground beside him. It could have held valuable things – maybe a laptop or a cell phone or even a wallet filled with cash. For some reason, I decided to talk to him instead of emptying out the contents of the bag.

There was something different about him – he talked with me not to me, he looked me in my face, his voice was deep and soothing and somehow reassuring. In all my life I had never had anybody be like that to me. I was used harsh yelling and being bossed about, and people almost never made eye-contact with me. There was something about how he was that made me want to find out more about him. He was not afraid of me and everybody was afraid of me. He talked with me like I was his equal. Nobody ever did that. He asked for my opinion – nobody ever asked for my opinion about nothing (later on he helped me properly learn when to use words like nothing and anything – smile.).

We kept meeting in the park. Somehow it came up that we could write a book together about me. The idea made me feel special. I had no idea how to do it and that made me feel threatened. He reassured me that together we could do it. He was a writer, if I failed to mention that.

We would talk – really, I'd talk about myself and he'd take notes. Then that night he'd write it up like part of a story and the next day he'd hand it to me to look at and think about. That's when I had to admit that I couldn't read. He worked his magic (smile) and by the next day I was reading a book if you can believe that. Up to that point in my life I had never felt so special – dumb old Del was able to read!

We went on like that for lots of months. I saved a kid from drowning and even got a award for it. I really couldn't

understand that. I'd never thought about a person's life really being worth much. Clearly most people thought very different about that. The old man asked me why, if I didn't think life was precious, did I risk my own life to save the kid. I didn't have an answer and it made me think there must have been some part deep inside me that did think life was worth something. It made me start thinking that if that little kid's life was so important to so many people – people who didn't even know him – then maybe mine was, also. The more I thought about it the more things seemed to show me that was true. The old man didn't want anything from me – something I'd NEVER experienced before. He just was always there for me and that told me I was important to him. We could talk about anything. No topic I brought up ever seemed off limits or embarrassing to him (and I intentionally brought up some triple X rated topics just to test him out on that).

I think about him like a grandfather, I guess. He's way too old to be my dad or uncle or older brother. In lots of ways he really is all those, I guess. I plan to be that way for kids myself when I mature some more. I'm practicing with a set of brothers already – but I'm getting paid to do that. Someday I want to do it for the same reasons the old man does it. He believes we all belong to what he calls the Family of Man and because of that it is our responsibility to all take good care of each other – help out, care for, make life better for. I guess that all boils down to love. I'm still learning about love. I have come to see that my mom loves me even though I've been a rotten son most of my life. I know the old man loves me although that word has never passed between us. I want to think that I love them, too, but truthfully, I'm not sure yet. Love seems like a very special investment that you really have to be sure about.

The first of next month mom and I will graduate with our GED diplomas. That will open up a brand-new life for both of us. I'm proud of myself for completing that. I guess I'm even more proud of my mother. I never realized how smart she was until the classes. I know she's proud of me, too.

I know that someday the old man will die. At first that really scared me, but mom set me straight about that. I've learned a lot from him about myself and about life and the

Family of Man and I will carry that inside me forever. It's like he'll always be with me – a part of me. I think that's what the Family of Man is all about. We all help and teach each other and those things live on forever because of how we pass along the good stuff.

When I first started this book, I thought it would be great for everybody to find out about me. It was like a way of bragging about myself (and maybe punishing others for how they had treated me). I thought it might make me into some kind of celebrity – maybe even rich. Not everybody gets a book about them. Somewhere along the way I learned the really important things about what a book should do, and it wasn't any of those things. The words or the story in a book are never the really important thing about it. It's the way the reader thinks about the words and understands the messages and then fits all that into his own life that is really important. I hope my book helps kids believe in themselves and in the possibility of transformation – making themselves constantly improving and dedicated members of the Family of Man.

The old man lay the pages down between them on the bench. It seemed symbolic. Those pages had brought them together and at that moment it was like a bridge spanning the gulf between them.

"I'm thinking your tears are good tears, right? Del said as the old man patted at his cheeks with his handkerchief.

"Very good tears, son. You did a wonderful job. You may not have given yourself enough credit, but perhaps that will come out in one of your future books."

"Think so?"

"Oh, yes. I think so."

They nodded at the same time.

"What are you going to title the book?" the old man went on.

"I've gone through lots of ideas. At first I thought about using your term, Transformation, but I was afraid kids wouldn't understand that – maybe think it was about a bunch of oversized robots attacking the world.

Then I thought about, 'Life according to Del,' but I understand I really don't enough about life yet to use anything

like that.”

The old man nodded.

“But then I shortened that to, ‘Del’s Book’.”

The old man nodded again.

“After a while I figured it wasn’t just my book so I thought about using, ‘Our Book’, but I doubted if that would make sense to anybody but you and me. Now, I think I want to just call it, The Book. What do you say?”

“I say, great. It is how you and I have referred to it all along, as I recall. I’m sure lots and lots of young people are going to be glad they had the opportunity to read The Book and to think about all the important things you have presented for them to consider.”

“I hope so. It’s always the message and not just the story. I hope we got that idea across.”

* * *

Several months passed. Del’s life became very busy. In September, he started as an early entry student to Community College – an experimental program for gifted students. It turned out his IQ was off the charts! He had a steady girlfriend (who went back to her old hair style). He and the old man still talked occasionally, but gradually drifted apart – the way it needed to be (the mother bird thing to which Del had alluded.).

One morning as the autumn leaves were swirling around the old man as he sat there on the bench, with a scarf around his neck and his yellow pad on his lap:

“I seen you here before,” came the opening words from the voice of a teen boy who the old man only then realized was looking over his shoulder from behind the bench.

The old man turned just enough to look up into the boy’s face – nice looking, Latino, uncombed black hair, dark eyes.

“I’m usually here. You here often? I don’t recall seeing you before.”

He turned back forward and patted the seat of the bench. The boy slid in beside him . . .

The end?

Happy reading and have a great life!