

A blue-tinted photograph of a snowy city street at night. The scene is filled with falling snow, creating a soft, hazy atmosphere. Several streetlights with glowing lanterns line the sidewalk, casting a warm light. In the distance, cars with their headlights on are visible on the snow-covered road. The overall mood is quiet and wintry.

*An
Old Man
In Winter*

A small, dark silhouette of a person sitting on a bench, positioned on the left side of the page.

*By
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An Old Man in Winter
(adults and young adults)

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Family of Man Press

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CHAPTER ONE

A Ferocious Snow Storm

The old man pulled his earflaps low and tucked his full, white beard into the top of his long, winter coat as he sat well back into the entryway of a vacant storefront in the oldest section of his city. They were all in a state of terminal decline: the neighborhood, the storefront, the once stylish wool tweed coat, and the old man. With some effort, he shifted himself, drawing up his knees, hoping to find a position which offered less discomfort and chill. That not happening, he closed his eyes and bent lower, hoping to find protection against the churning wind, which hurled sharp, icy flakes at his cheeks. The snow continued to collect about his feet, long numb from his extended, frigid vigil.

Mid-December in most upper Midwestern cities dependably and unabashedly delivered the ferocity of winter. The temperatures hovered near zero. Twenty mile an hour winds, amplified as they squeezed through the canyon-like streets, became the order of the season adding to the discomfort of folks whose lot it was to be outside. New snow provided a fresh, clean dusting daily, brightening the dingy skim of dirt and filth which, moment by moment, settled as if from nowhere to tarnish the World. Youngsters approached each flurry-filled adventure with joyful exuberance. Old folks, not so much – not at all in many cases – most certainly not for those deprived of shelter.

That had become the old man's lot – being deprived of shelter there on the narrow, dangerous, dirty streets of that timeworn, frozen city. Dusk had set in so gradually the old man was surprised when the street light brightened. Its spreading golden glow revealed a lad who was standing a dozen feet away to the old man's right, east along the aging sidewalk. Fitted out in a brown sweater showing beneath his dark blue coat, his neck bound in the double loop of a substantial, multi-colored, hand knitted scarf, and his hands lost inside man's well-worn cloth gloves, he was standing quietly, arms at his sides, observing the old man. Without indicating he had any intention of moving, he spoke.

“You look cold, old man.”

“Oh, hello there. I have been colder, son. I assume the same is true for you.”

“I’m okay. I move a lot. It keeps me warm. Why are you sitting there out in the storm?”

“A long story. Hardly of any interest to a boy.”

“You might be surprised. I am interested – enormously fascinated, really – in just about everything I encounter.”

“You use big words.”

“I like big words. It appears to me that people can think better using big words. They embody more precise meaning. At any rate, I fully intend to grow into them someday.”

The old man chuckled. The chuckle deteriorated into a cough. The boy moved to him prepared to offer assistance if needed. It wasn’t. Again, the boy stood motionlessly.

The old man looked up and offered a nod expressing his gratitude for the boy’s apparent concern.

“You have a handsome face, boy. Eleven? Twelve?”

“Very good. Just turned twelve. Clearly you have spent time among children. You have a . . . *remarkable* face – the long, white hair and beard, the bushy eyebrows, the ruddy complexion and those dancing, sky blue eyes.”

“I take credit for none of those things. The color of my hair I must assign to old age, the ruddy complexion to the frigid weather, and blue eyes to genetics. As to their dancing, I must say I have given that no prior thought. Bend closer so I can see your eyes.”

In one effortless, fluid motion the boy knelt beside him sitting back on his legs. He brushed back his own long hair – light brown, perhaps dusty blond. In his seventy-six years the old man had never learned how to tell the difference.

“Also, blue. That means we are related. If there were time I’d tell you how that has to be so. You best be on your way. It will fall well below zero tonight. Your parents must be concerned. You need to be inside, out of this weather.”

“So do you. I assume you have no place to get *inside*, *out of this weather*, or you would not be where you are, virtually wedged into a filthy crevice in a crumbling wall.”

“It is not your job to consider me or my situation. Be gone, now. Go home. Be safe. Live a wonderful life.”

“I can’t do that. You are clearly in need of assistance. I clearly have an inborn need to assist. I suppose I could just sit down beside you while we both shiver away our lives, or we could spend the night warm and safe at my place.”

“I’m glad you have a warm, safe place, son.”

A long moment of silence followed. The boy squatted so he was at eye level with the man.

“You know anything about making hot chocolate in an iron pot over a fireplace fire, old man?”

“What an odd question.”

“Well, do you?”

“*Well*, yes. Did it often as a child. Still, an odd question.”

“Will you teach me how – to make hot chocolate in an iron pot over a fireplace fire?”

The old man stretched out his arms, palms up, as if to say, ‘Look at me, here, child,’ then amplified his gesture:

“I have no fireplace or pot or chocolate.”

“I do. But what good is all that if I don’t know how to make it – hot chocolate?”

“If I weren’t such a trusting soul, boy, I’d think you were setting me up to get rolled. There is maybe ten dollars in my wallet. Just take it if that’s your game.”

“My game is to get you inside out of this weather where you can get dry and be warm – AND make us hot chocolate. You really do seem bright enough to have seen that, old man. By the way what shall I call you?”

“*Old Man* will work just fine. And me, *you*, boy?”

“*Boy* should work for now.”

The lad offered a wonderful smile.

Puzzled, the old man furrowed his brow, although the boy couldn’t see that because his stocking cap engaged his eyebrows. Their eyes met, really for the first time in any prolonged, meaningful manner. Neither flinched. Unhurried, they studied each other – the little that was exposed to be studied.

“To where would you take me?”

“Ah, he avoids the dreaded construction problem of placing a preposition at the end of a sentence. Educated, I’m guessing. That makes you *unbelievably* intriguing to me, Old

Man.”

“The place? Surely I would get some clue about that.”

“To my enchanted, underground, palace at the Hillcrest Arms.”

“That’s a long-vacated hotel on 47th Street. Been boarded up for at least five years.”

“Very good. He is also from this city. I am already learning so many things about you.”

“And I about you, Boy.”

“Me? I have carefully avoided revealing anything – except where I hope to lead you and even that, of course, could just be a ruse to get you up and started.”

“You remained in the shadows, undoubtedly studying me, when you first came upon me, before the streetlight lit. That suggests you possess a reasonable mix of being cautious and inquisitive. You wear boots and multiple layers of clothing. That suggests you tend to be well prepared and value your health and life enough to take good care of yourself. You approached me during my coughing spell, suggesting you are a caring, helpful person as you professed. Those two traits are also evident in the cockamamie hot chocolate story you concocted to convince me to come with you in order to force me out of the cold. You are self-confident and like yourself – the way you are able to look a person straight in the eyes and never let yours wander. And clearly, if only from your vocabulary, your better than average portion of intelligence becomes quickly obvious.”

“My, my. It is like a wonderful game of cat and mouse we are playing. You must understand that most of my story is private, Old Man. It has to be that way for reasons you may come to assume later. I ask that you don’t pry, however.”

“My, my. It IS like a wonderful game of cat and mouse we are playing. You must understand that most of MY story is private, Boy. It has to be that way for reasons you may come to assume later. I ask that YOU don’t pry, however.”

They shared smiles. The boy spoke.

“It seems we have come to an understanding; is that how it seems to you?”

“It does, I suppose. If any sort of meaningful relationship should develop between us, it will most certainly

be a fascinating, if convoluted, one, won't it, Boy?"

"That it will, Old Man. *Convoluted* – mysteriously complicated. What a wonderful word. How can I best assist you to your feet?"

"Who said I was getting to my feet?"

"You did, Sir – your obvious interest in me and my story. Your positive reaction to the nostalgia of hot chocolate at the fireplace. Willingness to exchange monikers or epithets."

"Do you ever speak regular people talk, son?"

"Only to regular people. You are clearly something else. I haven't completely figured that out yet, but I will. I'm good about things like that. Now, back to how can I help you get up?"

"I suppose if I don't, your incessant pestering will surely become my demise."

"See. Not just a regular person at all."

"Since I have been getting to my feet by myself since I was a toddler, I suggest you stand back and let me work through the motions, which, most mornings, have dependably delivered me upright to the world."

Again, the boy grinned. He stepped back just a bit, feeling the need to stay close, but with no plan whatsoever should the old gentleman begin to falter or fall. He was surprised – amazed, actually – when the old man gradually rearranged himself from sitting through crouched and stooped to fully erect *and* came in at least six feet tall. There had been no hesitation, no uncertainty, no faltering of any kind.

"Good going, Old Man! I mean I hadn't expected you to be able to . . . well, you are far more . . . I mean . . . I just seem to be digging myself in deeper."

"You mean you are surprised that I can manage myself like a fully capable, self-reliant, old codger?"

"Yes, I suppose so. I mean no offense in any of that, sir."

"Sir, is it now that I tower a foot and a half above you?"

The old man smiled and reached out, gently placing his hand on Boy's shoulder.

"Two things: First, I *never* am offended, because I refuse to define anything anybody can say to me as offensive.

Second, most of us are fully capable of digging our own holes without anybody else's help. I will never intentionally move any of your dirt for you."

"Those are two things we will need to discuss at length at some later point in our relationship. It's time to get you . . . well us, under a roof, warm and dry."

"And thoroughly hot chocolate – you promised hot chocolate!"

The boy acknowledged the humor with a nod and smile.

"I must caution you, Boy, not to take any of this as my commitment to any sort of ongoing relationship. Do you hear what I am saying?"

The boy nodded and they moved west along the walk, side by side. The boy observed that for all his talk about being capable and self-reliant, the old man's steps were short and measured. Perhaps it just represented astute caution on the ice and snow. Perhaps something else. He figured it really didn't matter.

Fifteen minutes later the boy pointed to a narrow gap between the boarded-up department store on the west and the hotel to the east. It opened into a dark, open to the sky, passage between the two buildings – something less than three feet wide. He removed a flashlight from his coat pocket and handed it to the old man, motioning him to move on ahead.

"Watch your step – jagged pieces of concrete and broken bricks. Not much snow gets in here. About half way to the rear there are open concrete steps that descend into the basement. They are in like an alcove on the right. You move on beyond them and let me go down first. I have a key."

"You have a key to a hotel that's been out of business for five years?"

"If our relationship is going to work, you have to trust what I say," the boy came back.

"It was more a statement of amazement on my part than the questioning of your voracity, young man."

"Actually, I figured that, but thought it was a good time to come to that understanding about mutual trust."

"You have my full agreement on that, assuming it

means we are allowed to keep necessary secrets.”

“I believe we already established that.”

They inched on for nearly half a block through the long, dark opening.

‘A little late to recognize this is no place to get caught with a bad guy,’ the old man thought to himself.

At the alcove, the old man moved a few feet beyond the entry to the stairs and the boy descended the steps with some caution. From up above, the old man tried to light the youngster’s way with the flashlight.

“Okay. Come on down. I’ve opened this door a hundred times in the dark. You just use the light to help yourself navigate. I’ve cleaned the steps of debris as you can see.”

“Yes. I see.”

With studied care, the old man made his way to the bottom. At about that same moment he heard the key click the old door open. It was reinforced metal set into a thick, steel frame, as if the builder felt the need to make the entrance impenetrable to those not welcome there. The boy pushed the door open – it swung easily.

“I keep it greased,” he explained before the old man could say what was on his mind about it.

He relocked the door and turned back into the large open space. Though unheated it was noticeably warmer – at that point the old man figured an igloo would have been warmer.

“There is no electricity for lights until we cross the open area and enter the door at the rear.”

The old man handed the flashlight back to the boy who immediately focused it on the door across the expanse as if to prove its existence. Again, they walked side by side, which best utilized the beam of light. The boy shifted it slightly left and right across the floor just ahead of them – both a considerate and innovative solution to the problem of lighting a wide path through the darkness with a narrow beam flashlight.

“I must say I’m surprised there is any electricity at all in such an abandoned, old building,” the old man said.

“The owner has to keep fire and smoke detectors operational and water available at the fire hose hookups on

each floor – building code.”

“I see. You seem to know your building codes?”

“After the fact – when I discovered those things I got to wondering so looked into it at the library. You’ll see how I have been able to hook into both the electricity and the water from the sprinkler system. The regular plumbing wasn’t functional.”

“You must have been here for some time.”

The boy offered a broad grin.

“One might assume that, I suppose.”

“Sorry. I really hadn’t intended that as prying.”

“That’s okay. We’ll work it out.”

They reached the door. It opened with the same key. Again, the boy anticipated the question.

“You could say I have sort of learned some useful locksmithing skills. I’ve found that needing just one key really simplifies life, so I reset the tumblers in all the locks I need to use. Pretty easy once you get inside one and see how they work.”

“More and more I’m glad I have met you, young man. Do you happen to also have a cure for arthritis?”

The boy chuckled and shook his head. He was also coming to be glad he had met the old man.

“Nothing for arthritis – yet – but they said I gave one heck of a back rub, back at the orphanage. Oops! I don’t suppose you can pretend you didn’t hear that.”

“No, but I can promise not to ask about it – that good enough?”

The boy nodded, kicking himself mentally for having let it slip. He wasn’t used to talking with people.

“How about if I manage a slip of the tongue of my own?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, if you’d not question me about it I might unintentionally say something like, I really hated it at the old folk’s home so I ran away.”

The boy immediately understood – each slip gave away information about their pasts. The old man was attempting to make things even – slip for slip.

The door opened into an interesting and creatively

renovated, fully carpeted setting about thirty feet square, enclosed by four eight-foot-high walls and.

“Fascinating,” the old man said looking around. “You keep the lights on even when you are not here?”

“Yes. I’m not sure if it makes a difference, but I figured if anybody were monitoring the power usage in the building, it would go up and down turning on and off the lights. That might raise questions. Somebody might come snooping.”

“I see. Clever.”

“That’s the bedroom area over there beyond the curtains. I have a way to cover the light in there for sleeping at night.”

“Fascinating!”

“You said that before.”

“I know, but didn’t you hear the exclamation mark after the second one?”

That produced another of the boy’s wonderful, full out, smiles.

“Actually, thinking about it, yes I did. Cool.”

“It is very comfortable in here – the temperature I mean.”

The boy pointed up as he began removing layer after layer of clothing. In a somewhat less hurried fashion, the old man followed suit as he continued to look about.

“I constructed 2 X 4, sheet rock walls and a false ceiling and piled eighteen inches of pink, roll out, insulation on top and draped it down along all four sides. There are all kinds of useful materials stored in the basement. It takes almost no extra heat in here.”

“Extra? I don’t understand.”

“The light bulbs give off heat and with them on all the time they keep it nice and cozy.”

“And in the summer?”

“In the summer I open those trapdoors in the ceiling – there and there and there – and the heat escapes. The basement is so deep into the ground it just naturally stays cool in the summer.”

“Amazing!!”

The boy grinned.

“That sounded like it came with *two* exclamation

marks.”

The old man nodded and offered a smile of his own.

“If you had no help, and I am assuming that’s the case, it is an unbelievable accomplishment for a lad your age.”

“Just wait ‘til you see the shower and water heater. I’ll keep that to amaze you with later on. Come into the bedroom and I’ll show you where you can hang your coat and stuff. I have a big closet and a huge dresser. I put in bunk beds sort of hoping I’d someday get a roommate. I sleep on top in case you’re wondering.”

The old man turned, facing the boy directly. He reached out and placed one hand on each of his shoulders.

“I am about to reiterate.”

“Do you want me to give you your privacy, then?” they boy said laughing, clearly thinking it had been hilarious.

The old man smiled and chuckled, waiting for it to pass, then continued.

“There is one thing we need to both understand right from the beginning. Neither of us can know just how this relationship will turn out, or for how long it will continue. It may well just be a much needed and appreciated stopover for me out of the weather until morning. We must not enter it with any preconceived hopes or ideas. You understand?”

“Yeah. Like you said you indicated that before, but I guess I needed to hear it again. I tend to get carried away with things like a little kid. Thanks.”

The old man leaned in close and spoke in a low, private tone.

“Confidentially, so do I – just like a little kid. I tend to think of that as one of my better qualities.”

It was worth more smiles.

The boy had shed his coat and sweater and other outside gear and draped them over a bed post.

“Here, may I help you out of your coat?”

“Thank you, and you will find there are *two* coats plus *two* sweaters, two shirts, two pair of socks and *two* pairs of pants.”

He began shedding layer after layer.

“You’re a regular walking Goodwill Store. I didn’t mean that in a bad way. As you have already seen, I tend to just

say whatever my brain points at my tongue without filtering it in any way. Living alone for so long I have tried to treat myself honestly by not sparing my feelings or making things seem better or more or less likely than they are.”

“And you seem to believe that approach has served you well?”

“Yes. I understand it is not an acceptable asset in conventional social interaction – I have never been really good with people because of it, I think. I come off blunt and often too direct. Honesty is often interpreted as rudeness, I have found. Back when I had to look after my mom it was the only way that worked between us . . . and . . . once again I have exposed things I had no intention of exposing. You make a relationship just too comfortable, Old Man. Your presence lowers my guard. Stop that!”

He offered an extended grin as if to emphasize that it had been an attempt at humor – the ‘stop that’ part, not the revelation about his past. The old man had grimaced at the comment, or the fact the boy had to harbor such a memory – he wasn’t sure which. He held his tongue as far as exploring it further; they had an agreement.

“Your things are all soaking wet. We can dry one layer at a time and have you ready for a comfy beddy-bye by ten o’clock,” the boy said gathering up the collection of outermost garments.

“The fireplace?” the old man asked.

“Yeah. I have a folding drying rack I sit . . . or is that set . . . along one side of the fireplace. Better than the kind at the laundromat.”

“Aren’t you concerned the smoke from the chimney will be seen and lead authorities to investigate?”

“No. And that’s the *too* short answer. One, the chimney rises ten stories up through the building, which is well above any of the surrounding buildings making it unlikely the smoke will be noticed. Two, I only burn hard, well dried wood that produces very little smoke. Three, during the day I burn only white smoke wood so what small amount escapes appears like vapor or clouds. Four, at night I mix in just enough coal to darken the smoke so it isn’t seen against the night sky.”

“Have I mentioned that you amaze me?”

“You have. Now, I’m waiting for you to begin amazing me – and I’m pretty sure you will.”

CHAPTER TWO

I Hate Cold Eggs!

The previous evening had gone well: the drying, the hot chocolate, the peanut butter sandwiches with milk, the wonderful bone warming hot showers, and hours of fascinating conversation – all of which carefully treated their pasts as if they had never taken place – and, eventually, the sleep. Safe and comfortable: for the boy that meant not being alone in an old building filled with squeaks and creeks, and having a living, breathing person right there within easy reach if that should be necessary. For the old man it meant a place inside, out of the weather, a real bed, and a budding relationship with a remarkable youngster. He questioned whether or not that was a good thing. Regardless, they had each experienced the finest, most worry-free night in many months.

In order not to awaken the old man, the boy slipped off his upper bunk with a degree of care seldom seen in a youngster his age. He figured the old man needed his rest both because of his age and because he knew from personal experience, living on the street was exhausting: the ever-present fear, the endless walking, the unpredictable weather, discomfort from environment and clothing – too much or too little – the unpleasant looks and jeers from passersby, the regular rousting from the cops, the periodic if not perpetual hunger and, of course, the inability to ever link two or more hours of sleep together at one time.

As a matter of curiosity, the boy had peeked at the old man in the shower, just to make sure he was not too thin or exhibited any deformities or disabilities. From what he could tell, he seemed to actually be in great shape for such an ancient being. He hoped the same for himself at that age – what age had he indicated – seventy-six, maybe.

The boy prepared a test, of a kind, preparing bacon, eggs and flapjacks for breakfast and pointing a floor fan from the kitchenette toward the bedroom. The old man passed, arriving a few minutes later dressed and smiling just in time to pour the coffee.

“I see two cups?”

It had been the old man’s question as he hesitated over the second one awaiting confirmation or denial that he should precede.

The boy saw the question in the old man’s momentary stop-action pose. He nodded.

“Yes, please. Me, too. Picked up the habit back with ma, before I was school age. I’m a milk and sugar guy. You?”

“I’m a black guy.”

The boy chuckled.

“The palest black guy I’ve ever seen. Have to fill you with hot chocolate three times a day and see if we can get you back on track.”

The old man smiled indicating he appreciated the humor.

“You’re my first visitor. Like the second bunk, I’ve kept a second chair at the table, here, just in case.”

“You’re saying I’m the, *‘just in case?’*”

“Correct. You can’t know how great this is for me.”

The old man assumed he really couldn’t, so refrained from any uninspired response.

The boy joined him at the table with instructions.

“You will please take all you want of each thing, first, then I will take the rest. If I need more I can fix it. If you were to need more I’m thinking you might not ask. I’ll get better at judging after a few dry runs.”

“If this is a dry run, I can’t imagine the luxury of a wet one.”

“Funny. You have a natural talent for teasing smiles out of me. I hope to gain that skill by studying you.”

The old man put his fork down and wiped his mouth.

“I do hope the time comes when I can learn how you have come by your remarkable vocabulary and insight into people.”

“The short, safe version is probably found in my library. I learned to read at three so I have a two or three year head start on most guys my age.”

“I did notice the bookcases out in the living room area last night, but the opportunity for me to explore them didn’t arise. Honestly, I am hesitant to explore here for fear I will

overstep the boundary we set up – the ‘don’t pry’ pledge.”

The boy thought for a long moment as he thoughtfully surveyed his ‘kingdom’.

“Just stay out of the vault. Anything else is open season.”

“You have a vault?”

“It was here. I built my palace around four given features – the fireplace, which was here on the rear wall, the kitchenette that sets at a right angle out along the east wall, the shower drain in the north east corner, and the vault which forms the southern wall of my bedroom – behind the drapes. If you have valuables, I can secure them in there for you.”

“Just one item, it seems, but it would just not be appropriate to lock it away like that.”

“I don’t understand. It’s a walk in, bigger than any room I ever had before I fixed this place.”

“A riddle for you, then:

Yesterday at this time I had nothing of value in my life. By darkness, I did. It came upon me like a silent statue suddenly bearing a halo. What is it?”

The boy sniffled. His lower lip quivered. A single tear found its way down one cheek.

“Thank you. You mean *me*. I’m sorry for my reaction – not very masculine. It’s just that I’ve never been referred to as *valuable*.”

The old man’s heart sank. Tear was met by tear across the table. They caught and held each other’s gaze. The old man turned to the side in his chair. He opened his arms and hitched his head. The boy’s initial hesitation was put aside and he rounded the table to accept the embrace of his life – the first one he could remember that held any meaning.

Presently, the boy whispered in the old man’s ear where it sat just inches away from where his face had found a soft, warm shoulder.

“Andrew – I like Andy.”

The old man nodded, turned his head slightly and made his own quiet offering.

“Woodrow – I like Woody.”

He felt the boy’s head nod. After a few more minutes, as the boy turned his body to get up, the old man arranged

him on his knee.

“I’m pretty old to sit on your knee.”

“You seem to fit just fine to me.”

“Hmm. I see that. Who’d a thought?”

They looked into each other’s faces. Andy broke a faint smile.

“What, son?”

“We’re like a clown I saw once – smiling through tears – only ours are real and his were painted on his cheeks. I never understood that until this second.”

“And what do you make of it at this second?”

“That even sad things can get better if you don’t forget to smile. That tears and smiles don’t have to be at odds with each other. It’s like they can support each other – like bookends holding both happy books and sad books – both are parts of how things really are – *important* parts I’m seeing.”

“Your words may have been gleaned from books, son, but the kernels of your wisdom undoubtedly arrived in this world with you.”

“I guess I don’t really understand that, but it looks like there may be time for us to work it out.”

“It does seem that way.”

Woody gently pulled the lad’s head back down on his shoulder. There had been no reluctance about it on the part of either one. After several more minutes Andy spoke without stirring.

“Our eggs are getting cold, you know.”

“I do. I usually hate cold eggs.”

“Me, too, usually. Not today, I’m guessing.”

* * *

After breakfast, Woody received instruction in the art of doing dishes there in the Palace.

“First, hold each pan or dish or piece of silverware under the hot water in the right half of the divided sink until it is either clean or clearly needs the application of the dishrag. If oil or fat was deposited on it, add a small squirt of dishwashing soap – I prefer *Dawn* – this squirt bottle is diluted 80% with water, a mixture I find perfect. Once cleared of all debris and traces of soap, leave it in the hot stream for a few seconds

more to make sure. The taste of soap while eating cereal is most unpleasant. Then slip it into the dish tray in the left half of the sink. I've determined that dishes that have been well heated in hot water dry on their own very quickly. In a few minutes, when they are dry, we will drape a dish towel over them. That will keep dust away until they are needed again. The method really saves on cabinet space and I never have dirty dishes stacking up. See how the dish tray is nearly half full? That is so great! With just me it never got used that much."

"I admire your method. Would it bother you if I said it is a lot like the way I did things back in the day?"

"Not at all – the 'birds of a feather thing,' I'm thinking. Like we belong together . . . maybe."

He wondered if he had let his enthusiasm take his words too far. He didn't want to scare the old man away. Woody didn't object so he felt he probably had not exceeded the limit.

He took the old man's hand and led him to couch – long, high back, flat sloping arms, and upholstered in purple fabric.

"It is purple for royalty like in a palace. It's comfortable whether reclining on it or sitting on it. I tried a dozen upstairs until I found just the right one."

"There is still furniture in the rooms?" Woody asked.

"Yes and not only that, but each piece is enclosed in a thick, clear, plastic bag – zippered closed. It's like whoever shut down the place planned to reopen it very soon – all those years ago."

"I am going to assume you know who owns the building."

"Claude M. Marley, well, *junior*, now – old Claude bit the dust last year. I was thinking if you want a private bedroom it will be quite simple for us to construct one. You can try out beds upstairs like Goldilocks 'til you find the one that's perfect for you. We'll bring it down the utility elevator. It runs on ropes and pulleys and weights and doesn't require electricity."

"If I don't cramp your style, let's just leave things like they are for now. Remember, whatever else we feel we have

going between us, the length of my stay has not been established.”

Andy nodded. It reluctantly reflected acceptance. It *had* been the understanding.

“May I ask why you haven’t just occupied a room upstairs instead of constructing this place – fine as it is?”

“First, no working plumbing up there. Second, way too fancy for my taste.”

“Makes sense.”

Andy continued.

“Back to the bedroom, I was hoping you’d say that. At the orphanage, the boys all slept together in one very large room with rows of cots. I really treasure my privacy here – not that I really have anything to be private about. I guess it’s mainly the idea – like having it makes me feel special. Dumb I suppose. Huh?”

“Most certainly *not* dumb. I understand. We all need a place we can think of as our own. Sometimes, I suppose it has to be as small as a cot in a room full of cots. Other times it might be a very special section of a huge hotel in which one could claim any or all of the rooms as his own if he chose to.”

Andy nodded. It hadn’t really been what was on his mind – why he had directed the old man to sit beside him on the couch. Woody understood that, and waited for the boy to work up to whatever it might be.

Andy began as if approaching a topic at arm’s length.

“It seems to me we have become friends.”

He paused clearly needing a response.

He received one.

“It seems to me we have become friends, also.”

Andy nodded and turned to face Woody, drawing his legs up under himself and leaning just a bit forward as if to lend an air of importance to the occasion. He looked down at the seat before raising his head to look directly at the old man.

“I would like for you to know about me – all the things I said I wanted to make sure you’d never ask about. That’s how friends operate, isn’t it.”

“Two things, Andy. First, yes, friends offer things about themselves to each other. Second, however, my experience suggests that it is best to make sure each person is really

ready to expose his past. Sometimes, *easing* into some of the details is best, so there are no regrets later – feeding them out a few at a time.”

“I can see the value in that and the potential downside of offering certain kinds of things too soon. Up front you should know I haven’t ever killed anybody or robbed any banks or done other really bad things like that. I am a squatter here in the hotel, not paying rent, or for the water, or electricity, and that is certainly not legal, but you already know that. Someday in my future, when I am able, I fully intend to make that right, probably not to the owner, but to other kids in need of help.”

Woody offered a single nod, which indicated he understood and could accept the explanation.

Andy returned it – his way of acknowledging the old man’s response.

“I suppose one person shouldn’t force his story on anybody else who might not want to hear it. I hadn’t considered that until this very moment.”

“That is not a problem for me, son. It is strictly your call.”

Andy offered another single nod as if that had become the important, private, signal of solemn agreement between them. It tickled Woody, but he allowed no indication of that. The boy began.

“I was born as a baby.”

He smiled somewhat sheepishly.

“I suppose that goes without saying, doesn’t it?”

It required no answer. Woody offered a smile. It was something they shared – both having wonderful smiles. Andy’s blossomed from deep within his rounded, firm cheeks and across his smooth skin. Woody’s displaced wrinkles and tweaked whiskers as his face fashioned a broad, angular, less tightly drawn smile.

“I lived with mom. She said my dad had gone away and for years we just left it at that. Later on, she would get upset when I was old enough to question what she meant by that. I recently managed to get a copy of my birth certificate – the one from the hospital. It just said ‘*Boy Doe*’, *Born March 31* and the year. Then, *Mother*, ‘*Mary Doe*’. My foot prints are

on the back in black ink. I've compared them and I'm very sure they are mine. I'd like you to look at them later."

Whether 'them' referred to the ink prints or the lad's feet, the old man couldn't be sure. It was of no consequence. The boy continued.

"I grew up knowing mom as Janice Hunter. I was Andrew Hunter. The father's space on the certificate was blank – no name. My inclination is to think mom was never married. When I was younger I fantasized my dad's name was also Andrew and that I was Andrew Hunter, Jr. In school, on forms that required a middle name I always put, Martin. It was the name of the street we lived on for a while and was one of the first words I learned to read and spell.

"Mom was a very sad woman; she cried a lot and by the time I was five she had taken to drinking a *really* lot – maybe even earlier and I just didn't know. It didn't make her violent. Quite the opposite, it made her passive and unconcerned – about things like fixing meals, paying bills, opening the mail, keeping the apartment clean. I mostly taught myself how to do those things so if you see I'm doing them wrong I want you to correct me. I have always tried very hard to be – well, that really wouldn't be true. I was about to say I have always tried hard to be like other people – meaning acceptable. Being more truthful I must say I never tried to be any more like others than I had to be in order to get by, to survive, to be accepted, to avoid the paddle at the orphanage – but that's getting ahead.

"I have spent an inordinate – I think that's the right word – an inordinate amount of time trying to figure out how to just be me. Do you understand?"

"Oh, yes. I think we are on the very same page, there."

"One morning when I was seven – I was in second grade – instead of sending me off to school, mom said we were going for a ride into the country in a taxi. I had never been in a taxi and I remember how excited I was. She put some of my clothes in a small suitcase to take along. I figured she was going to let me swim in a creek so I'd need dry clothes. Remember, I was just a dumb seven-year-old and seldom thought about anything beyond the end of my nose.

"Once in the cab she handed a slip of paper to the

driver. She said it was the address. We rode for a long time until we came to a very large, grey stone building set in the middle of the largest lawn I had ever seen. I remember noting there were three floors in the building. I asked her what it was. She said we were going inside to meet a friend of hers. I didn't know she had any friends so I was eager to go along. There were lots of kids playing in the big yard. They stopped and stared at us as we got out of the taxi. Mom told the driver to wait. The lawn was enclosed by a tall, wire mesh fence – to keep out the beasts that roamed the countryside, I figured.

“Inside, mom introduced me to Miss Badbreath – well, that's what I would learn the other kids called her. It was really Miss Waldbreth. Then mom bent down and gave me a hug – sort of a long hug I thought, so, although it was very nice it alerted me that something was not right. Hugs were definitely not a routine part of my life with her. Miss Waldbreth came up behind me and put her hands on my shoulders, patting them at first. I remember I tilted my head back and looked up at her. It was not a particularly friendly face. From that angle her nose looked huge and her chin pointed. She had no discernable cheeks and her eyebrows were dark, thick and undisciplined. Mom told me that I was going to live with Miss Waldbreth and the other children now, and that she had to go away. That was no explanation at all.

She just turned and moved out through the door into the hall. Miss Waldbreth sunk her long, strong fingers into my shoulders as if to keep me right there. They hurt. I struggled and eventually got free. I ran through the door into the hall and down the front steps. The cab was pulling away.

“I ran after it, with tears streaming down my face calling to her:

‘Mommy, Mommy, don't leave me here. Mommy, Mommy, please don't go away.’ I suppose I repeated that a dozen times until I met the fence beside the gate, which kept me from going further. I remember the taxi moving down the road, kicking up dust and seeming to get smaller and smaller. I watched it out of sight, screaming at it, then fell to the ground and wailed, beating on it with my fists and kicking it with my feet.”

Andy's explanation had been delivered with passion

and power and a trembling voice and pounding heart, plainly visible through his T-shirt. He sat there looking at Woody, sobbing convulsively, obviously shocked at his reaction. The old man assumed it was the first time the boy had related the story – out loud at least – so it had burst from his being with five years of unfair, and anger and disappointment, fueled by the most primeval sort of unfiltered emotion.

The old man scooted closer and pulled the boy into him. It was different from earlier at the table. Andy clung to him as if to never let go. His fingers dug into his flesh. His chest heaved against the old man's. His tears wet their clothes. It went on for many minutes. His unexpected reaction had clearly both surprised and alarmed him.

Even then – after the sobbing had stopped and the heaving chest had calmed, after the biting fingers had relaxed and the grip on the old man's arms had eased, the boy would not release himself. The old man nestled his head close to the boy's and began making slow, easy circles across the youngster's back with his big hands. He felt the boy relax – gradually at first, then more and more. His breathing became slow and rhythmic. Within minutes he was sound asleep. Woody continued to hold him, leaning back against the couch ready to settle in for as long as it took.

An hour later the boy stirred just a bit, and, indicating no move to separate, he spoke in a soft voice.

"I'm awake now. Thank you, you know. It wasn't how I figured it would go. That was the first time I'd ever let myself replay it in all its details – allow the feelings and images to revisit me. It felt like I was there – really living it all again. I guess I wasn't prepared for that. It was terribly frightening but, oddly, I think I feel better. I don't really know how to say what I feel."

With a monumental sigh he lifted his head from the old man's shoulder and sat up slowly, his shoulders remaining slumped and his young body sapped.

"I won't ask how you knew just what to do for me, but you did, you know – know just what to do for me. I suspect I'm not the first kid you've held and comforted through his pain."

Those comments – insightful as they would turn out to

have been – gave rise to long bottled-up, discomfoting feelings within the old man. He would share them – eventually. That was certainly not the proper moment. What it was the proper moment for was dry shirts – one boy's medium and one old man's roomy.

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CHAPTER THREE

Snickers or Milky Way

For lunch it was more peanut butter sandwiches and milk. Andy found a jar of grape jam in the refrigerator and a sack of chips hidden at the back of a cupboard. Woody added jam to his sandwich. Andy spooned some out into a saucer and used it as a dip for his chips. They both seemed pleased with their innovations.

“I’m hitting the bottom of the food barrel, Woody. We will need to go grocery shopping this afternoon. I had let things get low spending my time trying to build up a supply of paintings, and with a visitor – well you know how that goes.”

“I have that money I told you about when we met,” the old man said reaching back to remove his wallet.”

“Oh, we won’t need that. I have *lots* of money.”

The old man frowned, putting on a puzzled look.

“Yes. I can see how that may seem odd – an orphan-runaway from a children’s home – that was what Miss Badbreath preferred we call it. I’ll eventually get to that runaway part. One very good thing Miss Bad . . . Waldbreth did for me was to lead me to discover I had artistic talent – it’s actually been called exceptional by the artist who came to the Home sometimes to help a few of us. After lunch I’ll take you take to my studio – just the other side of the kitchen wall. There is a very large window high up on the wall that provides lots of natural light. As soon as I saw it I knew that was where I’d paint.”

“So it’s *painting* – your artistic talent?”

“Water color. I like oil and acrylic too, but water color is cheaper for me.”

“And you are implying *that* is the source of your money?”

“Yeah. I sort of put myself on a plan. I make fourteen paintings every week. I frame them in *el-cheapo* mats from a discount store. I get the mats first – whatever sizes they have that week – and then size the pictures to fit the openings. Most are small – 8 by 10 inch openings. They make me the most money because I can always sell all 14 every week.”

“Where do you sell them?”

“I have four outlets – one bookstore, one café, one pool hall and one bank lobby. Each one takes different sorts of pictures. The bookstore is good for abstracts and still lifes – apples in a bowl and that sort of thing. The café folks go for landscapes and waterscapes – those are my favorites to paint. The pool hall likes dogs playing poker or ladies behind shower curtains with legs or shoulders showing a little. I, too, seem to be coming to like those more and more. The bank buyers like city skylines in sharp contrasts or rustic alleys.”

“You seem to know the marketing side of the business. May I ask what you charge?”

“Well, the mats average about a dollar each. The paper maybe ten cents. The paint only a few cents. I charge the outlets ten bucks a piece and they add their profit on top of that. I’m thinking of upping my price to the bank. I see they’re selling some of them for fifty dollars.”

“My! Fifty dollars. I am eager to see your work.”

Andy stood and went to a drawer in a roll top desk, which sat next to the door. He removed a folder and placed it on the table next to Woody.

“Here are a few that haven’t been matted yet. It’s always the ones I like the least that get left behind in that folder.”

There were a dozen or so – all sized for the 8 by 10 mats, the old man assumed. He took his reading glasses from his shirt pocket and adjusted them part way down his nose before opening the folder. He moved his plate to the left clearing a spot directly in front of him.

He studied each one thoughtfully before sliding it to his right to reveal the next one. After examining six or eight he slid his glasses down to the end of his nose so he could look at Andy over the top.

“These are remarkable, son. Absolutely remarkable. I only have one criticism.”

“What’s that?”

“You are pricing them far below their value.”

“I make plenty to support myself and I’ve started a college fund – in the vault.”

“I see you sign them, ‘*Marcus*’.”

It had implied a question.

“Didn’t want to use my own name. Can’t raise suspicion in case anybody is really still looking for me, though I can’t imagine who that would be. I took it from the middle name I gave myself – Martin/Marcus. I classed it up a bit. The people at the outlets think I’m just the delivery boy for Marcus. I think it’s hilarious. You know what would really be funny if I would take you with me and introduce you as Marcus.”

They shared chuckles. The old man’s tummy rippled.

“Perhaps I don’t want to be found, either. I haven’t yet begun to tell you my story.”

“Hadn’t thought of that, of course. It was more just a silly thought that significantly raised my endorphin level.”

“*Endorphin* level, is it?”

The old man playfully wondered if the ‘boy’ was in fact a midget Ph.D.

“Yeah. Chemicals in the brain that make a guy feel happy. Produced when you laugh. I love them.”

“Yes. I know about endorphins. I, too, try to enjoy a heaping helping every day.”

That hadn’t been entirely truthful, but he’d deal with that at a later time.

“Then we can be *Happy* and *Jolly* – the *Endorphin Brothers*,” Andy said through giggles.

“Yes, nobody would ever notice the age difference – you being as wise as a middle-aged man and me rapidly approaching my second childhood.”

That was worth smiles and nods, but didn’t reach the threshold of chuckles.

Andy began clearing the plates and glasses away to the counter beside the sink. Woody moved to stand so he could help.

“You just stay seated. I got these. Anyway there’s still dessert – Butterfinger or Milky Way.”

“Are Milky Ways the one with peanuts?”

“Nope. Those are Snickers.”

“That’s still fine. A Milky Way for me.”

“Are you a milk or soda guy with sweets?”

“I guess I’m a Milk guy with sweets and a soda guy with salt – like pizza.”

“It’s like we are twins on most things. There’s a pizza place not far from here. There’s a strip of businesses several blocks to the south that’s still up and running in pretty good shape. My grocery store is over there. It’s where my art outlets are, also. We can go there for pizza this evening – need to be finished by five while it’s still light. Not dependably safe to be on the streets between there and here after six.”

The boy seemed to have things figured out; the old man would give him that. He was certainly intrigued about how long it had all been going on, but he would not ask. Woody was a very patient person. He hoped his sudden presence in the boy’s life would not in any way be hurtful. He had no idea how that might come about, but Woody was an overly thoughtful person. He had gone through life trying to be of no inconvenience to anybody. That one trait had – in a circuitous sort of way – eventually led to his recent, uncomfortable evening at the storefront during the snowstorm.

With the dishes finished and candy bars in hand, Andy led Woody through a curtain and to the back side of the kitchen wall. The boy had constructed a stage of sorts – 8 X 12 – some four feet off the cement basement floor raising him up close to the window. There were steps. Up top were four easels positioned to face away from a huge window, which provided light from behind him as he worked. The surfaces of the easels were bathed in pure light from a many pained, frosted glass window, which measured at least ten feet wide and six or more tall.

“Ten in the morning to three is generally the best light in here. I can pull those heavy drapes over the window at other times and use the bank of lights I installed up there. The drapes will darken the window and keep anybody from wondering why there are lights on in an abandoned building.”

“Four easels?”

“Like I said, I do water colors. The paint often needs to dry for some time before adding more so it doesn’t run and form one big, brown pool. Because of that, I usually work on several paintings at a time. I also have a blow dryer when I’m in a hurry. Sometimes the ‘blow’ from that moves wet paint away from where it belongs so I like natural drying time. Come up and take a look at what I have going.”

They were soon side by side doing a guided tour with explanation and self-criticism – never harsh or final, but always with an eye toward improvement the next time.

“With oil or acrylic if you make a mistake you can just go back over it, but that’s not so easy with water colors. I have learned to be very patient. This last one is probably finished – it was just waiting to dry.”

Andy went ahead and removed the masking tape that was holding the very tips of the four corners to keep the paper from moving.

“I see the easels are more like table tops than upright surfaces.”

“Water colors run so the paper needs to be on a pretty flat surface. I have them raised a little bit at the top to handle the glare and reflection from the glass.”

“Your instructor must have been an excellent teacher.”

“James. He was. Aside from helping me develop the basic techniques for working with water colors, he offered little other advice. He said he didn’t want to interfere with my natural bent. I have books filled with great water color paintings and I often study them. I don’t know if that is interfering with that bent or not.”

“Regardless, I say again, your work is remarkable. You go for simplicity and the modest use of lines and shapes. I like that very much. I really like how you often seem to just give a general impression of something and let the viewer fill in the rest – like the umbrella in this one – just the tip and handle with splashes of reds and oranges in place of a detailed fabric top.”

“It appears you know a good deal about art, Woody. Do you also paint?”

“I have dabbled in acrylics, but what I do could not even be considered painting compared with all this.”

“Thank you. I think the human imagination is one of our very best features and I give the viewer credit for being able to make good use of it – connect the dots or lines as you noted. Do you think I’m an impressionist?”

“I think you are ‘Marcus’ and whatever that is, is just the way it should be.”

“Good. My thoughts exactly. I love Van Gogh, but as

you can see I prefer pastels and . . . well . . . I think of his paintings as noisy and mine as quiet. That make sense?”

“Absolutely. I think he would have agreed with you. Van Gogh lived his whole life as if it were a scream. I just imagine he sometimes wished he could turn things down and spend part of it as a whisper.”

Andy nodded and turned directly toward the old man.

“When I just give you your head and let you talk, you paint wonderful images with words, you know.”

“And I thank you. Someday we can go into that in more depth.”

“I see I really need to do one thing to that center picture right now. It is at the exact degree of wetness – or dryness, never sure which it is – for the next step.”

“The winter scene?”

“Yeah. I want to add snow falling and here is how I think I can do that. I will mix some relatively thick white paint with just a tad of sky blue. . . . There. Now with this really stiff brush with the long, sparse bristles I am going to flick the paint at the paper from a foot or more away and see if it resembles the effect I’m going for. I advise you to stand back. My flicks have been known to fly twenty feet – sometimes right along with the brush.”

The boy became serious, squinted just a bit and stood to the left side of the paper. He positioned the brush with a good deal of care, changing its location just slightly several times. He inhaled and held it. He flicked and smiled. He moved the brush a tiny bit to his right and flicked a second time. He smiled a second time and gulped a large breath. He bounced his head from side to side as if contemplating his next move, then sat the brush in the glass of water.

“James says that when in doubt, less is usually better than more. What do you think?”

“If that is less it seems perfect to me.”

“I was considering the lower right corner – see, no flecks of white – but I was afraid I would over-fleck the area just next to it on the left so I stopped.”

“Come and stand back here with me. See what suddenly happened to that area – the lower right?”

“Well, what about that? With the addition of the bright,

white specks elsewhere, it gives the appearance of slight shadow there. A very nice contrast I think. Really helps make the picture.”

“I agree.”

Andy continued looking and nodding.

“One of those ‘happy accidents’ a TV artist talks about – Bob somebody. I like his deep voice as much as his painting – it’s a lot like yours – hypnotic when offered in the proper ambience.”

“Ambience? My, oh, my! I may need to begin keeping the dictionary handy.”

“I think it means mood or setting.”

“And you think correctly. It is a wonderful word. I was not making fun of you.”

“I doubt if in your whole life you ever made fun of anybody.”

“Well, there *was* my third grade teacher, Mrs. Pugh!”

“Pugh? Really?”

“Really!”

Andy shook his head and spoke.

“It seems like every kid has their Miss Badbreath at some time or other.”

They exchanged nods and smiles.

“We have both learned a lot about each other so far today, haven’t we?” Andy said.

“I am interested in what you have learned about me.”

They ducked through the curtains and returned to the living room area where they slid into the spots on the couch they had occupied previously.

“Well, you just said *correctly* – the proper adverb form – where most people would incorrectly say *correct* as if it should be an adjective. The word needed to answer the question ‘how’ and that always means adverb form – usually the ‘ly’ form. That furthers my belief that you are an educated person. Also, your knowledge of art far surpasses anything you’ll admit to – much more than the average guy on the street.

You have an unbelievable amount love to give away – you really care about people and want them to feel safe and secure and . . . well, loved and you’d never expect to receive

anything in return, but I'm thinking you'd take it if it were offered. Sometimes you may give even more than you should at the beginning and then have to find a way to pull back a bit later on. You like to see people happy and you help others prove their self-worth to themselves."

"For example, please, on that last one."

"In the snow picture, you let me find the shadow and set it up like it was all my intentional doing. I called it an accident, but in a way I see it *was* my doing because I stopped at *less* when a big part of me wanted to lay on *more*."

"And I am coming to learn what an observant – *accurately* observant – young man you are. And you know what I think the best part is?"

"No."

"That we still have so much more to learn about each other."

Andy nodded and did his faint smile thing.

"I never understood when to use *each other* and when to use *one another*."

The old man smiled at the sudden switch in gears.

"Each other' when there are just two. 'One another' when there are more than two."

"See, there you go again. Lots of education, like a teacher or a writer maybe. I'm not asking. Just playing with possibilities."

His face turned serious and he looked the old man in his eyes.

"I'm sorry about up in my studio. I asked if you painted. I had agreed not to ask about you."

"It seemed like a very appropriate question, to me, considering the moment. *Not a problem*, as I have heard young people say. That leads me to a next topic. I suppose that it is now time that I share things about myself with you. You earlier told me everything about yourself."

"Oh, no, Woody. I haven't even come close to telling you everything about me. I got volumes left to tell. That should have been 'I *have* volumes left to tell'."

"I must say, Andy, when – if – you get around to sharing with me about your outstanding education, I will be eager to hear about it."

“Got a minute now?”

“Of course, if now seems like the time.”

“My mom was the daughter of two doctors— a surgeon and a pediatrician, I was led to believe – so I’m sure I acquired a proper grammatical pattern from her early on. One fine thing about the orphanage was the library they had there. Some old guy died and left his to the home. I was already reading by the time I got three candles on my cake. I remember it that way because I read to her the words she had put on the cake. It was the first time she knew I was reading. Later, at the home, since I didn’t seem to be a very likable kid, I spent a lot of time alone in the library reading. It was one place Miss HmmHmmbreath would always let me go. I think she sort of understood my situation – I didn’t see that at the time, but I do now. I think she saw my potential, but didn’t have a clue about what to do about it.

“We had students from the college come out and work as our teachers – a different set every semester, but I liked that – the new blood thing I guess. I’d sort of commandeered them so they’d teach me what I wanted to learn. It was about the only thing the other boys liked about me – distracting the teachers away from them. I always picked up things fast and I think that tended to make the teachers like to work with me. My progress always made them look good to their supervisors, I’m thinking.

“Since I escaped from that place, I have mostly just taught myself. I gather books from wherever I can. I’m interested in just about everything so most any book is like cake – well, maybe not quiet.”

He offered a prolonged smile and wrote c-a-k-e in the air, as if adding to his grocery list, then continued.

“The city library and the museums and the art galleries and the planetarium have lots of lectures and free programs that I attend. I usually set aside mornings – seven to ten or eleven for studying. Then I paint until three or so with a break for lunch. I often get outside ‘til dark and then read or listen to music or go to programs or plays in the evening.”

“Aren’t plays pretty expensive?”

“Not if you can climb fire escapes and know how to open windows at the rear of the balcony.”

“I see. I guess I slipped and asked a personal question there didn’t I?”

“You did and I didn’t mind at all. You okay about it I hope.”

“If you are, I am.”

“Woody, I think we are ready for a different approach to that rule we set.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. How about if we can just go ahead and ask the questions that are on our mind – minds – and if the other one doesn’t feel like answering it he just says so and we move on with no hard feelings?”

“I do believe we are both ready for that. One more thing: no embarrassment or feeling bad about having asked a question the other isn’t ready for yet. It will just be a straight forward, no regrets, sort of transaction.”

“That is a good point. You are reflecting about how both of us are put together – not wanting to hurt anybody’s feelings.”

“I suppose I am. A new deal then?”

“Yes. A new deal. Let me just go get my list of questions for you – it’s three pages long.”

Andy’s joke produced long laughter and teary cheeks for both of them.

“I believe I mentioned that I figured it was my turn to say some things about me and my past,” Woody said. “Is this a good time or do we need to go shopping?”

“How about we pizza at four and grocery at five? That will get us home before dark and give us several hours now before we need to leave. I suppose that means you can take your time.”

“Seventy-six years in 120 minutes.”

“A little over one and a half minutes per year,” Andy offered – “1.5789 if you need something more accurate.”

Woody raised his eyebrows and continued.

“I’ll give it my best effort.”

Andy offered a serious suggestion.

“I’ve been doing my twelve years in installments. Maybe just the first installment from you today.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Fins and Sawbucks

“So, can I make some guesses before you begin?” Andy asked, perched again on the opposite end of the couch.

“I see no harm in that. It might be fun, in fact.”

“That seems to indicate you don’t think my guesses will be any good.”

“I didn’t intend to indicate that.”

“Okay then. I’m thinking you were either a teacher or a writer – probably an English teacher, if you were a teacher, and that you wrote books for kids my age and teen agers if you were a writer. I’m guessing you were married and had at least one kid. I’m going to guess that your wife died and either something happened to your kid or something happened with your relationship to him or her – and I’m guessing him – because you aren’t with him. You mentioned time in an old folk’s home so that really isn’t a guess. That’s probably enough. Oh, and that you had your gall bladder taken out back when the surgeon had to make that really long top to bottom incision across your stomach. I sort of saw you in the shower. I wanted to make sure you weren’t underweight and undernourished. I apologize if that is bothersome to you. Having lived with the other guys at the home I have no modesty whatsoever so I forget other people might.”

“I must say you have been busy assuming things about me. I’m surprised we’ve had time to talk.”

Andy smiled and twirled his hand as if to move the old man on with his story. The old man smiled, that coming from the boy who was advertising himself as a patient sort – at least when it came to painting.

“First, yes I had that operation back during my thirties. Second, no, it is not bothersome. I share your absence of modesty. With those things settled let me proceed.”

Andy pulled his legs in under him and sat back against the arm of the couch so he was facing Woody more directly. Woody began.

“I was born at an early age of mixed parents – one male and one female.”

Andy giggled clearly appreciating the old man's attempt at humor.

"I suppose for our purposes, here, my first twenty years are relatively unimportant other than to stipulate my parents were both professors and like you, I found learning a relatively easy process. By the time I was ten I had convinced my parents to let me remodel the attic for my room. They agreed with the stipulation that I acquire the material, do all the work, and pay for everything myself. I shoveled snow, mowed lawns and did an assortment of other jobs to raise the money for supplies and by the time I was your age it was mostly complete – I say mostly because I kept finding things I wanted to change or add."

"Your parents were very smart about that – it kept you busy, it taught you how to plan and work and how to handle money and I'm sure in the end it must have given you one whale of a good self-concept – feeling of accomplishment."

Woody nodded, not expecting, but not really surprised by the boy's wisdom laden commentary. He went on.

"I entered college at sixteen changing my fields several times realizing I had lots of time since I had started so early. In the end I had majors in history, psychology, literature and English."

"I knew it!"

Andy pulled air.

"I went on to get advanced degrees in psychology and English. At twenty-four I started teaching in a boy's prep school – junior and senior high. Later on I moved to a position at a university. I married a woman who taught archeology at the university. We had one son. When he was seventeen his mother was on an archeological dig in the Middle East. There was a cave-in and she died. My son left for college several months later. He always blamed me for not stopping her from leaving home to do her work. It had occurred a half dozen times during his life at home with us – often for six months at a time – and he missed her mightily.

"Fathers are fine, but mothers are essential. That is a fact of life with which many fathers struggle. Early on he and I were close and had a good life both when she was home and when she was away from home, but once he became a

teenager we grew apart – his resentment and my guilt, I suppose.”

“She had a right to live her life, didn’t she?” Andy added, clearly absorbed in the drama.

“She and saw it that way, but children usually have a very self-centered perspective and few, I suppose, would be able to accept such a situation.”

“Like kids with moms in the military, now.”

The old man nodded and continued.

“Six years ago when I retired from teaching I looked him up with the hope we could work things out between us. I soon saw that wasn’t going to be, so I made arrangements to move into a retirement home. I had spent my life among young people and can you guess what I found at the retirement home – nothing but *old* people. I soon had had enough of that. I hated it there and left well before the first year was over, a whole year for which I had paid up front.

“Since then I have lived several places, all of them in areas filled with young people – near schools, hospitals, a Boys and Girls’ club, and across the street from a community college. I would work my way into volunteering with the youngsters and life was very good.”

“None of that explains about how you came to be where I found you last night, Woody.”

“No it doesn’t and that is something I am not prepared to discuss yet. I’m sorry, but that is how it must be.”

Andy nodded knowing that was their arrangement, but thinking it was like having read a mystery novel right up to last page only to find it was ripped out of the book. He tried to move beyond his disappointment.

“Well, I nailed several things, didn’t I?”

“You certainly did.”

“I am very sorry about you losing your wife and the problem about your son not wanting you to be a part of his life anymore. But at least you got to know how it was to live in a complete family – twice, in fact. I guess I feel a little jealous about that.”

“And I, suddenly, feel more than a little ashamed for having whined about those things. It seems that every time you open your mouth I receive some new, wise, revelation.”

Andy offered his patented quick, partial smile and shrugged.

“Thanks for sharing those things with me. I feel a lot closer, now.”

“That was the same experience I had after you shared with me, so thank you, if a bit belated.”

Again, a nod.

Woody continued.

“May I offer an observation about you? Your early life was fully abnormal – a single parent home, with a parent so fragile you had to act as the grown-up. Then, later, a life you hated where you were apparently very much separate from the others at the children’s home, and found, upon leaving the orphanage, that the only useful and dependable resource you had in the whole world was you – yourself. And, yet, I see not a shred of obvious sadness anywhere in your day to day young being.”

“And you, Old Man, have had so much – families, education, work, satisfaction from volunteer activities – plenty of money, I’m thinking – all of which you clearly loved, and yet there is sadness written all over *you*.”

The boys pointed and accurate observations hit the old man with some impact. He reset himself into an immediate rethink of the new relationship.

“Perhaps it was a mistake to have accompanied you here, son. The last thing I want is to add an element of sadness to your life or give you reason to think I am just another adult in need of your care and supervision.”

“Oh, no. I didn’t mean any of those things. *You’ll* have to deal with your sadness – I figure nobody else can remove or even dilute anybody else’s unhappiness or misery. I’ve been there and I found my way to shed it. That’s for you to do. I’m here for you, but I can’t meddle in it. In spite of your mostly hidden down side, you bring a wonderful upside to my – well, to *this* Palace. I suppose it remains to be seen if it becomes *our* palace.

“Anyway, your sense of humor overjoys me – I’ve had very little of that during my twelve years. Just the presence of a wise, smart, experienced adult adds a tremendous sense of well-being to my life. I was thinking about that while I was

making breakfast. You are like a catalyst; you are here – up to now, at least, not apparently changing in anyway yourself – but still giving me a new feeling of safety and family like I have never experienced before. That’s sort of like a catalyst, isn’t it – an element that assists a reaction to take place without changing that element?”

“An interesting extension of the concept, but yes – sort of like it.”

“Also, you bring me a brain just filled with things I can hardly wait to hear and learn – like our discussion of Van Gogh in my studio earlier. That scream and whisper thing was fantastic. And, you do make the best hot chocolate in an iron pot I’ve ever tasted.”

Woody leaned a bit in Andy’s direction offering a confidential air. He put his hand beside his mouth and spoke low.

“The secret is a pinch of salt added right at the beginning. That also greatly improves the flavor of coffee – something about cutting oils.”

“Sharing secrets! I’ve never done this before. This is so great!”

In a sudden and surprisingly inappropriate reaction, the boy grew somber. It took command of his expression, his posture and his tone. He shifted his gaze from the old man to the cushion on the sofa. He picked at it with his fingers and remained quiet for some time. The old man let it play out – whatever it was. Presently, the boy began to speak.

“I suppose if you are going to leave me, it would be better to do that sooner rather than later. Even after just this short time it will be terribly difficult, but I can’t imagine how unbearable it would be later – like after, maybe we started to think we might love each other or something.”

It had been a thousand questions wrapped up in a short, tentative, statement. The *statement* reeked of logic; the *question* of desperation and fear.

The old man swallowed hard. Those same things had been on his mind from that moment the night before when he relinquished every sensible rule of conduct he had ever held dear, and moved to stand so he could accompany the boy through the evening snow storm.

Surely it would not be fair for him to have to make a decision – a promise – at that moment, and yet according to the terms the boy had put forth that appeared to be the stipulation. To say yes to staying, represented an irrevocable commitment about how he would spend the rest of his life. *The rest of his life* – that was a curious concept, since fifteen hours earlier he had determined he was ready to allow the frigid night to take his life. He supposed what life he had left was due to the boy's exasperating persistence. Perhaps *that* was the only consideration. Any days that remained in his future were, for better or worse, because of the boy. They should therefore be, in the old man's confused reality of that moment, the boy's to have and do with as he pleased.

Still, he needed just a few more hours. It seemed reasonable that if the boy had commandeered the rest of his days, at least he should be allowed that short amount of time to come to grips with what it represented – what it meant for him and the boy and others, who, in his selfish decision, he had discounted or relegated to undeserved insignificance. He would make his case.

"I agree that we both deserve to know the direction our relationship will take. Since we are speaking about a long-term commitment, it seems to me we both rate a few more hours in which to consider our personal needs, desires, and capabilities as those things relate to our relationship. I will grow older and more needy. You will grow into a young adult, needing freedom and the opportunities freedom allows. I assume taking just a little while longer makes sense to you."

It was met with more silence; the boy's face suggested a measure of studied thoughtfulness. Even before he looked back at the old man he began nodding – slowly, evenly, deliberately.

"It makes sense. Needs, desires, capabilities, aging, growing. I hadn't structured it around those terms. It was more like that thing you said – childhood selfishness. That's good. How long do you suggest would be reasonable?"

"Until this time tomorrow. It will give us a full day in which to continue to interact and get a better feel for the fit or misfit there may be between us. In reality, we really don't know each other yet."

Andy looked over at the grandfather clock.

“Until noon tomorrow, then. I need limits like that. I set them for myself all the time. They make me feel secure or maybe they form a framework that makes me feel secure. That is something to ponder later.”

Apparently further discussion had, with that, been cut off and deferred until the following noon. Andy continued as if that gut-wrenching interlude had not occurred.

“I need to visit my outlets and replenish the stock. I’m going to suggest they and I both add five bucks to our prices – five more for me and five more for them from their customers. Like you indicated, my work is good and my time and talent is worth more than I have been requiring. I’m afraid I often undersell myself.”

Woody was pleased to hear the boy putting real value on his talent.

“I can go alone or you can come with me. I have no way of making that decision for you.”

“I assume that is an invitation, should I want to accept it. If so, I do. I will be eager to see your work on display and meet the purveyors of the trade you ply.”

Andy grinned.

“*Purveyors* and *ply* – those were just for my benefit, right. I mean, surely you don’t talk to just *anybody* like that.”

“Correct on both counts.”

“Then I am appreciative of the proficiency and esteem, which such an unsolicited accolade implies.”

“You play the game better than I, Andy. I bow to your superiority.”

“To my preeminence, you mean?”

“Go home young man! Oh, you are home. In that case shall we make ready to meet and greet the folks at your outlets?”

“How about grabbing a candy bar to tide us over and make the pizza stop earlier than we planned?”

“That won’t shatter your security framework established by the earlier plans?”

Andy grinned.

“Regardless of what you decide about being here, Woody, you need to know that this is being the best time of

my life. I want to thank you now for however long it lasts. It's possible I might not have the right words later on."

"You are welcome and it is a wonderful time in my life as well – regardless – so thank *you*."

The boy noted that the old man had not gone as far as *he* had in saying it was the *best* time in his life. He figured that having lived 64 more years, the man had had more time to experience things he would consider 'best'. Still, he felt it didn't bode well for the decision to be rendered in twenty-four hours.

"We'll need to bundle up," Andy said. "Not supposed to get over fifteen degrees again today – wind still out of the north west between ten and fifteen miles an hour. It's about a ten-block round trip, although we'll be inside frequently after the three-block hike from here down to Hamilton Boulevard. The wind will be in our faces on the return trip. A scarf over our faces should do the trick."

"Even so, I think I'll just make it a one pair of pants outing – those, along with two sweaters and the overcoat should keep me toasty warm."

"You slip seamlessly between high class words like *purveyors* to man on the street, *toasty warm*. It speaks well of you I think. You can talk with anybody and I'm thinking you enjoy it regardless who it is – *diploma* or *shovel* as I think of folks."

"And what about you, young man?"

"I can, too. I imagine that I don't really enjoy talking with the shovels in the world. I kick myself for that. It's like I'm a snob. I'm not. I just don't know about their way of life so I don't know what to talk about."

"And you *do* when you're with the diplomas?"

"It's not really that. The diplomas I've known don't seem to care what I am or where I come from. Shovels get all bent out of shape when I use the words I feel comfortable using. It's nothing against them as people."

"That must be serious – bending shovels out of shape."

Andy wasn't in the mood for humor. He wobbled his head more than nodded. He widened his mouth more than smiled. It was more a shrug of acknowledgement without engaging his shoulders than an indication of appreciation for

the attempt at humor. Woody felt bad about the sudden glum turn things had taken, but was determined to continue being who he was, and bad jokes were definitely part of who he was.

By 12:30 they reached Hamilton Boulevard. Snow blowers and 'shovels' had been at work that morning and except for the first block most of the walks had at least one lane cleared with paths leading into the stores.

"The pool hall's here on the corner. The owner goes by Fingers – no idea why and never asked. He has all ten; I've counted them. We should stay up front by the register and not drift very far back toward the tables. You'll see why."

"Hey, little Billy Jack! Who's the big guy?"

"My uncle John. Visiting."

Fingers offered a nod so Woody withdrew the hand he was raising in the man's direction, swapping it with a nod mimicking the one being offered.

"Sold out, kid. Hope you got lots of dogs working their way up to lung cancer."

He chuckled at his little joke.

"Got jist what ya need. Look through these. Marcus thinks it's time for him ta make ya more money, Fingers. How about ya raise your price by a fin or even a sawbuck and Marcus'll go up ta fifteen bucks ta you?"

"I was thinkin' along the same line. Sounds good. I'll take the whole dozen, here. A dozen at fifteen is . . ."

"One eighty."

"Of course it is. One eighty."

He gave Uncle John a sheepish look and counted out the bills from the register. There was no invoice or bill of sale, just the exchange – bills for paintings.

Fingers turned to face Andy and shield himself from Uncle John. He spoke in a lowered voice.

"Got takers fer more a them shower curtain girly pictures. Could ya tell Marcus ta show a little more flesh – you know, guys!"

"I'll ask him ta git ta work on em, Fingers. Probably middle a the week. Okay?"

"Okay. Nice ta meet ya, Uncle John. Ya got a great nephew here. Jist great."

They left. Andy expected questions.

“I must say you appeared in your element in there, *Billy Jack* – talking with him – contrary to your earlier comment about ‘shovels’.”

“It’s not that I can’t do it. It’s more like I feel I’m cheating – not being myself – dishonest about who I am in order to obtain something I want.”

“Answer me this, Andrew. If a person’s first language were Spanish, which language would you speak to make sure he understood you and became at ease in your presence?”

““Español. Obtener su punto. Palas deben ser hablado con pala”.

“And the boy is fluent in Spanish. That should not surprise me. Let’s see if my college Spanish still percolates with some degree of accuracy inside my old gray matter. Did you say something like, ‘*Spanish. I get your point. Shovels need to be talked to in Shovel*’.”

“Good going old gray matter! But speaking shovel to them feels like I’m putting them down. Spanish is a real language.”

“So is Shovel, kid. The point is, you put them at ease. Approaching a person at the level he can understand is never a put down; it’s a mark of your character. Nobody’s less worthy because of how he has learned to talk, right?”

“Right. My brain has been skirting all around that point trying to help me justify my approach. That’s good.”

“A *fin*, really? *That’s* a five-dollar bill?”

“Surely you knew that, Woody. You’re putting me on.”

“Me? Put anybody on? Wherever did you get such a notion?”

That time Andy was able to chuckle without allowing the growing gloom to interfere.

Within the next half hour they contacted the other three, each time Andy talking the talk of the person with whom he was dealing. Each time he stole a peek at Woody and offered a wink. They all agreed to the price increase. The woman at the bank suggested twenty for ‘Marcus’ since they were easily able to sell his work for twice or three times that amount. In all, young *Billy Jack* had collected \$650.00 with requests to increase the number of paintings by a third the next week.

They walked on toward the pizza place.

“See. I’m rich and it looks like I’m going to be getting richer.”

“Maybe it is time to look into the possibility of a one man show at an art gallery,” Woody suggested.

“I’ve thought about that, but I’m afraid they’ll demand to deal with the artist in person – Marcus.”

“Many artists only work through agents. Some of the most popular contemporary artists remain reclusive on purpose – it adds an air of mystery.”

“Yeah, but I’m betting none of them have a snout nosed kid named Billy Jacks as their agent.”

“No. But many have distinguished looking older gentlemen acting as their go-between. I do clean up pretty well.”

Woody stood up straighter and put his hand inside the front of his coat as if striking a dignified pose.

Andy’s eyes lit up and then dimmed.

“Something to discuss – maybe – *after* noon tomorrow. I said maybe.”

The old man pulled the boy close to his side. Andy offered his arm around Woody’s waist. They walked on for nearly a block. Interestingly, the pizza place was named, The Pizza Place.

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CHAPTER FIVE

The Rest of the Story

Andy ordered a medium, deep dish, *Belly Buster* and Woody a small, regular crust, sausage and mushroom. Each came with a pitcher of soda – Mountain Dew for the boy and Diet Pepsi for the old man. It was a less awkward time than the old man had anticipated – considering the major pending decision and all the things that the boy had apparently put on hold. Conversation flowed easily. It was frequently punctuated by giggles – not all from the boy. Woody sensed Andy was trying to unreasonably extend their stay at the restaurant. The reason for that eventually became evident.

A girl entered and immediately moved behind the counter where she administered a loving embrace to the owner – *Pizza Place*, himself, Woody assumed. He awaited Andy's facts and figures.

"That is a girl. Her name is Amy. She is the daughter of Mack, the man who owns this place. She works here after school. I'm usually here later. I hoped she'd come before we left."

'No kidding,' the old man thought to himself, then smiled and spoke.

"She looks to be about your age."

"Almost exactly – just ten days' difference. She's older, but she says that's okay these days."

"She seems very nice."

"And pretty, too, don't you think?"

"Yes. Very pretty."

The youngster's eyes met across the room. She offered a look of surprise, perhaps puzzlement.

"She's surprised to see anybody with me. Is it alright if I continue the Uncle John charade for now? They know me here as Billy – Billy Jacks."

"Your call, Billy."

Andy filled a pitcher, placed it on a tray and moved across the room in their direction.

Andy/Billy lowered his voice.

"She always brings me a second pitcher and Mack doesn't charge me for it."

“I see. May I assume she is special to you?”

Before there was time for an answer the girl arrived. She placed the pitcher on the table beside Andy and stacked the empty pizza pans on the tray placing them on a nearby table. Andy scooted over to the wall and Amy slid in beside him.

“Amy, this is my Uncle John – well, I call him Uncle, but he’s more like a family friend. It’s a long and boring story.”

He was mellowing his story on the fly, partly in the service of honesty and partly, perhaps, with the hope a long term relationship might demand some tweaking.

“Uncle John, this is Amy.”

“I assume you two know each other,” Woody said playfully pointing back and forth from one to the other.

Andy giggled. Amy looked puzzled.

“You will come to learn he’s full of funny stuff. When you’re not sure, just chuckle. That’s what I do.”

“Glad to make your acquaintance, Sir. You have a very fine nephew.”

Andy seemed disappointed with the description. He’d have preferred something like stunningly handsome, or a super stud, or . . . his fantasies went on.

“If you youngsters will excuse me, I’ll ask you to point me toward the restrooms.”

Andy turned to Amy.

“I just imagine that is his way of thinking he is giving us our privacy for a while.” He turned back to Woody. “But, just in case, to the rear and take a left. The one you will want says, MEN on it.”

The two youngsters tittered. Apparently, she got *his* humor. They held hands beneath the table.

When Woody returned ten minutes later, they were involved in some intense conversation. He *had* wanted to give them some time alone although he had to admit he had no idea what twelve year olds did in their time alone especially in a restaurant with the girl’s father watching every move. Anyway, he returned and remained standing.

“That’s his way of indicating it is time for us to leave. It was good seeing you. Thanks for the soda and stuff.”

Woody wondered just what ‘stuff’ he might have

missed, but refrained from making any of the several, inanely humorous remarks that came to mind. The youngsters stood and Amy walked them to the cash register. Woody felt something being slipped into his palm – the right palm as it hung down at his side. His quandary lasted only a moment. It was a twenty-dollar bill. Clearly Andy thought it would appear more natural if ‘Uncle’ were to pay the bill. The uncle paid the bill.

As they turned to leave, in what seemed like a very sweet gesture to the old man, Andy took the young lady’s hand in his and patted it gently while looking her into her eyes.

“See you next time.”

“Sure, next time,” she repeated.

Outside, the monologue began before the door had closed.

“Isn’t she wonderful? She likes to listen to me talk and I like to listen to her. She has the prettiest smile I’ve ever seen – and, really white teeth. She’s quite intelligent. She goes to public school. She thinks my parents have me home schooled. So far I’ve avoided the, ‘where do you live’, question. Her father says when she turns fifteen she can group date. Well, what do you think?”

“About group dating at fifteen?”

“No. About Amy.”

“She certainly seems very nice. You know what impressed me the most about her?”

“Her hair, eyes, eyebrows. I love her eyebrows. I think she may augment them with a pencil.”

“I was referring to the very natural way she placed a full out hug around her father’s waist when she first arrived and how he leaned down and planted a kiss on the top of her head.”

“Yeah. They always do that. They always mean it. I know I shouldn’t be, but I’m really jealous of that – that she has a parent to hug like that. It is hard for me to even imagine how wonderful that must be. Mom wasn’t a hugger and Miss HmmHmmbreath was much handier with a paddle than a hug. Of course, I’ve never told her about the jealous thing due to the intricacies of the lies I’ve had to tell her. That stinks that I have to do that, but if I told her the truth I’d put her in a bad

spot – knowing things about me that somebody might come asking about some time.”

“I understand about both of those things. I’m glad lying is uncomfortable for you. Having to lie *should* be uncomfortable. The discomfort speaks to your level of character. I was really impressed by the way you said good bye – patting her hand in such a gentle and meaning filled way. That was sweet and I could see in her eyes she thought so, too.”

“Girls are really hard to figure out.”

It seemed an odd segue, especially because he followed it to nowhere. The old man let it go. Maybe it was another of those things the boy was holding back until after noon the following day.

“Thank you for lunch or supper – for the pizza, I guess,” Woody said.

“You’re welcome. We really pulled off that money exchange slick, didn’t we?”

“I’ve never seen it done slicker. Here’s the change, by the way. How do you feel about your transactions and the new arrangements you brokered at your outlets, today?”

“Very good. For a second there I thought Mrs. Thomlinson, at the bank was going to insist on speaking in person with Marcus, but instead she doubled my take. Yup. It was a good day – that way.”

“Groceries, now?” Woody asked as they approached the corner.

“Just over one block toward home. We can both pick things out – things we like.”

He paused, then continued.

“Maybe we should wait and put it on the schedule for tomorrow afternoon.”

Woody understood the underlying message – no need to stock up on things the old guy liked if he weren’t going to be around.

“That is entirely up to you. You were low on cocoa last night and milk.”

“Okay. We will go ahead and get those things, and we need ham salad and potato salad and chips and bread and those little white donuts covered in powdered sugar – I love

those little guys. They are like an entire food group for me.”

“You must be careful of them – see what they did to my hair.”

The puzzlement lasted but a second. White donuts. White hair. It was even worth a chuckle.

Considering the growing shopping list the old man figured that at least the milk could be classified as healthful. He wondered just what sort of nutrition standards the boy maintained. If he were to bet, he’d put his money on the side of meat, veggies, and fruit – the boy was too astute to go any other way. The ‘good for you stuff’ first and ‘good to the taste buds stuff’ second.

They were in and out of the store in ten minutes, sticking closely to the suggestions the two of them had made. Woody added a sack of little marshmallows for the hot chocolate. Andy approved.

As they drew close to the hotel, the old man spoke.

“I have things to think through, son. You go inside. I need to walk awhile, alone.”

“I have a better suggestion if you will allow me to proffer it.”

The old man smiled. How many twelve year olds in the entire history of twelve year olds had ever used that word in place of offer? Heck, how many college graduates used that word?

“Of course, you can always *proffer* your suggestions.”

“Well, this really is not a safe neighborhood to go for a stroll in. I run every day, but not outside. Come in and I’ll show you a really great, safe place for you to walk – inside and private.”

Woody was intrigued. He accompanied the boy back between the buildings, down the cement steps and across the vacant area to Andy’s Palace. They put the groceries away – cupboard and refrigerator.

“You will want to leave your coat on. There is a stairway just beyond my studio that goes up to the first floor and then widens considerably into a carpeted version and continues on to the second – well, on up to the tenth, actually. It’s the second where we’re going. Let me show it all to you and then I’ll leave you alone.”

They reached the second floor. Andy leaned down to the baseboard and plugged in an extension cord. Hundreds of tiny, clear, LED, Christmas Tree lights came on around the floor, arranged tightly back against the walls that fronted the rooms.

“It’s hard to see at first, but your eyes will adjust. Each floor has six rooms along each of the two long sides and two along the shorter front and back. In between is like this common area thirty feet wide and ninety feet long front to back. There are sofas and chairs and small tables in it – where the hotel guests could get out of their rooms and mix with others or stretch their legs. That makes the walking circle, in close to the room walls, 240 feet long. Twenty two laps and you have a mile. I run 44 laps most mornings before breakfast and showering. The lights use almost no power and provide enough light for my purposes – or yours if you are just walking.”

“I see. Very nice and, as you imply, safer I’m sure than out on the streets. Thank you. I will be able to find my way back downstairs and will make sure to turn off the lights. I may be up here for quite a while.”

“Okay, then. I’ll leave you to your walking and thinking. Down at that other end I have unwrapped a really nice couch. I use it to lie back on and think sometimes. I guess I will see you later.”

The thoughtful implication had been that if the old man’s legs got tired he could still stay and think in privacy.

Andy turned and left. After the first ‘lap’ Woody removed his coat and lay it on the couch, determining his two sweaters would keep him warm enough even there in the unheated area. It was out of the wind and that made a significant difference. He walked and thought for several hours. He didn’t keep track of the laps even though he felt sure he would be questioned about it.

It wasn’t that he was not comfortable with the boy – he was as comfortable with him as he had been with any youngster he had ever known. The boy needed an adult in his life, not because he wasn’t apparently coping with life unbelievably well, but like he had indicated, having an adult around provided a sense of security. Just being twelve was a

tough enough time. However, he wouldn't stay just because of that. Most any grown up could serve that purpose – a dog even – bark at the ominous shadows, cuddle during uncertain times and play when things seemed fine. Although he felt sure he had another six years of adequate vitality left – the six needed to see the boy off to college or wherever at 17 or 18, after that he was bound to be on the decline. He didn't want the boy to feel responsible for him at that point. *This boy would.*

He liked the boy – very much. He understood they would be able to work out a very healthful and mutually satisfying relationship. He had to wonder however, if his own motivation was not strictly selfish – trying to build a relationship with a youngster that would be better and more solid than the one he had with his own son. It would not be fair to try and run the kid in as substitute player late the fourth quarter of his life. The boy was brilliant and wise and would eventually come to understand what the old man had been up to. Such a revelation could be devastating – seeing that the relationship had been a fraud from the beginning.

And then there was that other thing. He wondered if he had really put it behind him or if he were just enjoying a momentary reprieve. It was his overwhelming depression – depression serving the purpose of hiding his debilitating guilt. And if, through this lad, he had momentarily shooed the depression into the background, would the guilt not rear its presence again and cripple him in the way it had during much of that past year. Living with either – depression or guilt – would surely cloud his ability to be the person Andrew needed in his life. He had already proved to himself that he could not beat either one by himself. The boy had, by his account, already spent half his life caring for another inadequate, emotionally crippled adult. Woody would not force such an experience, such an unfair responsibility, on him again.

It appeared real and even likely that at least one of those ominous outcomes – clinging to him somewhere deep down inside – could surface again. It would be better for them both if he just severed the relationship before either of them became dependent on it, or, worse, as the boy had suggested, the two of them should acknowledge that a state of love

existed between them.

The old man understood it would only be the *acknowledgment*, because he had no doubt he loved the boy and, to the extent the boy was able to trust and allow himself to love, that Andrew loved him.

In a way, it was love, misplaced, that had led to the old man's guilt and depression. He had been volunteering at the Boy's and Girl's Club near his room way across the city from the hotel. It had been one of the very best times in his life – interacting with the youngsters, holding how-to-write sessions, and tutoring in a variety of subjects. Best of all, he enjoyed the unstructured interaction – listening to what was important to them, 'proffering' suggestions when appropriate, counseling when a young life had become overwhelmed.

At that time, he still had a car and drove, although usually alone. On one occasion, many minutes after the Boy's Club bus had left to take several dozen youngsters on a camping trip to the lake, Bert arrived. Woody understood the boy lived in a troubled home so didn't even ask why he had been delayed. He received permission from the director to drive Bert to the lake so he could join in with the others and return with them on the bus the following day.

They were talking as Woody slowed and navigated the narrow off ramp, which lead to *Sunny Lake Drive* – the access road to the lake and campgrounds. It was a severe, steep curve that dropped some fifty feet from the bypass to the flats. Halfway down, they met a car coming up – going the wrong way. It was moving erratically and flying along at a high rate of speed. It crashed into them, forcing them off the ramp. The car flipped and fell nearly thirty feet onto a concrete waterway below.

Woody was knocked unconscious, but was otherwise relatively unharmed. The car had rammed them on the passenger side door and young Bert was badly injured. He remained in a coma for days. In some ways that was a blessing since eleven of his bones had been broken – shoulder, upper arm, ribs, both legs, more. Those could be set and would heal. The nerves in his spine, however, had been severed and he had no control of his body below his chest. There was also at least moderate brain damage, which

affected his speech and dulled his mental processes. The full extent would only be known later.

Woody had stayed by the youngster's side in the hospital for most of the first week and was there when he regained consciousness. It fell to him, therefore, to offer the first, simplified explanation about what had happened. Later a doctor had done what he could to explain the technicalities. Members of his family dropped in for a few minutes at a time, but on no dependable schedule. On each occasion, Bert was surprised all over again. Clearly, however, they were exceeding his expectations.

The driver had been intoxicated – seventeen – with no insurance. Bert's mother had no insurance. Woody arranged to make payments to the hospital, but never, during the rest of his life, would he have been able to pay it off.

He convinced himself that he had no business having had the child in the car with him – an old man who, some years before, had told himself that he must stop doing such things. Being responsible for himself was one thing – for another life, quite a different thing. He understood his skills and reaction time had slowed and dulled. If only he had stuck to what he knew was right and sensible. But he had let the disappointment showing on the little boy's face convince him that just one more time would surely be alright.

It hadn't been the old man's fault, of course, but under the circumstances, Woody would not be convinced of that. Eventually, the state took custody, assumed the bills and placed Bert in a sheltered care facility in the central part of the state. Thinking he was allowing the boy time to settle in and get adjusted to his new surroundings, Woody waited four weeks before making the seventy-five-mile bus trip to visit him. When he walked into his room, Bert seemed to have no idea who he was. The old man tried to converse with him, to find some shared memories, but it proved fruitless. As far as the boy was concerned he might as well have been a chair or a lamp. The brain dysfunction was far more severe than the doctors had led the old man to believe.

Woody was devastated. That visit had taken place seven months prior to his encounter with Andrew. During that time the old man's feelings of guilt grew. As depression,

dependably does, it crept in and dulled guilt's unrelenting grasp. The inevitable tradeoff, of course, was helplessness and despair. Life came to have no purpose other than magnifying the old man's misery.

Woody allowed himself time to get his estate in order and draw up a new will with the Boy's Club as the sole beneficiary. He took the last thousand dollars for himself and began walking the streets. He had no schedule or destination in mind. He had no places he wanted to visit or things he wanted to do – no people he wanted to see. Every hour of every day overflowed with unbearable self-reproach – shame, self-hate, regret. Those things feed on themselves and eventually devour a person. He wrapped himself in his deep sadness and waited for death to rescue him.

The afternoon before, he had broken his last ten-dollar bill, for a pack of gum – he loved Dentine. He found a spot in Old Town that was well enough hidden in the twilight to provide privacy yet in a place where in the light of day his body would be found – sooner rather than later. He had his burial policy – a pay-to-bearer bond – in his coat pocket, with instructions for an immediate, inexpensive, cremation – spread his ashes in some perennial flower garden or flush them and at least feed the fish. He really had no preference. There was no one in his world who would wonder about him. He was fully satisfied with his decision. The frigid conditions would be perfect that night. He had read that freezing to death was akin to just falling asleep. That evening he was looking forward to the freedom promised by his final slumber.

* * *

Even if none of those reasons for avoiding the relationship with the boy afforded him a legitimate reason to run away, the truth was Woody was an old man with the frail nature of old age beginning to intrude on him in noticeable ways; Andy was a youngster, still growing and developing, vibrant, energetic, irrepressible. Perhaps it came down to that difference: a child in the spring of his life and an old man in the winter of his.

After three hours of walking laps in the dim light of the second floor and thinking and wondering this, and supposing

that, the old man made his decision. Surely, such a man would become a ruinous burden on any young person. Whether or not the rendering of the decision should wait until noon the next day, he was not certain. It might be best if he were on his way immediately.

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CHAPTER SIX

When is Half a Whole?

“You were gone a long time. Not complaining. Not sure why I felt the need to point out the obvious. How many laps?”

Woody smiled.

“Three hours’ worth at approximately my usual speed of three miles an hour. I will leave that for you to compute.”

“I made ham salad sandwiches and can open the potato salad. Milk, pop or coffee.”

“How thoughtful. I’m still quite full from earlier. Maybe a half sandwich and small glass of milk.”

“I’ve sometimes wondered about the factors necessary to define a half sandwich,” Andy offered with more attendant thought that seemed reasonable.

It had been the last thing the old man expected his response would foster. Anyway, he couldn’t resist urging an explanation.

“I just bet you have. Any conclusions?”

Andy went about setting the table.

“I have. Watch me, here.”

The old man took a seat at the table, truly interested.

“I have here three slices of bread. I will cut one in half. Now I will spread the ham salad on one whole slice and one half slice. I will cover the well-spread whole slice with the second whole piece of bread. That is clearly a sandwich. I will now cover the well-spread half piece of bread with the other half piece of bread. Would you not agree that is also a sandwich – just smaller and of different proportions?”

“Yes, I suppose I would.”

“Now, watch this. I cut the sandwich made with two full pieces of bread in half. Those two sections now truly qualify, I believe, each as half a sandwich, while the other one of the same size and proportions as each of those halves, still qualifies as a full sandwich.”

“I see. You are saying it is the intent of the sandwich creator that is more important than the amount of material, when it comes to defining ‘a’ sandwich.”

“Right. I mean the sub shop makes ‘a *sandwich*’ that is

six feet long. When somebody eats a six-inch section of it he doesn't pretend to be eating 'the sandwich'. But, when the sub shop makes a sandwich from a six-inch roll, they also call that 'a sandwich' so in that form the person *would* be eating a *full* sandwich."

"I surrender to your superior reasoning on the matter, however" – the old man said, reaching across the table and taking half of what had been part of the larger sandwich – "I do believe this qualifies, according to your reasoning, as half a sandwich. Just what I wanted in the first place. And, what's left is, according to your reasoning a sandwich and a half even though it is no larger than the two-slice sandwich you made earlier. Hmm!"

"This is so much fun, isn't it?" the boy said beaming."

"Yes, I must admit it is fun."

The old man's response had been less upbeat than Andy thought it should have been since, after all, it was strictly about fun. He took that as a bad sign, but tried not to show it.

Still, the old man *felt* the reaction. The boy continued.

"The Deli guy wrapped the two salad containers together in sheets from last week's newspaper. I found two interesting articles. May I tell you about them?"

Woody thought the request for permission was odd.

"Of course, you may tell me about them."

Andy poured the milk and tore off two sections of paper towel for them to use as 'plates' and later 'napkins'. The articles were circled. Andy continued.

"This first one is about the Orphanage at which I lived – *The Washington County Children's Home*. Haven't heard anything about it since I left there. It says they have run into severe financial problems. The County Board and the Federal Government both cut funds and a major supporter died. It presents a real problem since there is no place for those thirty some kids to go. That's just awful, I think. I hated the place, but at least it was there for me when there wasn't any other place. I got shelter and food and clothes and schooling and many of the other things kids need.

"Then the other article. The *Bradford Retirement Home* has announced it will close its doors the middle of February. That's a low rent place subsidized by government and donors,

for people that have to live on Social Security. The government cut way back on its contribution. I didn't know Social Security amounted to such a tiny amount. I don't see how any old person can possibly survive on that. Where will those people go? I'm really upset about both of those articles."

"I can understand you are, Andy. I know the Retirement Home although it wasn't the one where I stayed. I also know there really aren't places those folks can afford in this city – four of them sharing a one bedroom apartment, perhaps."

Andy shook his head.

"What an undignified way for people to have to live out their final years, Woody."

"I agree. I'm certainly sorry about the apparent fates of both places."

"Can I tell you about a *way-out* idea I have?"

"What's this with you suddenly feeling you have to ask my permission to speak? That's not the way we've been functioning."

"I guess I don't want to do anything to upset you. You probably can figure why."

"Oh. I see. Yes. Well, please just talk – no restrictions, okay?"

Andy nodded and washed a mouthful of sandwich down with milk. It required a well-executed double swallow. Twelve-year-old boys are the world class experts in that move.

"Just listen. I know it will sound crazy at first. But I have found *that* has never been a good reason for me not to give something further consideration."

Finished with his 'half a sandwich' and drink, Woody wiped his mouth with his 'napkin', folded his hands on the table, and prepared to lend his full attention to the boy's idea.

"Kids need adults in their lives for all the obvious reasons. Old people can serve most of those obvious reasons. Old people need various kinds of help – getting dressed, tying shoes, getting wheelchairs pushed, being read to, having letters written for them, somebody to just chat with and to go on walks with, and lots of things I'm sure I don't even know about. Kids can do all, or at least lots, of those

things for them. I can't understand why it hasn't been done before – have kids and old folks live together so they can take care of each other – share their special talents with each other.”

“And,” the old man continued, “you are thinking this old hotel would be an ideal place to start – private rooms in which old and young could double up, open spaces on every floor for play and happy times, city buses for school and shopping . . .”

“And, this huge basement where they could set up something like cottage factories where they could make things to sell and help augment their income – like I do. I know many of the orphans get a government check every month – I don't know how much. We – well, at least I – am going to begin making a list of steps to take, information I will need about the property, rules and regulations, and other stuff. I assume it'll take a lawyer right off. One of Amy's uncles is a lawyer. Maybe he can help or recommend somebody. I know there are legal associations that assist people who can't afford to pay for help.

“Can you just imagine how happy kids would be to have people in their lives that wanted to have them around?”

“And old people who would relish having young people around,” Woody added. “You present a fascinating possibility. Lots of unknowns – laws, as you indicated, the availability of this building, what a realistic budget would be, and a very short time line in which to accomplish it all considering the closing dates. It will take a great deal more money than you and I could supply.”

“Then we just find some other supply,” Andy said with full confidence. “I have met the bank president and his wife – she's the one who buys my paintings. From the clothes they wear and their shoes, I can tell they are as rich as blazes. They might have wealthy social contacts the could get interested.”

“They well might.”

The old man understood that the plan had less than a one in a thousand chance of getting off the ground. That might be reduced to as little as one in five hundred if he were to be there to guide the lad. Add in his friends in the law department at the college where he had taught, and the eager

young brain trust of business and finance majors, and that might even drop it to something nearer one in one hundred. Still, it was a real long shot. But then there was the secret ingredient that dared not be overlooked – Andrew Martin Hunter – the most remarkable young person Woody had ever encountered.

On the way back down the stairs from the second floor, Woody had decided to contact a young friend in the Sociology Department at his college and ask him to find some way to keep an eye on the boy – not to interfere, but to be available if things should turn sour for him. He could, instead, turn that call into one to Robert Scott, the head of the Law Department with perhaps eventual call-forwards to Gary Potter in the Business Department and Sarah Denton at the School of Social Work.

His old chest began to ache – stress and anxiety he was sure, and not a heart attack. It was his body's dramatic and insistent way of asking him to be very sure he was fully prepared to make an about face in his decision. He had already verbalized the formula – young people need old people; old people need young people; they thrive in each other's presence. If he truly believed it would be a lifesaving approach for the old folks and the kids who were in imminent danger of being evicted, he had to believe it would work for him and the boy as well.

He sighed the fullest and longest sigh of his life, then stood and hitched his head for the boy to follow him over to the living room area. The boy was puzzled, but didn't hesitate. Woody walked to the Grandfather clock that stood beside the desk. He opened the glass door that covered the face. He physically nudged Andy into position where his view would be clear and unobstructed. The old man raised his hand, extended his index finger and began rotating the big hand, round and round until it obviously represented twelve o'clock noon of the following day. He closed the door and turned to his young companion. He reached out and put his hands on the boy's shoulders. The youngster looked up at him and put on a major frown. Woody spoke.

"There is no reason to wait another fourteen hours. I hereby propose that the lives of young person, Andrew Martin

Hunter, and old person, Woodrow Wadsworth Wentworth, hereby be joined as the informal Hunter/Wentworth family alliance, based in honesty and mutual respect and intending many years of joyful comradeship.”

Andy cocked his head, his still puzzled face slowly smoothing and gradually blossoming into his wonderful grin.

“*I do* or whatever the correct response might be.”

“I’m thinking a solid shake and the hug of all hugs should make it official.”

They had the shake – an extended, hand on hand, gaze-holding, eye to eye moment. They had the hug – a tears matching tears moment that neither wanted to end. Eventually Andy whispered something:

“Woodrow Wadsworth Wentworth? Really? You poor kid?”

The old man’s tummy jiggled at the response, then he answered whisper with whisper.

“Finally, some long overdue sympathy, compassion, and understanding. Where were you at my christening?”

They separated with chuckles and streaked faces.

“I can see now that perhaps I was actually fortunate to be able to give myself my own middle name,” Andy said. “I’ve always felt bad about that before – like my mother hadn’t cared enough to give it any thought. Hunter/Wentworth – sounds pretty classy to me. Like a wedding headline in the society pages – the Hunter/Wentworth Nuptials.”

The Imp in the old man responded.

“Well, I for one feel fully ‘nupted’. How about you?”

“Nupted? Oh, from nuptials. Sorry, I missed that. I’m betting that by this time next month I won’t be missing many of those.”

They exchanged a smile as Andy led them to the sofa where they took seats. That time the boy remained close beside Woody.

“I have to admit that I know very little about love. I have studied it – sad I suppose to have to look up such a basic aspect about being human. What I have found in the description are words such as: fondness, tenderness, attachment, an unusual depth of caring and a feeling that the loss of a loved one would result in the deepest sort of

sadness. According to that, I have no doubt that I love you, *Old Man.*”

“And by that same wonderful description, I have no doubt that I love you, *Boy.*”

The old man reached out for one of Andy’s slender, young hands and held it tightly between his.

Andy readily accepted it. He sat quietly for some time before speaking.

“I was expecting some very special feeling to wash over me, Woody, but it didn’t. I think that’s good, though. It tells me I’ve already been loving you for some time so the appropriate feeling was already inside me – there was no new feeling to come. That has to mean it is genuine, I think. Can love come upon one that rapidly?”

“It can and I do believe we have both proved it during these past thirty some hours.”

Woody reached his left arm across the boy’s shoulders and pulled him close. Andy lay his head against the old man as if were a natural part of a lifelong relationship. They sat quietly enjoying their new arrangement – commitment – for many minutes. From time to time Andy would offer a question or comment.

“We can ask for hugs whenever we want them, right?”

“Right.”

...

“We can *give* hugs whenever we want to, right?”

“Right.”

...

“We can say ‘I love you’ whenever we want to, right?”

“Right.”

...

How sad, the old man thought, that any lad of his age should even have to contemplate such questions. How wonderful, that from that moment on he would never have to wonder about them again.

Presently, they got on with things, clearing off the kitchen table and turning in for the night. Andy darkened the room by the pulling the cord that moved the covering over the ceiling fixture. He had one final comment from up above.

“You know, Woody, we are like that sandwich.”

“Oh? I can hardly wait to hear how.”

“Well, before, each of us was like a whole family all by himself – you being all you had and me being all I had. Now we are like we are one whole family even though there are still two of us.”

Woody smiled and allowed a tear in the darkness.

“Can we be an egg salad sandwich – that’s my favorite,” he called up.

“Sure. Egg salad with lots of mayo and pickle relish.”

“Who’s the mayo and who’s the relish?”

“Hmm. Well, mayo is smooth and tangy and relish is sweet with a tickle. I’m thinking I’m more like the mayo and you the relish.”

“Sounds fine to me,” the old man said smiling into the night.

He had actually intended his question as rhetorical – an attempt at humor to lighten the moment. He should have known better.

* * *

Woody heard the faint rush of the shower very early the next morning. He was not used to the late bedtimes that had been his lot those past few days so he closed his eyes seeking another 40 winks. Sometime later he heard a soft voice out of the darkness. It was part boy and part man and frequently crackled in between.

“Well, I hear it breathing. That’s positive. It seems to require more time to rejuvenate at night than I do. Hmm?”

“Is there some purpose to the whispered monologue or is it just verbal ruminating by an inquisitive, almost teenager?”

Giggles.

“Sorry. Here by myself I frequently think out loud. It has always helped make me feel like I wasn’t alone. I find I am very good company! Want the light on?”

“What time is it?”

“Going on nine – well it will be going on nine in an hour or so, anyway. I’ve already been back to the grocery store. Got a special breakfast ready for us. Not traditional, but I think you will understand how it’s the only reasonable one for this special morning.”

Those two sentences left so many unanswered questions the old man wouldn't even begin asking.

"Light on. Yes. Thanks. I suppose you will need to show me how to work that."

"Shade your eyes. Here it comes. I find it seems very bright emerging so suddenly right out of the complete darkness like it does down here in the basement. There. I'll go put things on the table while you dress. By then the coffee will be ready."

Woody soon appeared in the kitchen. Upon seeing the spread he had to laugh out loud.

"Never in a million years would I have guessed and yes, it is absolutely perfect for the first meal of our new . . . arrangement."

Andy went on to describe the obvious.

"Egg salad sandwiches on toast, with chips and pickle wedges on the side. If you examine the sandwiches you will notice they are unique, symbolizing our new . . . arrangement – I'm going to call it our new *family arrangement* – maybe just *family*."

They took seats across the table from each other.

The old man studied what was on his plate, but came up empty.

"I'm not sure what I am supposed to see. A sandwich apparently cut in two."

"Turn it over."

"Ah, ha! A full, uncut slice of bread on the bottom and half slices on the top – the old and the new, the two making one, all in one sandwich. Your mind works in fascinating ways, son."

Andy beamed. The reaction seemed to reflect something more than the old man's positive reaction to the sandwich. He had to ask.

"What? Have I missed something else?"

"I love it so much when you do that. You can't possibly understand. That was the tenth time."

"That? What 'that' have I done or committed ten times?"

"Referred to me as, 'son'. I mean I know I'm *not* your son and I have no intentions of trying to replace your son, but

nobody ever called me that before and it makes me feel like I'm – I'm not sure how to characterize it: special, legitimate, as if I belong or I'm wanted, maybe even precious. Can you understand?"

"I don't know how a smart boy like you could be so wrong about such a characterization."

Andy's face offered a perplexed – *pained* and perplexed – look. Woody continued.

"When I call you *son*, you see, *I* mean special, legitimate, that you belong and are wanted, and are *absolutely* precious."

The boy's face cleared and he grinned.

"You had part of my brain really going there, old man."

"Only part?"

"Yes. Part of me knew you would not deny any of those things I had listed, and yet part of me had to contemplate what you meant by the bewildering words you spoke. I must admit *that* part of me didn't get the message until you completed your off the wall unraveling of your bizarre statement. I am going to really enjoy absurdity as humor once I get a handle on it."

"It appears there is very little about yourself that you don't understand, but I have to ask, do you have any idea how beautifully you speak?"

"I have the idea that I can spit out 'mayo and pickle relish' with the best of them. So, having said that, I suppose, I really have *no* idea what you mean."

"I'm not going to explain for fear I might make you self-conscious and in some way interfere with it. Sometime down the line, I am going to encourage you to write – so just be prepared for my pitch. I think you would be an outstanding writer."

"I guess I will take that as a compliment and just await your further elucidation, and you do understand I don't use words like elucidation with just anybody."

"I've noticed that. In the pool hall, you immediately slipped into the man's speech pattern. In the bank, you spoke collegiate English with the Vice President. With Amy, it was appropriate kid talk."

"And with you, old man?"

“A prudent potpourri of the petty, the preposterous, and the pristine.”

The boy smiled.

“You’re not such a spurious, slovenly, slouch of a speaker yourself.”

Nods and smiles.

They began to eat. Andy had a comment.

“At least the sandwiches didn’t get cold while we were talking. They’ve been in the refrigerator for an hour. Wait. Get warm? Oh, forget it.”

“They are very good. Next time I’ll show you one little trick that will make them just a bit different.”

He carefully avoided the word ‘better’.

“Then they will really be like *our* special sandwich, won’t they. You better just tell me the trick now, otherwise, I will probably bug you hourly about it between now and whenever. I tend to be that way. I await things in a most impatient fashion – unless I’m painting or studying or writing or thinking.”

Woody smiled, continued chewing and swallowed before speaking. Andy put the rest of his life on hold as he just waited.

“Drain the relish before adding it to the eggs. Mash it against a screen or strainer with a fork. A dryer mixture holds together better and contains less moisture to seep into the bread and make it soggy.”

“I really should have figured that out. Thanks for the tip.”

The boy grew silent. When that happened – and it seemed to happen often – the old man understood there was no way for him to figure what was going on inside the boy’s head. It might be relevant to the topic at hand or something light years away, zapped there by some esoteric association obvious only to Andy.

“I have a problem, Woody.”

The old man wondered if it might be the first of the typical line of personal questions that well up and often fester inside boys that age.

“Problems are always fair game. Shoot – the *problem* not the *game*, please. I am repulsed by the idea of hunting,

but then, I suppose that's my problem."

The boy smiled, intrigued by the circuitous paths the old man's thoughts often traveled on their ways from point A to B.

"Here is it, then. Feeling love for somebody is new for me. It is, I have decided, just about the most wonderful emotion I can possibly feel. Because it is both of those things – new and wonderful – I can hardly contain it. A dozen times already this morning I have wanted to say, 'I love you,' but I never hear guys saying that to each other. I formed the question terribly, but I assume you got my point."

"I believe I did. You never have to resist the urge to say I love you in my presence. You have to understand, though, that you say that without words in many ways, and that every time you do, I understand you."

"More, please."

"You left the room so quietly this morning I didn't know you had left – not wanting to disturb me said to me, 'I love you.' You asked about the light and then cautioned me against the shock of sudden brightness. That said to me, 'I love you.' You made a trek through frigid conditions to the store before sunup so you could make this special breakfast. All parts of that said, 'I love you'. In each case I heard you."

"But I want to say it."

"Then say it whenever and as often as you like."

"And I like to *hear* it, too."

"Then I will more regularly translate my feelings into words for you."

"Okay, then. That sounds great. I love you."

"It *is* great. I love you, Andy. From the tips of my toes to the old gray hairs on the top of my head, I love you."

"Thanks. I suppose that's inappropriate isn't it – saying thanks like that."

"We all react to being loved in our own ways, son. If saying thanks seems like a good and genuine way for you, then by all means say it."

"I've been worrying because love seemed so complicated, but the way you explain it, it really isn't complicated at all. I just need to be myself about it. Wow! I wish I'd have asked that last night. I laid there worrying about it, oh, maybe, 45 seconds before I could get to sleep."

There were nods and smiles and chuckles – love announcing itself in all manner of ways.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

The Plan

They spent most of the day at the kitchen table, making a list of things relevant to the hotel conversion plan and then extended that into a dozen more detailed sub-lists. It was an exciting time – the two of them brainstorming, working together on a project that was deeply meaningful to both of them. Half an hour into the venture, caught up in the boy's enthusiasm, Woody was able to put out of mind the fact it had next to no chance of getting off the ground.

Not a moment passed that wasn't filled with one of their voices making a suggestion, asking a question, or launching a new idea in the other's direction. There had been no discussion about it, but every idea and question was accepted without hesitation. Later, they would establish guidelines – once they had played with the concept fully enough to understand the parameters. They would wait until then to begin making the 'save vs set-aside' decisions.

"What time do you suppose it is?" Woody asked at last, stretching and looking around for a clock – he had pawned his watch days earlier and his back was to the Grandfather's Clock.

"The only clock I can see from here is the grandfather clock and as I recall it's still about fourteen hours ahead of where it should be. Let's see, that makes it about three. My gosh! I can't imagine we've been at this that long," Andy said standing and touching his toes several times.

No explanation for that was 'proffered'. The old man didn't ask, content just seeing the boy being the boy.

"Maybe this would be a good time to get ourselves back to the grocery for some serious shopping," Woody suggested. "My old bones are requesting that I remain in this position forever. That's always the signal *not* to listen to them."

"Probably a good idea. I have back packs we can wear to help carry things back since there will be so much. Let me go get them."

It was the first moment the old man had let himself admit that he was totally dependent on the youngster for money – well, for most everything. He was initially distressed,

but would deliberate the matter at some later point. That was just how it sat at that moment. He was certain it presented not one whit of a problem for the boy. Odds were that it had not even become a point for his consideration.

Andy returned with two large backpacks while stuffing a one-hundred-dollar bill into his front jeans pocket.

“I just looked at the thermometer outside my studio window and it reads zero. Maybe you should stay here and let me go.”

“I’ll make it a two pair of pants outing and I will be fine. You may want to consider doing the same.”

“I’ll be fine – been dressing myself most of my life and never froze yet.”

It had been an interesting exchange that established a number of things. They clearly cared for each other and would make suggestions, which indicated that. Still, each one reserved the right to make decisions about himself. It would not be a father-managing-his-young-son relationship. It would not be a son-managing-his-aged-father relationship. It would be one of the most equal relationships of which either of them had ever been a part. Clearly, that would be more of a challenge for the old man who had spent his life caring for others, than for the boy who had spent more than half of his life mostly in charge of himself.

At the store each one made suggestions. There were things to learn about each other. Primarily that the old man was a far pickier eater than the boy. Andy only really stuck up his nose at broccoli, foods with names he couldn’t pronounce, and anything containing curry, cayenne pepper or paprika. Fortunately, Woody’s longer list also contained those things – except for broccoli. Although he liked salty foods – ham, bacon, Mexican, and soup – his mature digestive system had other ideas. He was willing to move up the sweet food scale past ice cream, but stopped short of syrupy substances – sickeningly sweet, was his descriptor. They both liked beef in any form, and chicken and turkey if baked or deep fried. Woody knew better than to eat deep fried anything, but that seldom kept him from indulging.

“Better add a bottle of Tums, son.”

Also, the old man watched prices – the boy didn’t; like

he said, he thought of himself as wealthy. Perhaps once he realized how expensive it was to have a roommate that might change. Woody would let the boy work that out by himself.

To and from the grocery they continued their conversation about the plan. One thing soon became clear to Andy.

“I’m afraid I really don’t know anything about what old people need or want, or like or don’t like. I need to know that before we get much further into our plan.”

“You’re learning about me – my needs and so forth,” Woody pointed out.

“I have the distinct idea that you are not a typical representative of your generation. You have the heart of a kid and apparently, no imperative needs or wants whatsoever. Your approach to life is like that of an ever-inquisitive teenager tempered by the wisdom of your many years.”

“An interesting set of observations. Perhaps you are correct – maybe I am not a typical representative. Of course, you recognize that neither are you typical of young people.”

Andy chuckled as they turned the corner to begin the several, cold, snowy blocks back to the hotel.

“What?” the old man asked, smiling.

“If we set up a place for kids and old folks to live together based on our knowledge of them, I’m thinking none of them would survive the first month. We need to do some investigation – some ‘getting acquainted’ ground work – first.”

“You really think we are both that out of touch?”

“I think we just agreed that it is even worse than that – I don’t even know how ‘real’ kids are and *you* don’t know how ‘real’ old people are.”

“I see. We have our work cut out for us, then. I’m sure I can get invited to the Retirement Home that is closing. How about the County Home on your part?”

“I will look it up on line. If Miss BlaBlabreth is still there maybe not. She and I didn’t part on the best of terms.”

“Well, if that doesn’t work out we can visit kids in hospitals and talk to kids that attend the YMCA after school programs.”

“I’ll look into that as soon as we get back to our place. Hey! Did you hear that? Our place. I love that. It just rolled

off my tongue all natural like – as if that’s how it’s always been. Maybe it always has been considering the extra bunk and chair. Fascinating!”

Woody wasn’t sure how to respond so he just nodded and smiled. It had raised a question.

“You have internet access? I haven’t seen evidence of that – computer. In fact, I haven’t even seen a TV come to think of it.”

“A high-end laptop inside the roll top desk beside the big clock. I have the password for secure access from the Bank’s Wi-Fi and that’s my access route. The TV is in a room up on the top floor – I call it my TV Suite. From way up there I receive all the over the air channels from 50 miles in all directions – free of course. Twenty some channels. I don’t get the cable news channels, but I have aps on my phone that allow me to see whatever I want on them.”

“I guess I wasn’t aware of your phone either.”

“I keep it in my hip pocket when I’m wearing pants. You probably thought it was a wallet. Otherwise it sits on the top of the dresser under a handkerchief – to keep off the dust. Since nobody ever calls me – I don’t give out the number – you’ve never heard it ring, I guess.”

Once back ‘home’ they unpacked things and put them away.

“Glad I took the full-sized refrigerator from the kitchen instead of one of the pint sized models out of a room. We will certainly have sufficient room to meet our new needs. Where do you stand on bread and the refrigerator?”

“I’ve heard refrigeration changes the cellular structure in bread and makes it stiffen and go stale faster so I guess I come down on the no refrigeration side of the issue.”

“I wasn’t aware of those things. Good to know. It will set on the counter beside the toaster – how will that be?”

“Fine with me, but perhaps you should consult the bread – being that close to a furnace that can make charcoal of it in 60 seconds may be a bit unnerving. Neurotic bread might cause indigestion.”

Andy shook his head for some time as he continued putting things away. The old man was certainly one of a kind. At one level he hoped it wasn’t contagious. On another it

hoped it was. The most likely outcome of their melding was going to be that Woody would end up with more of the characteristics of kids and he would end up with more of those of an old man. He figured neither of those would really be bad things. It deserved more thought, however.

"If there are TV programs you enjoy on broadcast networks, I'm sure we can find them and put them on our schedule," Andy went on.

"Schedule. We have a schedule?"

"Well, as I indicated earlier, I like my life to remain organized so I try to stick to a loose sort of schedule."

"I will try my best to learn your schedule so I don't interrupt it or make suggestions or demands that interfere with it. You must let me know when I cause such problems."

"I see what you are really saying."

"Well, I hope so because I said it in as straight forward a fashion as I knew how."

"You're kidding me. Oh. I thought you were suggesting I should take another look at the structure I've forced on myself and see if it might no longer be needed."

"Well, that is not what I intended, but I think we all need to do that every once in a while to make sure we aren't just blindly following some out of date set of procedures, the updating of which, might greatly improve our lives."

"I love it when you do things like that – well, I guess I love you for doing them."

"Things? Them? Me?"

"Offering gentle counsel for me to assess and then accept, reject, or accept or reject in some part. As I came to understand it from the older kids at the Home, parents often force things like that on their children and it often backfires. Austin, one of the older boys, used to say his father would tell him, 'If you are going to live under my roof you will think the way I tell you to think.' Probably fortunately for Austin, his dad died of alcohol poisoning before James either acted on his threat to run away or added the rat poison he had purchased to put the man's oatmeal."

The old man chuckled.

"I suppose none of that was really funny, Andy, and yet the way you related it in such a matter of fact, dead pan

manner seemed quite humorous. I apologize if my reaction was inappropriate. No problem between a parent and child should be treated lightly.”

“I’ve always figured we are each entitled to our own take on things – interpreting them as they seem to us – the way they hit us.”

“Austin was one of the older boys, you say.”

“Yeah. He said he had been dragged there by the sheriff, kicking and screaming, when he was twelve – *he* was kicking and screaming not the sheriff. He was fourteen the year I was there.”

The old man began to put things together. Apparently, Andrew was only at the home for one year. He entered when he was eight. That meant he left when he was nine, which further meant he had been on his own for going on two years. He wondered how long the lad had been there at the hotel, and if not for that entire interval, where he had been and how he had managed during that time. Woody thought he remembered a reference that indicated he was well informed about life as a street person.

“You’ve been quiet,” Andy said. “My impression is that when that happens you are either thinking back on your life or wondering about mine. Due to the context out of which it grew, I’m betting this time it’s about me and my life between the Orphanage and here. I’m ready to talk about it if you are prepared to listen.”

“I am, but it was not my intention to pressure you for information.”

“*Not a problem*, as kids often say these days.”

He waited for the old man to react with a smile indicating he recognized that he had used a phrase that Woody had used earlier. He received it – smile, nod, open mouth chuckle.

“I’m putting two corndogs in the microwave for me. You?” Andy asked.

“Sure. Make it two, also.”

“I like mine with mustard. You?”

“I take mine plain.”

“Two minutes for four. The sticks will be really hot.”

Thanks for the warning. Haven’t had one in years.

When my son was small they were called 'Pronto Pups'. He called them 'punto prups'."

The old man chuckled mostly to himself. Andy left it alone.

Woody tore off two sections of paper towel to cradle the goodies once out of the oven. The bell rang.

"How about you bring the doggies and I'll bring pop – you like pop with salt, right?"

The old man nodded. He assumed 'bring' referred to the couch, which had become there place to talk.

Seated in what had clearly become their spots, they engaged the corndogs to a chorus of approving oohs and ahhs. Their simultaneous reactions coxed grins. The old man had learned that the boy dawdled over his food. He figured his second 'dog' would need to be reheated by the time he got to it.

"Well, let's see. I think the first installment of the saga of Andrew Martin Hunter had reached the point where I had fallen to the ground by the fence feeling totally alone in the world and understanding that I had just been abandoned by the only truly important person in my life. For many months I took full blame for that, although I couldn't put my finger on what it was that I done so wrong – what terrible sin I had committed that had driven my mother to hate me so much that she couldn't stand to have me around – to even look at me I figured.

"Two boys about my age came and sat beside me in the grass. They didn't say anything – they just sat there close to me and let me cry it out. I figured crying must have been common there. Eventually I sat up. I remember nodding at each of them and they returned it, all without any words. I said something like, 'I guess I better go back to the office. That's where I left my stuff. What is this place anyway?'

"The short fat kid told me it was the county orphanage. The tall skinny one corrected him: 'Miss Waldbreth says we have to call it the Washington County Children's Home.'

"The tall one offered me a hand up. I thought that was very kind of him. They began walking with me back across the lawn. The closer we got to the building the further away from me they got. It seemed obvious that I was to reenter the

building by myself. I sensed that meant I was in some sort of trouble. I wasn't used to being in trouble.

By mid-first grade the principal at my school and I were having regular run-ins over my absences, but once he understood I spent those days at the public library or one of the museums he stopped getting on my case. He understood the work in my classroom was boring and probably useless for me and he seemed to enjoy having me tell him about all the things I had learned on my days off. He asked me to keep those to two a week – something about money for the school being based on attendance. I could see how I needed to be there for that. Mom never expressed an opinion one way or another about it.

“But I veered off track. I should say one thing – the boy says veering off track again. I really enjoyed those times after school when I'd stop back at the principal's office and we'd talk about my day off. He even had his secretary make me up an ID card – no picture, but my name, my address, his phone number and my mom's. He said it was in case anybody ever questioned why I was not in school. They could call him and he'd tell them something that would get me off the hook or he would come and pick me up. Never had to use it. His secretary got me a wallet to keep it in. She was a very nice woman. It's the wallet I carry to this day. Got a real ID card now.

“Anyway, inside the big, stone building, I got a stern talking to from Miss Waldbreth and she showed me the wooden paddle she used on bad boys. Although I couldn't see that I had done anything bad – just trying to get to my mother – she saw it quite another way. I never discussed it with her. In fact, I learned not to speak with her at all when I could avoid it.

“Like I told you, the boys all had cots in a big room. We each had a foot locker – like a trunk – at the foot of our cot where we kept all our possessions. There were thirty three boys when I got there and ten girls. It was the same schedule every day – awake at 6:00, boys showered together in a large shower room at 6:15, breakfast at 7:00, school there at the home at 8:00 and so on through the day until lights out at 9:00. Most every minute of our lives was scheduled for us.

“I’d never had a strict schedule and hated everything about it. On warm nights, I’d sneak out with a blanket, climb the fire escape to the roof and sleep up there. Miss Badbreath got onto me about it and she’d send the janitor looking for me. He was a good guy just doing what she told him to. Usually, he’d whistle before he got to me so I could high tail it back to my cot without ‘being caught’. The kids were closed mouthed about each other’s misadventures. I got more than my share of paddlings. She had broken most of the kids’ spirits and had them frightened of her. I was bound and determined not to allow either of those things.

“The rule among the boys was to start crying loudly at the first whack – that way it wouldn’t last as long. I refused to cry at all. I remember the last spanking she gave me. She always had another adult as a witness – a legal requirement I’m thinking.

First, I need to put the event in perspective. I had had several run-ins with her that week and had had it with her unreasonableness. So, I had filled the sugar bowl at her private dining table with salt and mixed cayenne powder into the cherry jam she always put on her toast at breakfast. I let the others know my intention so all eyes were on her that morning as she spread her toast and added four teaspoons of ‘sugar’ to her coffee. She took a nibble of toast and made a face. Then she took a big swallow of coffee as if to rinse the bad taste out of her mouth. She immediately spewed it out all over her table making a fool of herself. Everybody snickered. My defiant attitude had already made me something of a hero, but that pretty well sealed it.

“Anyway, she stood and shouted: ‘Andrew Hunter. To my office. Now!’ I stood, raised my arms above my head Rocky style and pranced, twirling, up the aisle and out the door to her office. The kids all cheered and clapped. She became livid.

“The janitor followed her as she followed me. I had already assumed the position by the time she arrived and I had placed the paddle on her desk within easy reach. Those things enraged her even more, just like I knew they would. Her formula was five strikes for minor offenses, ten for serious offenses and fifteen for whatever Andrew Hunter had done. I

expected her to stop at fifteen, but she continued to twenty and then twenty-five. As she reached thirty the janitor stepped in and stopped her, taking the paddle away and telling me to go back to the dining hall. There, I was met by a chorus: 'How many?'

"I flashed five fingers at them six times. They cheered. Although in great pain, I smiled through breakfast and continued through the daily schedule. That had been March 31st, my tenth birthday, which, by the way had gone unnoticed.

"In the wee hours of the morning of April first – April Fools' Day – I gathered my most precious things in my old suitcase, slipped out of the dormitory room, and ran away. My butt continued to quiver and burn. As I walked on into the night my fantasies involved images of that woman enduring the worst of the tortures I knew about and some I created just for her. Some nights I still wake up out of a nightmare in which I had just relived that terrible ordeal. I'm not sure why I awaken; it might be the associated emotions are too much to allow sleep. I know for sure it's at least partly the sound of my screaming. I hate it that I still hate her so much. I am legitimately afraid that if I ever see her again I will attack her with a fury no twelve-year-old has ever unleashed in the whole history of twelve year old's. I figured you needed to know about the nightmare thing so you won't be worried if it happens."

Sure, Andy. Knowing about it would keep the old man from having *any* concerns, whatsoever!

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Streets

Andy took time out to reheat his corn dog – it had been predicted – and rescue another can of pop from the refrigerator. Woody waved off the offer of one for him. The boy returned to the couch and continued.

“I made my way back to the city figuring I needed resources, and there in the country I would be unlikely to find what I needed. I knew the city. For all the evil it contained, it was at least familiar. I figured I knew what to avoid. How wrong could one kid have been? It was a terrible way for brand new ten year old to have to live, but that was the only alternative I could see.

“I had long known of a room in the basement of the library. I often went down there with the books so I could read all day without being hassled by the librarians. There was a window high up on the outside wall and a ceiling light. Early on I had moved a sizeable, tattered, rather comfortable, overstuffed chair in there from a storage area. My plan that night was to make it my temporary headquarters. That wasn’t going to happen. When I arrived, the second-floor window that had always been unlocked was locked. I searched for other points of entry, but found none. I wasn’t about to break a window at my library.

“By then I was hungry – I hadn’t eaten since breakfast. I figured that maybe there would be food in the alley behind a restaurant to which mom had sometimes taken me. I was right. The conditions were unsanitary, but that is never a consideration for a ten-year-old boy.

“It got cool early at night. The next day I visited a food pantry and offered a tear punctuated song and dance about my sick grandmother and before I knew it I was loaded up with blankets, and a small box containing canned food and fresh fruit.

“I knew of a rooftop, up a series of four old iron fire escapes so that’s where I headed. When I reached the top, I was met by two homeless men who had set up camp there. They took what I had and proceeded to shove me back and

forth between them. It was a game to them, but it was a terrifying, life threatening event to me. On several occasions, I had been pushed to the surface of the roof and one final time into the brick air vent. I hit my head and was knocked out.

“When I came to I was back down in the alley. My hair was matted in blood and my shirt was torn. My supplies were missing, including my suitcase. It had not been a good introduction to life on the street. Well, maybe it really had been. I learned how essential it was to be very cautious.

“It was late – going on midnight – when I found a place off an old fire escape on an abandoned building. It was in an entry alcove to a back door – sort of like where I found you only up high. It was just me and a package of shingles there in the dark. I fell asleep, but woke up a few hours later, shivering. I tore open the shingles and bent them over me – two and three thick. It kept me surprisingly warm.

“The next morning I set out down the alley to find food. As I came upon the dumpster behind the restaurant, a group of five boys – all several years older than I – approached me. Possible friends, colleagues, allies, I hoped. That pipedream lasted about ten seconds. They encircled me and began pushing me back and forth among them. I had to wonder what it was with these city vagrants and shoving people who were smaller than they were. Anyway, one of them got me from behind and held my arms at my sides while the others took turns hitting me – stomach, chest, face, knees to my groin. I remember the pain grew unbearable. I figured if I’d just let myself go limp and fall they might stop. I was unable to execute that move. The next thing I knew I was inside the dumpster struggling to wake up. My shoes and jeans were gone. Since I’ve always been anti-underwear, there I was, mostly in my altogether – a shirt torn to shreds and socks. I momentarily considered a creative use for one of the socks, but soon moved on.

“I dug through the dumpster hoping to find a way to make myself presentable. Between an old, stained and torn kitchen apron and a couple of well-worn dish towels, I fashioned an outfit that kept me covered in all the places the law requires one to keep covered. I knelt down at a puddle to look at my image. My face was bruised and cut and began

bleeding when I moved my cheeks or jaw. It still makes me very angry that there are people in the world who care so little about the welfare of others and are willing to blatantly disregard it for their own personal gain or perverted pleasure. I began to believe my new street world was populated only by that sort. My moment to moment terror grew, but I did my best not to panic about it all. My status as a runaway prevented me from going to the authorities or even to the do-gooder's places.

"I lived from one safe alcove and one dumpster meal to another for the better part of a month I'd say. I managed to find clothes and restrooms in which to try to keep clean and presentable. I did chores and errands for shop owners and by the end of that time I had saved back over one hundred dollars. Soup kitchens and similar agencies asked way too many questions of a boy out on his own so I avoided them.

"One evening – about dusk, I suppose – I was up on the roof of a boarded up building right across the street from this hotel. It came to me that an old hotel might just have things I could use so I found my way inside from the door on the roof. Earlier I had found those roof doors were often left unlocked. It led to a set of stairs down to the top floor. I investigated several rooms and found they were more just sleeping than lifeless. They were still furnished. I stayed that first night in a room up on the top floor. It had been the first time I had slept in a real bed since I had left home – nearly a year and a half. I really had forgotten how it felt.

"The next few days I explored the building. I found architect's drawings in an office off the huge lobby area on the first floor. That's how I discovered ways to access the electricity and water. For whatever reason, a key hung inside a basement door – the one we use. I've told you about how I came to arrange locks and such.

"I took stock of the supplies stored down here and soon had drawn up plans of my own – for my palace. That's a funny story – *palace*. At the top of my drawing I intended to print, '*My Wonderful Place*'. I wasn't careful about spelling 'place' and it came out 'Palace'. I liked that so kept it."

"By then school was out for the summer so I could continue running errands mornings without being questioned

and threatened by the cops. I worked at building my big room down here from noon on. One day, passing the bank, I saw a display of art work in the window. I studied the individual pieces and told myself I could do better than many of them. I walked three miles to an arts and crafts store and purchased paints, paper and mats. I was still saving most of the money I made. I started painting at night and when I had a dozen finished and matted I began making the rounds to possible dealers. That's when I started recognizing that different outlets required different sorts of work. A month later I had two outlets and now, four. I've kept it at that. I'd have no time for anything else if I expanded beyond that and it is important to me to keep at my education. I built the platform so I could utilize the mid-day light and here we are.

"At the end of the school years I rescue books from the trash containers behind school buildings. I do science and math every day –10th grade books now – and pretty much fill in the rest by reading widely. I suppose that catches you up with the highlights of my life."

"Quite an adventure. I am sorry so much of it had to be so frightening and painful."

"And *lonely*. Me too, but that's behind me now. I mostly look back on it as a period during which I learned things most boys my age never get an opportunity to learn – mostly useful things once I figured out who I could trust and who I couldn't. It has given me tremendous faith and confidence in myself – my ability to cope and survive. I also believe I have a far more complete view of life than most people."

The old man nodded, thinking no child should have to endure a single day of such a life just to survive, let alone to expand his purview and prove his mettle to himself. He didn't share those thoughts with the boy, however.

"Your mother?"

Woody had offered it as a tentative question. One to which a response could be made at any level of detail or none at all.

"I sort of left that out didn't I? Well, let's see. Soon after I got back to town I tried to find out about her. I figured she wouldn't want to see me, but I felt the need to know where

she was. She was no longer where we had lived last. I got it out of the mailman that she had left a California forwarding address, but he had no idea what it was. That was enough for me, anyway. She had purposefully removed herself from my reach. It was good that I knew how I stood with her. After that I could harbor no illusions of someday getting back together.

“By then I no longer blamed myself. I had always been the sane, strong one between the two of us. She had been the weak and crazy one. If there was blame to be assigned it would not be to me. I’ve just left the whole blame thing in limbo. I figure no good purpose will be served by making it all her fault. I have no way of knowing how her parents might have contributed to her instability because I was never allowed to know them. That says something was very wrong between them.”

“A wise decision though a tough one to keep, I’m thinking.”

“There it is again. You know just what needs to be said to kids. Your psychology training maybe, but more from experience with kids, I’m thinking. And I think I finally get it.”

“You lost me. You finally get *it* – *what?*”

“You just said you loved me in that response you gave to the blame/no blame thing, and I said it to you when I offered you a second pop. I really got both of those. Good for me.”

“Yes, good for you.”

“I imagine your next question will be about how I feel after all our talking – sharing – about the two of us.”

The old man was amused at the assumption, but offered a single, serious nod.

The boy had no ready answer. The question had been genuine and was as much for him as for Woody. He remained thoughtful for some time.

“On the intellectual level I approve of what we’ve done – the sharing. On the emotional level I have come to feel better about myself and the lot I’ve been dealt, but I seem to feel worse about you. It’s like I should have been there to help you, you know – earlier. Maybe once I hear the end of your story – how you came to be in that storefront that night – I’ll feel somehow better.”

“It seems it is time for that section of *my* story, then. It

may seem sad as I recount it but you already know how it turned out, so keep this wonderful ending in mind.”

The old man related the story, much like he had relived it while thinking things through on his walk up on the second floor. At several points, tears dribbled down Andy’s cheeks. Woody didn’t comment, thinking it was best to lay it all out and let the boy experience his honest reactions.

“And that pretty well tells the rest of *my* story, Andy.”

Andy nodded and wiped at his face with the back of a throw pillow.

“This will work better,” the old man said offering his handkerchief.

Andy nodded appreciatively and had things to say.

“Have you noticed how we reacted to our problems in different ways, Woody?”

“I have my own sense of that. I will be interested to hear your take on it.”

“We both got sad and mad – me mad at the world and you at yourself. I blamed mom and Miss Badbreth so I took it out on Miss Badbreth – she was the only one available for me to target – and that kept me fighting. You took it out on yourself because you refused to blame anybody else – not your wife for her absences from the home, or your son for putting his mother’s negligence on your shoulders, or the drunken driver – and you just gave up. I hit old Badbreth with every angry missile I could toss at her, while you just sort of withered up and encouraged yourself to rot away.”

The old man was amazed – again – at the boy’s grasp of terribly complex issues.

“We have the same take on things, son.”

Andy sighed.

“Neither one of us has fixed himself yet, you know,” the boy went on thoughtfully.

“I know, although there is no doubt that your approach was a healthier one than mine. You kept trying to fix yourself and your situation. I gave up.”

“But no more, right? You put that behind you, right?”

The questions were driven by something akin to passion.

“That is my hope. I don’t know how to be more honest

with you than that.”

“The first few months at the orphanage, like you, I felt some guilt, wondering what I had done to make my mother throw me away. That soon turned to hate for her and now my feeling toward her is just . . . blah! I don’t think the depression you talked about ever took hold of me.”

“I think you’re right. You are a first-class fighter not a retreator.”

“I always had a plan that I believed would make things better for me. It changed from time to time, but at any given moment I always kept a plan to work toward. I guess I think of myself more as a planner than a fighter.”

“I’ll accept that. There is no doubt that you are an exceptional planner.”

“Speaking of which, we need a plan for the rest of the day – this evening. I’m way behind on my painting so I need to spend time doing that.”

“And I still haven’t examined your two large book cases. With your permission, I’d really like to do that.”

“Good. If you get bored you’re welcome to come up and watch me paint. I’ll appreciate any suggestions.”

The old man would make certain he eventually got ‘bored’. The boy’s ‘you’re welcome to’ sounded more like ‘I’d really like you to’.

Aside from the young man’s occasional giggles, his attraction to Amy, and his affinity for Mountain Dew, he offered very few typical ‘almost teenager’ characteristics. Woody could understand how that had come about, but felt bad he was missing out on his childhood – and time was rapidly pushing through the stage in life set aside for that. The old man would think about it – building an igloo, snowball fight, paintballs at ten paces, playing catch, a batting cage, roller rink, a rock concert. Best of all, of course, would be positive interaction with other kids. *That* might be an unforeseen, positive byproduct of the plan they were forming.

He chuckled out loud, thinking, ‘An old codger, cogitating’. He knew the boy would have enjoyed that.

The boy’s library was wide-ranging, just as Andy had indicated. The little Mermaid on one end of the spectrum with Will Durant’s 11 volume masterpiece, *The Story of Civilization*

on the other. There were works of science, math, art, sociology, psychology, medicine/physiology, business, architecture, seamanship, aeronautics, philosophy, educational practices, and fiction from A to Z. He found six novels for boys his age by W.W. Worth. That brought a smile and a tear. He patted the one he had slipped out and put it back.

He passed nearly half an hour with the books, thoroughly impressed by the range and depth of what he found. He felt sure he would be occupying many cold winter nights with selections from those shelves.

“Knock, knock,” the old man said as he started up the steps to the boy’s studio. “Well lit, for sure,” he added turning around to look over the area more carefully.

“Just to see what the result would be I once wore sun glasses here under the lights as I mixed my paints and painted. The pastels I thought I was using turned into brilliant hues. I put it into a saying: ‘The brightest offerings of life can be dulled depending on the lenses through which we choose to view things.’ What do you think of that?”

“Insightful, true, an unmistakably positive message.”

“That’s pretty much what I thought, too. I have lots of those. I should probably right them down so when I get old I won’t forget them. Although an unfortunate choice of words there, I’m sure you understand there was no intention to put you, as an old person, down – and please don’t require me to diagram that sentence.”

He giggled, and continued working, needing no response to be certain the old man understood.

“All winter scenes this evening, I see.”

“Yeah. That way I use basically the same pallet. I’m particularly pleased with this one. I used the ‘flick-a-flake’ technique again, but see, first I flicked just tiny ones – lots of them – from far away. Then later I added just a few big ones. See what it did?”

“I do. It gives the illusion of great depth – the small flakes are pushed into the distance by the larger ones that appear to be right up front. An excellent technique.”

“And something else. Look closely.”

The old man adjusted his glasses and leaned in closer.

“Ah, ha! The small flakes are darker white and the larger ones are bright white, which adds to the feeling of depth – lighter shades appearing to be closer. How much of your technique have you acquired through study and how much through your own improvisation?”

“This is not bragging, but most of it came from inside my head with trial and error. Sometimes after I achieved some effect, I must admit I have looked the technique up to polish it a bit you could say. James, the painter who came to the home, refused to show me more than just the basic techniques. He said I had an innocent and distinctive style, and that I should never let instruction soil that.”

“Your James was a wise teacher. I always loved it when a student took just the kernel of an idea I offered and then ran with it according to his own bent. I guess I thought of myself not as a teacher, but as a facilitator.”

“How do you distinguish between them?”

“A teacher believes he is the seat of answers and tries to convey a set body of information or techniques to his students. A facilitator guides his students to discover the answers and to pin down all the so-called ‘information’ out in the world until they are certain it is based in truth. I have found that art teachers are often the most capable in using the facilitator technique.”

“That’s sort of like the Socratic method I’ve read about – guiding students by asking questions rather than providing answers. I’ve long thought that’s how I’d approach teaching if that should ever become my lot, although really I still don’t know very much about it.”

“Yes, I suppose my approach is like old Socrates, but often the facilitator provides related information or sources of information rather than just questions to be answered. For example if Johnny Jones believes ‘A’ is the sole correct way to govern, the facilitator might present him with information from those who believe ‘B’ and ‘C’, so the student will have the opportunity to investigate other ways of looking at things on his way toward a decision or preference.”

“I like that. How does it feel to be smarter than Socrates?”

Woody chuckled.

“Well, at this moment it moves me to ask if you think this next painting is somehow out of balance.”

It was one that was drying. Andy stood back and looked at it for some time. He began nodding.

“The orange of the pumpkin down in the right corner is so powerful it draws the eye right to it, forcing the viewer to miss the intended focus on the horse and carriage moving down the road into the distance. Hmm? I can’t really dull the pumpkin or it will look like a big peach with a hideous growth extending out of the top. Hmm? What if I added just a tinge of orange in the upper left, which represents the source of light in the picture – like brightening the moon behind the clouds just a bit? It would provide the balance and hint at brightness beyond the gloom of that winter night. What do you think?”

“You are the one to make that judgement, but it certainly would take the emphasis off the pumpkin and improve the balance.”

While the old man spoke, Andy, mixed the faintest shade of orange in with the gray he had used for the sky. He applied just two, gentle, feather-like arcs by barely touching the paper.

“Wow!” he said standing back. “I am always amazed at the huge difference such a tiny dab of paint can make. Thanks for the . . . nudge. Is that an acceptable term for what a Facilitator does?”

“A perfect descriptor and I agree with both your diagnosis and the result.”

Andy moved on to the furthest easel as he continued to speak. The painting was already started.

“There is absolutely no doubt about it, you know,” he said.

“I might know, if I had even the tiniest hint about what you’re speaking.”

Andy grinned.

“It’s going to be a habit that will be difficult for me to break. I’ve become so used to having one part of my mind conversing with some other part that I forget an outsider is not privy to that. ‘We’ – he chuckled, meaning the several parts of his mind – were thinking that you and I make a great team. Neither of us is sensitive in a negative way to what the other

one says because we know he'd never intend to put us down. I've observed that people typically put other people down to make themselves look better by comparison. It's a lazy person's way of achieving status – false status – Miss Badbreath was like that. Seeing that, now, I can feel sorry for her. All she had was the status her position gave her and the respect she erroneously thought it should automatically bring. I'm afraid I burst that bubble most every day I was out there. She was plenty smart enough to understand that her paddlings would never make me respect her and she soon learned they didn't improve my behavior one whit, so they came down to just being an outlet for her rage at the fact I refused to bow to her conception of how things should be between her and me."

Again, the old man had to ask himself: 'Where, when, how, had this young man become so insightful and wise?' He hoped it wasn't a tradeoff between that and being able to live a normal, well-adjusted life as he grew older.

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CHAPTER NINE

“Don’t Take No Crap From Nobody!”

“I’ve done all the damage to these paintings that I can do this evening. How about hot chocolate at the fireplace?”

“That sounds good.”

Andy soon had a small fire underway and Woody was tending to the drink.

“Don’t forget the salt.”

“Already taken care of it.”

“It’s getting close to Christmas, you know,” the boy said moving closer to the fire.

He was sitting cross-legged on the floor next to the old man in the recliner. The old man nodded, figuring the boy had merely begun translating his thoughts into some carefully assembled message of importance.

“We haven’t spoken of religion. Do you believe in decorating trees during the seasons of Christmas, Hanukkah or Kwanzaa?”

“Oh, my, yes. I believe that all such trees, regardless of their source, are aglow with love. It is the appreciation of the necessary power of love, which they represent, that is significant. My old being would be filled with the same warm, wonderful feelings, if you were to string lights on a bagpipe or a sack of flour. All those holiday names translate as, *‘The Season of Love’*, for me.”

“You are a strange old man, old man, but I love you more than anything in my life, right now.”

“Thank you.”

“For which, calling you a strange old man or that I love you?”

“Both are among the wonderful parts of this old person’s life, I believe.”

“I can understand about being loved – probably because it is such a new part of my life, but ‘strange’?”

“Oh, yes. Strange, or odd, or different, or unique, or one, or eccentric. They all underscore that I am just me and nobody else – not even close to others. I certainly would never want to be just like anybody else. If I were just like others, I’d be lost in the crowd – nothing special at all. How

could I even know who I was?"

The old man put on a shudder.

Andy smiled mimicking the move. He figured the old man had certainly achieved his goal. He was unlike anybody he had ever met – accepting, honest, comfortable, humorous, intelligent, wise, and, of course, loving. Now, if the old man could just incorporate all those things into the way he viewed himself.

"You and I are certainly alike in that way. I never wanted to be like anybody else either although the more I learn about you the less I may be able to hold to that."

"And I, regarding you," Woody say. "I don't believe in miracles. I'm more likely to believe in opportune coincidences and our occupying the same space the other evening was certainly that."

"A *coinnacle*, you mean – I combined miracle and coincidence, there – four syllables: co in a cle."

"Yes. I picked up on that right away. I like the term – it moves a mundane happening up toward a far more special sort of event."

"Like the happy juxtaposition of very separate entities that unequivocally should coexist."

"It will take my old brain some time to sort all that out, but understand, I will review it carefully"

Andy smiled. He had mostly just been making fun. The old man's response indicated he had succeeded. He really wanted to master the art of humor. He was coming to see how it provided a wonderful dimension of being human. Humor seemed to be something that could not be contained when it really worked. It needed to overflow with those precious endorphins so they spilled and splashed all over the place.

"You said someday you would encourage me to write – stories, I assume. By merely stating that you understand you already started the encouraging."

"You caught that, did you?"

"You knew I did because you knew I would before you snuck it into the conversation."

"You calling me sneaky, young man?"

"Absolutely, I am calling you sneaky!

"And you bring up the topic now because . . .?"

“Because I figure you were – are – a writer as well as a teacher.”

“I was – maybe still am – a writer. You pegged me early on – stories and novels for Jr. High age readers.”

“I have never seen any of your books – Woodrow Wentworth. I would have remembered that. It has a definitely stuffy quality to it.”

Woody chuckled.

“I propose a game. I will deliver a short passage from a book and you see if you recall having read it.

“I’m game for a game although comparing the paltry number of pages I have read with the entire universe of things out there to be read, I doubt if I will be much good at it.”

“Don’t underestimate yourself. Let’s see. Ah. Here’s one. ‘The wind howled. The lightning sparked against the swirling blackness of the sky. The boy scooted further back under the huge old pine tree hoping to escape the cold, driving rain. It was the stuff from which nightmares were made.’”

Andy’s face brightened.

“The opening paragraph of, *The Orphan of Breckenridge*. You found it in my library?”

By the time it reached completion, the statement had become a question. The wheels were turning in the boy’s head. He spoke slowly and deliberately.

“My turn. How about *this* one. ‘If it hadn’t been for his cane, the frail old man with the hunched back and uncertain gate would have surely fallen by the wayside.’”

“I do believe that paragraph opens a novel named, *The Hunchback of Hanover town*.”

“And the author?”

“W.W somebody, I believe,” Woody said his eyes twinkling.

“W. W. *Worth* and I’m suddenly feeling confident that’s a derivation of *Woodrow Wadsworth Wentworth*. I love those books. I have six of them – just by chance. They came in a ‘grab bag’ at a local bookstore inventory clearance sale – a buck a box. Now I’m beginning to see why it was so easy for me to get to know you. I have known you for years. I am right, right?”

“I greatly enjoy your *statements* that so effortlessly turn

themselves into *questions*. Since you like them, I plead guilty as charged.”

“I have read them each a half dozen times. They overflow with essential information and insights for kids who are struggling to become teens.”

“If that comes through then I have succeeded in my mission. An author can never be sure until he hears from an unsolicited source. I am glad you approve – thank you.”

“I can’t believe this: I know W.W. Worth! I’ve had hot chocolate with him and slept with him – well, I guess you understand what I meant there. This is so great.”

Andy suddenly grew quiet.

“I keep saying *that* these past few days. I have never said that before in my entire life.”

“And what is *that*, son?”

“*This is so great!*”

“I see. Well, I probably haven’t said it, but I fully agree with the sentiment.”

The old man refilled the boy’s mug. Andy looked into his face.

“I love you, too, old man.”

Woody nodded and smiled seeing that the boy understood his message even without the words.

“How many books have you written?”

“Going on thirty I suppose.”

“You don’t know exactly how many?”

“I write because I love to right. I’m always eager to finish one so I can begin on the next. If one wrote in order to collect trophies on his shelf, then I suppose he would know how many on a second’s notice.”

“But you write for the result, the effect, the message, I’m thinking.”

“Yes. Things like that. Quite selfishly, as I indicated, I write for myself – I just love to write. The characters in the manuscript I am working on at any moment become my best friends.”

“Strange as it may sound I understand that. I’ve written a bunch of stories. They’re in the old Roll Top over there. I never fully understood it. I just knew when I was lonely, writing picked me up right away. I suppose that was partly

because I was filling my life with friends – like you said. Sometimes I made their problems much worse than mine – that was for the purpose of making my own life seem not so bad.”

“I have written some books for adults in which the main question I posed for the characters to resolve was one I needed to resolve for myself. I let them work things out for me.”

“Did it work?”

“Almost always.”

“What do you know? Have I ever mentioned that *this is so great?*”

The boy yawned and stretched.

“Getting time to turn in is it,” Woody asked.

“Not clock time, time, but I do seem really tired. You ready?”

“Understand this: any time after 9:00 I am ready to turn in.”

Andy smiled.

“You should have said so. Let’s get the pan and mugs cleaned up and call it a night. Tomorrow we need to begin getting serious about our plan; down to the nitty gritty – finding phone numbers and addresses of people we need to contact. We need to run our idea by the people in charge of the two homes. I doubt if the orphanage has a web site. You may need to make a call and find out who’s in charge now.”

Lights were out by 9:30. The boy was sawing logs by 9:32. It would take the old man longer that night. He fully intended to make his second chance at life considerably better than his first. An initial obstacle was to define exactly what he meant by that ever-troubling word – ‘better’.

* * *

Several days passed. They worked long hours ferreting out people and agencies that were to be the major players in their plan. One call or email led to others. A good portion of Andy’s time was spent on his laptop finding the specifics – names, addresses, phone numbers, copies of laws and regulations and so on. Woody made the necessary phone calls and composed the letters and emails. At noon that

day they were ready to summarize where they were. Andy had the final list in front of him on the kitchen table. He was on his knees on the chair.

“Claude Marley, the building’s owner, is out of the country, but his daughter, Brenda, is enthusiastic about the idea. She has encouraged us to go ahead with preliminary plans. She is making the rounds of her rich friends to extract promises of sustaining contributions – every year so it can keep going.

“Mr. Nevil, the head of the board of directors at the orphanage is more than onboard – he is already gathering pledges. He has also set up the charitable non-profit with the state so we are legal where it comes to accepting donations. Mr. Thomlinson, the bank president has agreed to take charge of the non-profit organization.

“Patterson and associates, architects – Mrs. Nevil’s brother – is providing plans for renovation to keep it all within city codes. He says very little really has to be done.

“John Quincy, Amy’s attorney uncle is keeping everything legal for us.

“We still need a licensed professional to run the show. Your friend at the College in the Sociology Department is apparently hot on the tail of somebody. You heard from him yet?”

“No, but I have the feeling the tail he is hot after is his own. He worked as a social worker for twenty years and is taking steps to get his license reinstated. It’s been inactive for some years now since he began teaching at the College.”

“It seems to me we have made a huge amount of progress in less than a week,” Andy said. “Help me make a list of things that are still outstanding.”

The old man began.

“First, of course, is gaining the official right to use this building. Then, obtaining the building use change permit to a sheltered care facility. The boards of directors of the orphanage and the retirement home have taken that on as their project. With their connections and know-how, I’m thinking that will move ahead smoothly.”

“And,” Andy added, “getting sufficient pledges to move forward with the construction needed on the building once all

the other hurdles are settled. That shouldn't be difficult since at the beginning we are just modifying three floors. We can always cut that back to just the second floor where the first set of residential rooms will be. It isn't legally required to do anything to the first floor where the offices will be. When we add the medical clinic down there we will have a substantial expense in renovating costs."

"I have an idea about that. I need to meet with the head of the Medical School at the college. Make me a note to set that up."

Andy moved to his laptop at the roll top desk.

"I'm expecting an email from the director of the retirement home."

He turned to face Woody who was still at the table.

"When I call it an old folks' home does that bother you?"

"Are you familiar with the phrase, 'A rose by any other name would smell as sweet'?"

"Yes. From Romeo and Juliet. She was telling Romeo that regardless of what his last name was he would still be the same person he was as far as she was concerned."

"Extraordinary. Yes. Well, the old folks home is populated by old folks who think of it as their home – call it retirement home, assisted living home, or man caves for old codgers, the name does not change the nature of what it is. My roundabout way of saying no, it does not bother me in the least. I, however, look back on my days in one as having relegated me to a boring, humiliating, institution that seemed to work hard at encouraging old people to only look back and call it quits sooner than later."

"It's such a shame you have no opinion about them."

Andy giggled and turned back to his screen.

"Hey, here it is – the email with an attachment with all the residents' names."

He took a moment to read down the list silently.

"Well, this just might present an interesting problem, Woody."

"Oh? What 'this'?"

"You'll never guess who lives there."

"Well, considering all the things I have learned during these past few weeks and wondering which of them might

present an interesting problem for you, let me guess that Miss Waldbreth is now a resident there.”

“You’re like some super psychic. Yes, that’s it. She’s there.”

“How nice.”

“NICE? I don’t follow *that*.”

“Well, I assume it bothers you either because you assume she still hates you or you are so ashamed of yourself relative to her, that you have predefined the upcoming relationship as uncomfortable. How about predefineding it in some more useful fashion?”

“Got your old Sacra-woody hat on I see. Thank you. You’ve given me something to ponder – at length.”

“He turned again to face the old man.

“I meant that – *thank you*.”

“I always assume your thank yous mean *thank you*, son.”

Andy turned back to his desk, nodding. Of course, he knew that.

“Her first name is Priscilla. I’ve never known anybody with that name – well, I have I guess, I just didn’t know it was her name.”

“You do understand that you often think things through to the furthest reaches of absurdity, don’t you?”

“Yes. One of my most outstanding characteristics, I’ve always thought – well, not *always* because there was a time when I didn’t know the word *absurdity* so couldn’t have contemplated the presence or absence the trait.”

“And again, he proves my point.”

“And there will be no charge this time.”

“So, what’s next?” the old man asked.

“I assume you are not referring to death because that would bring up a necessary discussion of the probabilities and improbabilities of some incarnation of existence *after* death.”

“Let me rephrase that as hurriedly as I can. What are the parameters that seem essential for us to contemplate and pursue during, say, the next six hours?”

“This is so great! I love it – my new life – my new you – probably my new *me* come to think of it.”

“Ditto.”

The old man was ready to leave it at that. Andy had to return to it.

“We haven’t had much time to just talk about random areas of interest since we got the Plan underway. I miss that.”

“*You* are in charge of the schedule, I believe.”

Andy smiled, appreciating the humor in the pointed reminder.

“Have you noticed that I am a controlling person, Woody?”

“I have?”

“I believe it creates the best results whether just for me when my only concern is my own best interests, but also when others are involved. I have learned that other people don’t like the trait in me even though my suggestions are almost always superior to differing suggestions coming from them. That has always puzzled me.”

“That was a convoluted passage, son, but I hear you saying you like to be in control and you wonder why others don’t appreciate that because your ideas are typically superior.”

“Right.”

“Think about this, son. If *you* have that need, do you suppose other people do as well?”

“I have actually thought about that, but why would one want to go with his own inferior plan when a superior one had been offered.”

“You can follow your ideas well into the future and shape and reshape them so they have a very good chance of succeeding. In your experience do other people have that same skill?”

“To look a plan into the future? I have never really considered it. Recognizing the disasters so many people make of their lives and those of their families I suppose they don’t – can’t. You’re saying that since they can’t evaluate probable outcomes well into the future, they can’t see how their suggestion is truly less adequate than mine – in the long run. Hmm? That seems to put them in an impossible situation, then doesn’t it?”

“You know about trial and error learning, in which you gradually modify your failures so eventually they become

accurate or at least closer to the ideal.”

“Yeah? It’s basically how I learned to paint”

“Where does your trial and error learning take place and where does it occur for most people?”

“I understand. I’ve seen it happen over and over again. Most folks just seem to barge right in and begin a task. Before I begin a task I have rehearsed it in my mind many times. My failures mostly occur as I make plans about things – mentally prepare for them. That way I fix most of the potential missteps before they really occur. I guess I don’t understand why everybody doesn’t do it like I do it.”

“Somewhere along the way you have been prompted to think things through ahead of time. Many people, probably most, have not been urged to acquire that approach. They have grown up compartmentalized – doing is doing and thinking is thinking.”

“. . . and never the twain shall meet. I had never departmentalized that tendency for *compartmentalization*.”

The boy grew quiet – more than quiet, low-spirited and suddenly down.

“I hadn’t made the connection. She really gave me a great gift and since I hadn’t realized it I never thanked her.”

“Just for the record, son, I have no idea what you mean if that’s important,” the old man said, not being entirely honest with his statement. His intention was to draw the boy out to more fully explore his discovery.

“Mother. As far back as I can remember. When I made a mistake, she thought had been a dumb mistake she’d say, ‘I don’t think you thought that through very carefully’ or ‘did you leave your brain in bed this morning’. I hated when she said things like that. I thought she was just trying to put me down and hurt me. And here she was trying – probably in the best way she knew – to prepare me to be successful in life. And something else, when I’d leave the house she’d say, ‘Be thoughtful, now’. I hated that, too. It was as if she just expected me to do something wrong, but she was really just prompting me to use my natural skills to keep my life on a reasonable path. I like that I automatically used the word ‘*reasonable*’ there.

“It makes me think more widely. On Martin Street I had

a playmate named Butchie – no idea what his actual name was. When he'd leave the house, his father would always say something like, 'Don't take no crap from nobody', and, he didn't. He even saw 'crap' when I'm sure none was intended. He was always in trouble. And Dexter's mom always said exactly the same thing to him, 'Be careful', and, he was so careful that after we had spent an hour making mud pies his white shirt and shorts were still spotless. I can't even remember seeing him stumble and fall when we were running."

He thought for just a moment and continued.

"Being a parent requires a huge amount of planning – like every day, I imagine, if it is done properly. I'm not sure I'm up to that."

"Today, maybe not, but give yourself another ten years."

"I'm sure you planned for your son, didn't you?"

"Every single day. My wife and I made it part of our routines to ask ourselves every morning, 'What does Robert need today'? At least once a week we'd talk about how he was coming along. When he became your age we'd often include him in our talks so more and more he was expected to take charge of himself. Clearly, the relationship needed more than that, but I am very proud of the man he became – responsible, thoughtful, creative, caring, helpful, and generally positive."

"I can believe all that. I'm thinking you're doing that same thing with me – only between us it's mostly just nudges for me to try something out or to contemplate some aspect of life that you believe requires more of my attention. I love that about you, you know."

Woody smiled and extended the idea.

"And I see it is becoming, 'like the old man so goes the boy'."

"What do you mean?"

"I have the idea that some of the questions the *boy* asks – purportedly in relation to *himself* – are in reality asked to jog the old man into examining things the boy thinks I need to consider or reconsider."

Andy's cheeks floated his wonderful smile.

“You caught that, did you? I know I’m not as subtle about it as you, but I’m getting there. I’m glad I have you to practice on.”

“Indeed! Isn’t it simply grand how we are able to help each other – to foster growth and invite contemplation of important issues?”

“I have already experienced fascinating new paths you’ve helped me follow, old man.”

“We can only *point* others toward the paths, son. It is fully up to them whether or not they will begin thoughtfully stepping off along them.”

CHAPTER TEN

A Warrant for *Whose* Arrest?

Later that afternoon they made their way back to the Pizza Place. It had become their habit to eat there at least twice a week – partly for the pizza, even, the old man figured. That day, however, the greeting was considerably different from usual. Amy met them at the door. She had clearly been crying.

“Oh, Billy. A policeman and a social worker came here looking for you – or somebody pretty much like you. I found I had nothing to tell them, because I see that I really know very little about you. Because of that I’m sure I couldn’t have let anything slip – if you are that person.”

“Take it easy. What were they asking?”

“How long you – or the person – had been here in the neighborhood, what name you use, where you live, why you weren’t enrolled in school – I explained about the home schooling – and other general things like that.”

Andy kept his cool.

“Did they say why they were maybe looking for this kid?”

“The social worker said it was in response to an old warrant about stolen property and being a minor with no approved adult supervision.”

“And it sounded like I might be involved, how?”

“Like you were the thief. I don’t believe it for a moment. Dad has the policeman’s card. I have copied the information down here on this sheet of paper for you.”

Mack, her father, had been listening and approached with the card. He addressed Woody – ‘Uncle John’. The old man offered his hand and spoke first.

“Did you see any paperwork – the warrant for example?”

“Something called a Summary Warrant – Name, Address, offense and things like that. It don’t make sense.”

“Why’s that?”

“The kid’s name on the warrant is Andrew Hunter. We tried to explain that we didn’t know a boy by that name and

didn't mention Billy, here, at all, of course. You did fit the description, Billy. Your hair is much longer, now, though."

What was it about girl's father's and boy's long hair?

"What was the offense stated on the warrant?" Woody asked.

"Theft. Went on to say this Andrew kid stole \$150 dollars from a lockbox at the county children's home – the old orphanage west of town."

"Who signed the complaint?" Woody asked.

"The Director. Amy has her name there – Priscilla Waldbreth."

Amy held up the sheet and pointed to the name.

"One more really odd thing," Mack continued, "it was dated over two years ago. That makes no sense that a kid could walk in, steal \$150, escape unseen and remain at large for this long. Just no sense."

"Did they say how they traced the boy here to the Pizza Place?"

"Only vaguely and it really wasn't to here. The cop said they had reports a boy matching his description had been seen in this vicinity."

"Does it make any sense that a warrant would still be in open investigation after more than two years?" Woody asked as much to himself as anybody else.

"It really doesn't," Mack said. "It seems to me that the kid's looks would have changed a good deal from then to now – what, ten to twelve or thirteen or so. Sorry, I didn't think to press them about that."

Woody tried to put the conversation behind them.

"With this information from Amy, I'm sure we can see that Billy's name is cleared. We appreciate your heads up. Now, how about a couple of your fantastic circular offerings from Italy?"

Mack nodded and Amy accompanied them to their usual booth. The rest of the place was empty – not unusual at 3:30 in the afternoon. She left to get the drinks and write up the order – it was always the same. After returning, she scooted in beside 'Billy'. Their hands had a way of finding each other immediately.

"I'll be glad when you get this mess all cleared up," she

said. "You can't know how worried I've been."

"Like Uncle John said, we'll go get it all straightened out. No need to worry."

He was, of course, telling himself that if they came to Pizza Place they also went to the bank, the book store and the pool hall. He was uneasy, but did his best to smile through it.

The youngster's conversation became somewhat hushed and 'Uncle John' again felt like a fifth wheel, a third thumb, and most assuredly, an unneeded chaperone. Taking his drink with him, he stood and walked the room looking at the various sports-related pictures on the wall. An old man can only stand there ogling a scantily clad basketball player for so long before feeling it must appear inappropriate.

Mack delivered the pizzas to the booth and Woody rejoined the youngsters. They managed a three-way conversation that scrupulously avoided the earlier information about the policeman and social worker. The old man had forgotten how long a girl that age could make a single slice of pizza last. She made Andy look like an entry in a competitive eater contest.

On the way home Andy suggested they use an alternate route just in case they were being watched even though there was no visual evidence of that. They walked right on past the front of the hotel and turned north one full block west. Andy guided them into a narrow alley halfway down that block.

"I'd suggest we hurry now, just in case we've been followed."

They hurried to the center of the block, to the point where the narrow passage between the two buildings entered the alley. It was boarded up, or was it?

"I hinged it on top and put a slide lock at the bottom on the inside."

He reached down and released it.

"There. Just swing the boards up in front of you and duck underneath."

He had soon joined Woody on the other side and relocked it.

"We can rest if you want to, now," he said.

"I'm fine. Rather get inside."

Moments later found them in the Palace where they shed their winter coats, hats and boots. Andy stirred the fireplace fire back to life and added a log.

"In light of the warrant, I suppose it's time I add a few details about my life," he said.

The old man slipped into the recliner beside the fireplace and removed his shoes. Barefoot Andy sat cross-legged, facing him.

"I learned about the warrant two weeks after I ran away. I didn't steal anything. I assume Badbreath was so angry at me that she not only wanted to get me back, but she wanted to have a legitimate reason to continue punishing me. So, she lied on the warrant. All of that is why I settled in this area – ten miles away from the orphanage *and* in a deteriorating section clear on the other side of the old city where nobody in their right mind would run to. It's also across town from the address where I used to live with mother."

"I have to wonder if the renewed interest has anything to do with your involvement in the hotel renovation. Which name have you been using on your emails?"

The boy grinned the grin of an Imp and looked up.

"Billy Jacks to those who know me and *Greg Jackson to those who don't.*"

The old man smiled back, nodding.

"I should have known – well, no I shouldn't. Without the knowledge of the warrant I had no reason to think there would be any reason for needing another name – Andrew William Gregory Hunter Jacks."

Andy chuckled.

"You left out Timmy Barton, but that's another story that has no relevance to any of this."

The old man smiled again and shook his head.

"Maybe I should acquire an alias, too."

"I think you already have, W. W. Worth."

"I see. I had never equated a penname with an alias. It's probably best *not* to get old WWW involved in this."

"Here's one of those questions that we agreed we can ask and it will be okay if you don't answer."

"I do believe I even understood. Shoot."

"Do you still receive royalties on you books?"

“Yes and no. I do, but I signed all of that income over to the Boy’s Club along with my other chattels.”

“Chattels?”

“Possessions, in any form.”

Andy nodded.

“Are you concerned about our finances?” the old man asked.

“No. I was just wondering about things; if I got sent off to reform school what you would use for money?”

“You are *not* going to get sent off to *any* place.”

“It’s just a kid’s word against an adult’s. In my experience, kids never do well in such a matchup. I am also wondering if *you* could be in trouble – now that you know about me – for harboring a criminal.”

“First, I believe it is you who is harboring me – shame on you – taking an old man in off a street in zero degrees and blizzard conditions.”

Andy could manage no more than the mere indication of a smile.

“And second?” he asked.

“Boys don’t go to jail for stealing such a small amount of money. Any chance your fingerprints could have been on the lock box?”

“Well . . .”

“Let’s have it, son.”

“Not too long before I left, I guess I sort of filled the keyhole on the lock box with self-hardening putty from the janitor’s room down in the basement. There were probably prints in both places.”

“You went out in a blaze of glory, you’re saying.”

Andy smiled and shrugged.

“Pretty juvenile of me, really. I can see that now.”

“Oh, yes. No ten-year-old has any right to be acting like a *juvenile*.”

The boy smiled. It approached genuine that time.

“So, how are we going to approach this warrant-thing, old man?”

“I see two avenues – not including the one where we swim to Brazil and end up living out the rest of our days enjoying the attention of bikini clad bathing beauties on the

white sand beaches there.”

“I do like that one, but what are the other two – contacting the police and trying to straighten it out or keeping things like they are and just being lots more careful about coming and going?”

“Ahead of me as usual. That pretty well covers the options.”

“May I digress and ask you a serious question?”

“Certainly. It often seems to me our whole relationship has been one, very large and complex digression.”

Andy smiled with a chuckle.

“This is so great, but seriously for just a minute.”

With some drama, Woody wiped the smile from his face and became serious, which only sent Andy into convulsive laughter. The old man waited, enjoying the young man’s reaction. It was only at times like that when Andy lowered his guard completely and lived in the moment, unshielded by his schedule or list of priorities – or, possibly, his left-over fears.

The old man tossed a hanky in the boy’s direction. He wiped and sniffed through his smile.

“You were about to proffer a serious question, I believe,” Woody said.

“Yes. It seems less pressing at this moment, but let me go ahead anyway. It relates to the Brazilian beaches remark. I have wondered, recently, if old men are still attracted to beautiful young women. It’s one of those, ‘answer only if you want to’ inquiries.”

Since, initially at least, it had been presented as an important topic, the old man proceeded in that vein.

“Attracted to, in the sense that I still appreciate feminine beauty, yes. Attracted to, in the sense I would want to take one out behind the barn, no.”

Andy swung his head in wide, slow arcs.

“Did I ever tell you that you are a *really* odd person, old man?”

“Yes, in fact, I believe you did, and I thanked you for the accuracy of your observation.”

“One more?”

It had been a question.

“Sure. Shoot! Same provision, though.”

Andy nodded.

“*Could* you take one out behind the barn?”

“I will leave that one for you to answer for yourself in about 64 years.”

“I figured as much. Sorry if I got too personal. It’s just that I still have a considerable number of things to learn about the intimate side of his and her relationships.”

“I’m always available to talk – in general or about you, not me. Okay?”

“Fine. Once we get all these kids and old people hooked up and put to bed, I will make sure to pursue that. . . . Did that sound inappropriately suggestive?”

“What? Oh! Probably to a young man still investigating his relatively new flood of hormones. Not to an old codger who relishes going to bed only because he can no longer hold his eyes open.”

“That was about as close as we’ve ever come to sexual talk.”

“I suppose so. Remember, son, we are living on *your* schedule.”

They exchanged smiles and moved on.

* * *

“I do wish I knew why that old warrant came to the surface again,” Andy said.

“Well, there is one way to find out.”

“Turn myself in, you mean. That holds the promise of delaying our Plan and we only have about a month left. Tomorrow is the day Claude Marley’s daughter said she would have a decision for us from her father. I don’t know why I’m so nervous about it. She said she was sure it was a done deal.”

“And, we have taken care of all the legal work. We have the permits, we have the non-profit status, we have a board of directors with the wife of the bank president as chairperson. What is her name? I don’t like calling a woman some man’s wife. It sucks the humanity right out of her. In case it hasn’t come across, it irks me no end.”

“Her name is Emily and your position on it has come across to me. May I ask why you feel so strongly about it?”

“Back when my wife and I were professors and we would have occasion to be introduced as a couple, it was always Dr. and Mrs. Woodrow Wentworth. I would usually smile and move my hand toward her and say, ‘Dr. Alice Wentworth’.”

“Doctor! I hadn’t put one and one together, I guess. Of course, a professor would have a doctor’s degree. I may have to start calling you Doc.”

The boy smiled waiting for the old man’s response.

“I can think of nothing I would dislike more and you know it. I hated being called doctor. It was like an inappropriate status thing – as if the mere title made me somebody special. Hated it! I will make you a deal, though. The day you receive your PhD I will shake your hand and say ‘congratulations, Dr. Andrew Hunter. Don’t expect to ever hear it from me again.’”

“You think I could get a PhD?”

“With your smarts, you can get four if you want them. This current project represents as much or more thought, research, and planning as most dissertations.”

“A dissertation is like a research project, right.”

“Right. A requirement of an advanced degree. It is supposed to be something that adds to the knowledge in your field of study.”

“What was yours?”

“Dissertation or field of study?”

“Dissertation. Your fields were English and Psychology.”

“Promise you won’t laugh at the title?”

“Of course, I won’t. You know I could never promise that – not since I’ve met you.”

“Okay. I will gladly take partial responsibility for that malady. Here goes: *A Study of the Relevant Variables Associated with Acceptance or Rejection of Members of Other Cultures Based on New Information as Reflected in a comparison of the Subjects’ Written Reaction to a Series of Pre and Post Projective Tests.*”

“How many pages did it take to explain the title well enough so readers understood what it was really about?”

“About ten the way I remember.”

“How long is a dissertation?”

“I had a colleague who got his degree in Mathematics. His project was to devise an equation of some kind for some purpose – don’t press me for details. He wrote one paragraph explaining the problem he was solving. Then he wrote the equation he had created and signed it. One sheet and out. Of course, he spent the better part of two years refining it so it was accurate and meaningful – so it worked, I guess one could say.

“On the other hand, mine was about one hundred pages plus a dozen Banker’s Boxes filled with the raw data – the tests the youngsters had taken.”

“Sounds like something I’d love to do. I’ve been thinking we should write up what we’ve done here so other cities or agencies could use it as a model.”

“I have also been considering that and am behind it 100%. In fact, I’ve made a few pages of notes.”

“So have I. Are we hilarious or what? Like twins. Maybe we are twins that were separated at birth.”

“At the birth of two different centuries, perhaps.”

Regardless of the absurdity in the contention, they felt exceptionally close at that moment. They each, also, felt a tiny, growing, feeling of sadness: The boy because he knew somewhere down the way, the old man would die and leave him behind; the old man because he knew it would not be his lot to know about all the wonderful accomplishments the boy would make during his lifetime. Still, the feeling of closeness overpowered everything else.

Woody finally broke the several moments of silence that followed.

“What is our schedule tomorrow, son?”

“Emily at ten at the bank. Go over things with the contractor at one. Go over the financials with the attorney at three at the Pizza Place. Then, assuming Brenda gives us the go-ahead on the building, there will be the first meeting of the Board of Directors at seven tomorrow night. That seems a bit awkward to me.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s our project and we aren’t on the board.”

“They will count on us for advice and counsel at all

junctures. We will continue to be too busy to do board member stuff. Mainly, they are on the board because they have the capacity to raise lots of money. I'm sure they will ask us to continue to oversee the project until the new director is hired and feels comfortable. Even then I'm sure we'll be included."

"The first meeting the board is to ratify the Mission Statement we have drawn up. What if they make changes in it we don't like?"

"Then, I guess we'll just have to don our blue tights and red capes, swoop down on the meeting room and kick their butts."

Again, the boy went into hysterics, writhing on the floor. The old man couldn't help but join in – from his chair not on the floor.

After they had wiped their eyes, Andy spoke, thoughtfully.

"There is another good side to having the board and the Director take over much of the project."

"And that is?"

"It frees us up to begin some new project that we haven't even thought up yet. That is what's really exciting about life to me. I suppose creating a new book was a lot like that for you, wasn't it?"

"Yes, and well put."

"I suppose my next really big projects should be finishing my education and growing as an artist."

"Is being an artist going to play a major role in your future?"

"I like that question. You're urging me to explore areas that may not yet be present in my life."

"You know, son. You make it extremely difficult for me to seep your subconscious."

"I will need a thorough explanation of that."

"It began as a therapeutic method in Gestalt Psychology. The simple version: to seep another's mind, person 'A' makes a simple suggestion to person 'B' and then rapidly moves on to another, unrelated topic before 'A' has a chance to reject the suggestion or idea. Not having rejected it, the suggestion often surfaces in the mind of 'A' sometime later and 'A' thinks it must be his idea making it more likely to be

accepted. It works very well for parents with adolescents who often tend to reject all parental suggestions for no reason other than they feel that's their job. Many teens tend to believe they have to invent the wheels of happiness, success and survival all over from scratch all by themselves when, in fact, most of the really tough questions have already been solved if they would just search for them."

"So, any day now I should expect to start getting *seeped*."

"You mean I haven't begun yet?"

They shared grins.

"I'll be glad to play your game, but I believe it will be far more efficient if you just sit me down and point out my options – it seems to be working very well so far in our relationship."

"I do believe we are on the same wavelength – of course we both *do* seem to enjoy games."

"If you were another kid it would be time for a friendly tussle all over the room without regard for lamps, vases or the fireplace."

The old man slipped off his chair onto his knees and worked his arms as if readying himself for the tussle of his old life. Andy's face lit up and he sprung off the floor and propelled himself onto his dear friend. Initially he thought he'd just take it easy on the old guy – that was before he found himself pinned, arms against the floor.

"Playin' it that way are you, old man."

Andy lifted his legs up around Woody's shoulders and pulled him over onto the floor, whereupon he made a flying leap onto his stomach. At that point Woody was laughing so hard the youngster's strength actually overpowered him.

After a few minutes, they separated and lay side by side on their backs on the floor panting and laughing.

"Not bad for an old guy."

"Not bad for an inexperienced little twerp."

Woody pulled the boy close and they were content just being there together in the quiet of the gathering dusk.

"You know one of the really great things about that?"

Woody always relished hearing the boy's take on things.

"What?"

“Neither of us really won and it doesn’t matter. I didn’t have to win. That may be a first for me. In case you haven’t noticed I tend to be quite competitive.”

“That *is* a great part of it. I’m thinking there was something else, too.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t think either one of us really *wanted* to win.”

“I love you, old man.”

“I love you, son.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Everybody Loves You Old Man!

That evening, Andy painted and Woody read – they were each enjoying one of the things they loved the most. Before they turned in, Andy explained his four new paintings to the old man and Woody summarized for the boy the most interesting points from what he had read.

The next morning, they were both up and around early, preparing for the several very important meetings of that day. They entered the bank at 9:45, having allowed themselves a few minutes inside, out of the cold, to stomp their feet, shed their snowy coats and clean up their noses.

Emily met them in the lobby.

“Brenda, Claude Marley’s daughter asked if I would meet with the three of you this morning. There are apparently papers to sign.”

“Really!” Andy said clearly pleased. “That has to mean the deal’s gone through. I will try and curb my enthusiasm and take a spirited roll in the snow later on.”

Emily looked at Woody.

“Yes, that really is the way he talks – from morning to night, *that’s* the way he talks.”

They shared a smile.

“She is already in the conference room. I just want to tell you two what a wonderful thing you got started. I haven’t discussed it with anyone who doesn’t agree. I took the prerogative of inviting the directors from both the children’s home and the retirement home to meet with us here once we have finished with Brenda. Just some housekeeping and procedural things we need to agree on. By the way I received your email about the various names you use, Andy. I appreciate the clarification, but you must understand it makes no difference. That rose is a rose thing.”

It was more of a relief to Andy than he figured it would be. Next, he would have to explain to Amy and her father.

They entered the conference room. The biggest meeting of young Andrew’s life took all of ten minutes. Ironic, he thought. Many of the meetings that had been fully useless

had taken hours. The Building Use Plan had been approved. The general nature of the financial arrangements was agreed to. Basically, the *Hunter-Wood Foundation*, which was the name given to the non-profit at Emily's suggestion, would be responsible for the renovation and building upkeep. Marley would provide the building free of charge, providing him with a huge tax right off. He agreed to return half of that to the Foundation. The agreement was for five years with the right to multiple renewals.

Emily signed the agreement for the Board and Brenda for her father. Andy and Woody signed just because it was their project. Andy could hardly contain himself.

The meeting with the Directors of the two facilities went well, also. A number of 'mixers' were arranged between the kids and the old folks so they could get to know each other and begin thinking about how they were going to pair up. Initially, each youngster was to have several ten-minute sit down sessions with a dozen of the older people – those pools had been established by the two directors working together in an attempt to match likely pairings. The first one would be at the Children's Home later that week. For some reason, Andy was nervous about that. He would talk it out with the old man later.

Emily had arranged a catered lunch at noon, since 'the men', as she referred to Andy and Woody, would have an early afternoon appointment there. The bank president, Emily's husband, joined them along with their son, Frank – well, officially, Franklin Anderson Richards Thomlinson, the fourth. He was fourteen and when he heard about the project he wanted to become involved. At his school – a snobbish private academy for brainy, wealthy brats, as he described it off the top to Andy – there was a service club and the members were eager to see if they could volunteer in some way.

He and Andy hit it off immediately sharing many interests. From the direction their conversation took, those apparently including girls, art, girls, swimming, girls, writing, girls and other less public things discussed in low tones with enthusiastic nods and snickers. Franky invited Andy for an overnight at his place. The boy hesitated only long enough to

get a thumbs up from the old man. It was set for the following Friday night. They would rendezvous at the Pizza Place to feed their faces at five and then be whisked away in the boy's limo to the family's walled estate at the east edge of the city. People who chose to live like that would, also, require some meaningful conversation.

The meeting with the contractor was not all good news. He related that his walkthrough with the building inspectors had highlighted several necessary changes he had hoped they could avoid. The most expensive was the backup generator to support the elevators and common area lighting in case of power failure. That involved a substantial amount of rewiring. Also, the three rooms on the first floor – off the original lobby – which were designated as the medical center would have to be gutted and resurfaced all around. The good news was that the work could begin immediately and he felt sure they would meet the deadline. The unions were supplying a good deal of free labor.

At three they met with the attorney. He had Foundation paperwork for them to go over and sign. The insurance on the building was going to cost more than they had allowed, but he had worked a new life insurance arrangement at a greatly reduced cost. By including all the youngsters in the pool, it actually brought the per person cost down by nearly forty percent. The health services would have three sources of funds: first, the medical school at Woody's college was supplying all of the staff except one fulltime nurse practitioner; second, the service qualified for the insurance most of the seniors had with Medicare; third, the long running health insurance plan at the Children's Home could be transferred to the new foundation. There were a number of smaller contracts to be signed. They felt very good about everything they had considered up to that point. The pizza was not half bad either.

"There is one more thing that concerns me," the attorney said. "It concerns the legal custody of Andrew. Apparently, a woman named Priscilla Waldbreth is still his legal guardian. Who is she and where is she?"

Andy explained.

"Well, that will plainly not do."

“How about Woody?” Andy asked thinking it was a shoo-in.

“No doubt that would be both reasonable and excellent. The problem is that Dr. Wentworth is retired with no income as I understand it.”

“I may be able to rectify the income problem,” Woody said. “It should take no longer than a week.”

“I’m sure you can have that much time. The old order is actually way out date. I went ahead and obtained a temporary custody order from the court. It expires the third day of February. You keep me informed, Doc.”

Andy cringed at hearing the term. The old man gave no indication how much it bothered him.

They went back to the hotel to clean up before the Board of Director’s meeting back at the bank that night.

“What a fantastic day,” Andy said. “My only concern is the cost overruns, but you keep telling me to let Emily worry about such things. You understand, of course, that I *can’t* do that. Still I think we have to be very pleased at how things are going.”

“I agree – fantastic day, let Emily worry, very pleased.”

“What’s this about you and new income?”

“For me to worry about.”

“You understand my risibles will be strung tighter than taut until I know.”

“I do, even with the definition of risibles and that taut condition remaining nebulous to me.”

“It’s time for me to tell Brenda Marley that I’ve been living in the hotel for two years. I hope it won’t ruin things. What do you think?”

“She seems to be on your side in every way so far. When?”

“I had planned to do it this morning and then Emily got involved in the meeting. I think it should be just between her and me since I’m the interloper – is that right word?”

“Trespasser. Yes, that word works.”

“I’ll talk with her before the Board Meeting tonight. She’s going to be there as her father’s representative.”

“You know how you are going to approach the subject?” the old man asked.

“Straightforward. ‘This is what I’ve done and for this long and there is no way I can pay you back for what I might owe you’.”

The old man nodded.

“Okay, then. I’d say go with that.”

If honesty were truly the best policy, that should work.

* * *

Before the meeting, he spoke with Brenda. The wait leading up to it became a more nerve-racking undertaking than he thought it would be. If she became angry with him the entire deal might collapse and it would be his fault.

“I have something of importance to speak about with you, Brenda. It is only tangentially related to the project.”

They were in a small conference room next to the board room. She motioned for them to sit. He waited for her and then took a seat. She nodded and smiled, recognizing the courtesy.

“I don’t know if this is a confession or just a statement of fact. Either way I consider it quite important.”

“Sounds serious. Go on.”

She offered the hint of a smile. Andy couldn’t tell if, perhaps, it had been some sort of putdown – maybe related to his age.

“I have been living in the basement of the hotel for about two years using your electricity and water. I also used some of the lumber and other supplies I found down there to construct a large room and borrowed furniture and linens and towels from up on the third floor. I have also just about exhausted the supply of logs stashed in the basement for burning in the big fireplace in the lobby. Well, that’s it, I guess. I’ve been living there like a squatter, without permission. It is hard for me to say I am sorry because it has been such a wonderful experience, but for the associated illegality, I really am sorry.”

“I know.”

“You know? I don’t understand. You *know what?*”

“A little over a year ago, I went into the basement in search of several large pictures we stored down there at the time the hotel was closed. I was baffled, of course, when I ran

onto your structure. I had one of our workman set up a surveillance camera at the basement door. I became more than a little intrigued when I discovered it was a boy – such a young person apparently being responsible for such a well thought out and constructed area. I must admit I entered the place on several occasions when you were out. I came upon your wonderful paintings – *Billy, Andrew, Marcus.*”

She offered a full smile. He shrugged, still at a loss.

“You see, we have both been living on the edge of unlawful positions – you trespassing and I not informing the authorities about an unsupervised minor. I have checked on you every week – how, is really not of any concern. I just wanted to make sure you were okay while I decided what I needed to do. I’m not sure why I didn’t turn you over to the juvenile authorities immediately. I suppose you reminded me of my alter ego when I was your age. I was a rich kid with servants and maids hovering in every corner of my life. I had no real privacy. I would have given anything to have been able to break the chains from my family and experience the freedom I saw you enjoying.

“It soon became clear you were handling yourself better than most adults I knew. You were taking total responsibility for yourself. I really admired that. I even think I figured out why you always kept the lights on – heat and keeping power usage constant. Brilliant! I must admit I felt relieved when you started frequenting that pizza restaurant. I figured the owner could offer up advice if you were to ask for it. Mack is not educated, but he is smart and wise. And then when the old man, Woody, moved in I was completely relieved – well, once I had a background check run on him.”

“You did that?”

“I did that.”

“For my protection, I’m thinking.”

“Yes, for your protection.”

Silence.

“So, thanks, I guess, Brenda.”

“So, you are welcome, I’m sure, Andrew.”

“You are amazing, you know, Brenda.”

“You are amazing, you know, Andrew.”

They exchanged smiles and nods.

“Will you be staying there once the hotel is renovated?”

“We haven’t discussed it. I feel like I owe you so much.”

“Considered it *prepaid*.”

“*Prepaid*?”

“Yes. I have purchased two dozen of your water colors. I’m betting in ten years they will be worth twenty-five times what I paid for them.”

“If that’s true then in order to make a lot of money I should stop selling them and wait. I suppose people have been dragged away to the loony bin for purporting such illogical things.”

* * *

The Board Meeting was mostly boring from Andy’s perspective. He and Woody were asked to sign a few documents and they outlined the next several steps they were undertaking. As meetings with adults had been going, that one was relatively short.

* * *

It was nearly ten when they left the bank building.

“They have the most delicious peppermint ice cream at Amy Dad’s place,” Andy said.

“Is that a suggestion or an order?”

“Let’s just say I’m going. You do as you please.”

“I always do as I please.”

“Don’t give me that, old man. You seldom do as you please if anybody else’s needs are also involved.”

“Oh. You think so?”

“I know so. I’ve known that since fifteen minutes after I first met you.”

“How could that possibly be?”

“The last thing you wanted to do that night was to get to your feet and go with me. According to your later story you already believed you had sat down for the last time, but then a persistent young pest came along who clearly wanted, maybe needed, you to accompany him – so, you stopped doing *what you pleased* and got up. The rest is our wonderful history.”

Woody put on a huff, his hands on his hips.

“Well, at this moment in my life, I *please* to have some peppermint ice cream at a little place I know. You coming or

not?”

He strode off through the snow, feigning an ‘I don’t care what you do’ attitude. Andy caught up, locked his arm through Woody’s and urged them into a skip on down the street.

Emily and Brenda watched from a fifth-floor window.

“Have you ever known two such unique specimens?” Emily said.

“Not this side of an asylum.”

The two women had a good laugh between them.

Amy – that is, the ice cream – was wonderful, and the girl turned out to be a surprisingly good conversationalist that evening. Woody spent time at the counter passing the time of day with Amy’s father, while Billy/Andy/Boy Doe went into the necessary details about himself.

They left for home at eleven and talked as they walked. Andy’s talk with Amy had gone well. He related his conversation with Brenda syllable by syllable. He was far more relieved than he thought he would be – to the point of getting giddy at the least provocation.

“Brenda asked if we were going to stay where we are or move upstairs when the hotel is ready.”

“What did you tell her?”

“That we hadn’t spoken about it.”

“I see. I imagine you’ve been thinking about it.”

“I have. Those rooms are going to be really, really nice.”

“They are going to be all of that.”

“Have you been thinking about it?” Andy asked.

“Some.”

“And?”

“Options have come to mind. Moving up to one or even two of the elegant rooms and living like rich folks *or* add on that bedroom down here that you spoke of early and staying at home.”

“*At home*. Yes. That’s what I’ve been thinking, too. I’m just not a ‘live-in-an-elegant-room sort of guy.’”

“That may change during the next ten years when your paintings are selling for \$500 each.”

“I doubt it, but I guess we’ll cross that road when the time comes.”

“You keep saying *we*. You have to accept the fact that you can’t count on me being around forever.”

“I’ve recently read that the average life expectancy for a 65-year-old man in the United States is 81.6 years. If he reaches 85 he can expect to live to be 90. My plan is to take very good care of you for the next three point four years so you can get to that free ride on toward 90.”

“In eleven years you’ll have your doctorate, have been married for two years, and have one child. I don’t expect for you to fit me into that life.”

“There you go again. As long as *you* have life, you are going to be a part of *my* life – grandpa.”

“He burst into laughter and reached out putting his arm around the old man’s waist. I can just see you bouncing little Andrew or Martin on your knee while he slobbers all over you. Maybe it will twins – one for each knee.”

“It is hard to anticipate anything more wonderful than that, but wives tend to have some say in such things.”

“Face it, old man, everybody loves you, so that won’t possibly be a problem. Besides, it will be item number two on my questionnaire that potential wives will have to complete.”

“May I ask about item one?”

“No.”

He giggled himself into a belly clutching, right angle.

Back in the Palace they unbundled. The old man was tired from the demanding day. They made themselves comfortable in their usual places on the sofa deciding to skip the usual hot chocolate in light of the ice cream.

“Are you aware of the rather stupid thing we just did,” the old man asked.

“Stay up too late?”

“We walked back here from the business district at eleven o’clock at night.”

“We did, but we weren’t in any danger.”

“How do you possibly know that?”

“There was a cop car following us – Amy’s other uncle, I’m thinking.”

“You have made some very useful connections, young man. You could have told me, you know.”

“Were you thinking about possible danger as we

walked?”

“No.”

“So, since we were not in any danger, I saw no reason to make you uncomfortable.”

“I see. Thoughtful, then. Thank you. That is one of the wonderful things about our relationship – we do take good care of each other.”

There were smiles.

“About your bedroom,” Andy began. “I’ve been thinking over there, just on this side of mine – we’d still be close, but separate. It hit me last night after we got in bed that since you’ve come here we have hardly had any time apart except when we’re in the shower. The room can be exactly the size you want – we have most of half a square block of basement to work with here. What do you think?”

“Actually, that is where I envisioned it also. Is it set then? We add one old man sized bedroom and stay here?”

“I think it’s set. We are having Wi-Fi put in the building so we will have internet access down here and there will be cable TV. How long do you think it will be until our initial one floor expands all the way up to the tenth?”

“On the one hand, I’d like to think there will never be that many children and old folks in such desperate need of a place like that. On the other and unfortunately the more realistic hand, I just imagine once all the financial wrinkles get worked out, there will be more need than even we can provide.”

“I understand what you’re saying about too many desperate people. Maybe our next project needs to be about working pairs of kids and old folks into family settings. Like we could add a suitable room on houses for families so they could take in the kids and seniors.”

“Your brain just never stops churning out great ideas does it?”

“That’s another thing I like about myself. It forces me to stop, sometimes, and be grateful to my mother and father for the superior genes they contributed to me. Don’t get me wrong, I still have some big unresolved problems about them and how they abandoned me, but I’m coming to see how, because of you and me, I’m not going to miss out on the

things my family failed to provide for me.”

“I’m glad, for whatever reason, that you feel you are making progress in regard to your feelings about them. Me to, what you said, by the way.”

Andy looked up directly into the old man’s eyes.

“I saw the reaction on your face a few minutes ago when I said everybody loves you. You know I didn’t mean to make you feel bad – about you and your son.”

“Yes, I certainly do know that. It was reassuring to hear your assessment that many people like me. That is a heartwarming piece of information.”

“What I said was that *everybody loves you*. You’re always selling yourself short. I may have to start standing you in a corner and giving you positive self-esteem mantras to repeat.”

The old man smiled faintly and grew silent. His eyes moistened without offering up tears.

“Wouldn’t it have been just the most terrible thing if I had missed out on getting to have you in my life, son.”

“I am assuming that’s rhetorical and I understand it refers to this alternative to your state of nearly life-ending depression. I know I would have survived and probably even flourished without you in my life, but getting to have this experience makes even the best of those old scenarios feel pale and empty now. My wife is going to be more fortunate than she will ever be able to imagine because I have had you in my life.”

The old man remained silent, inviting clarification with his furrowed brow.

“*Love*, old man. *Love*. I knew about it on an intellectual level, but I had never experienced it so I would have never been able to truly provide it. I would have made an absolutely horrible husband and father.”

Eventually, the old man *did* allow a few tears dribble down his old cheeks.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Andy, Taken into Custody?

The next morning, they were awakened by a terrible racket coming from above them.

“When the construction guy said they were ready to go, I guess he meant it,” Andy said slipping off his bunk and parking himself on the lower bunk beside the old man. He kept talking.

“That’s about the most beautiful horrible way to be awakened I can think of. He said there were fifty some union volunteers – can you imagine that. I want to make sure I personally thank each one of them.”

“A nice gesture – one I would expect from you. For a person claiming to have unpracticed social skills, you certainly know about them.”

“Actually, I didn’t say my skills were unpracticed. I said they were so bad other kids generally hate me.”

“And why do you suppose I have never seen that side of you?”

“For one, you’re not a kid – in case you hadn’t noticed. For another, I have spent my life trying to avoid most other kids. They are very dull and I find them to have virtually no curiosity about them. They study in school so they can pass the tests and then happily forget everything they learned. They spend their lives talking about who did what to whom instead of grappling with the big issues of life – world hunger, war, sickness, misery, and ways of preventing all those things. I find them both intellectually inferior and impossible to talk with. I know. It makes me a first-class snob. In all ways, *you* are different from that, ergo, our relationship can be mutually fulfilling.”

“Ergo? Really?”

Andy smiled and shrugged.

“What about the banker’s son?”

“Franky? He was really pretty cool – definitely intelligent and his mere presence in our life was motivated by his desire to be a helpful person – to contribute to our project.”

“And Amy?”

“Confusing. She is a special case. Although she, too, is smart and compassionate, she comes under the rubric of ‘female’. She is my friend, but she is something more – something where few of those aforementioned concerns seem to have any relevance. As you can see I am still completely dumbfounded about girls and the attraction I have for them. From what I’ve read, it seems I can expect that confusion to continue for many years. – book three in a series by WWW.”

He offered a smile. Woody acknowledged it with one of his own.

“It appears you are on the right track. Patience is a big part of the key.”

“We must talk more about all this later – not the boy and girl plumbing stuff, I’m well aware of the what and why and how. I guess the relationship part.”

“Any time. As I think I have indicated, we are on *your* schedule.”

It was the old man’s Dutch Toast for breakfast – like French Toast but with flour, baking powder, a pinch of salt and a drop or two of vanilla added to the eggs. It had become one of Andy’s favorites and was always a two man undertaking. Woody mixed up the ‘secret’ batter and Andy handled the griddle – the old man tended to scorch things and he wore the bread out from turning it too often.

Christmas Eve arrived.

“Today is the day to get good deals on Christmas Trees. We’ll have to carry it eight blocks. You feel up to that?”

“Anything for a tree.”

“I’m thinking next year a fifteen-foot tree in the lobby upstairs,” Andy went on. “The residents all get to help decorate it – the old folks down below and the kids on ladders. The youngest kid will be held up or he or she can put the start on the top. And Santa on Christmas and gifts for everybody and cookies and candy canes and carolers.”

It represented everything he had never had as a boy and yet his wish was for the others to have it.

During the previous several weeks the day time temperature had been hovering near freezing. With earmuffs, stocking hats, gloves and scarfs they saw to it that weather

never interfered with an outing.

At the tree lot, Andy took a good deal of time looking through the generally scrubby stock that was left. In the furthest corner he came upon a beautiful specimen – one that must have been hidden from view earlier. It was just over six feet tall with full branches and wonderful smelling, dark green needles. He gave it a good shaking to make sure the needles were still firmly in place. The tree guy gave them a really good deal.

“We could take it right in through the front door, now that my Palace and my presence in it are no longer secrets.”

“Your call.”

“That isn’t my door. I think we can force it through the walkway without damaging it.”

They could and with care it was delivered undamaged.

With the tree lying on its side on the floor, Andy spoke.

“I built a stand last year. It’s in the vault. Let me get it.”

“In the vault?”

“I use it like a closet for bulky items.”

After fifteen hilarious minutes, they finally had a tree standing straight and tall – well, tall at least.

“I rescued yards and yards of garland after New Year’s last year – silver and gold. How about we start with that? I don’t have lights – the power surge problem. I made a few decorations out of cardboard and painted them.”

“That sounds simply splendid. I have a suggestion, but it will require a visit to the grocery.”

“Mysterious, huh?”

“You may think it’s *corny*.”

“Let’s face it, old man. With you around I have come to not only expect corny, but to thrive on it. Talking with you is like adding an extra veggie to my diet every meal – even though I realize corn really isn’t a vegetable.”

An hour later they had been to the store and were back, elbow deep into making dozens of popcorn balls – each with a short string embedded in it. That would be used to secure each ball to a branch.

“So, you think I’ll think this project is ‘corny,’” Andy said. “That’s very clever, but you realize I had no way of appreciating that until you purchased four jars of popcorn.”

“I’m patient.”

Another hour later, there it stood – crisscrossed in shiny garland and with three dozen, snowball-like globes gracing the ends of branches.

They stood back and considered the result.

“Well, what do you think, son?”

“I think it is the most wonderful tree ever. I remember thinking last year after I was finished that something was missing, but I couldn’t figure what.”

“And you’ve discovered what it was?”

“Yes. There was nobody to enjoy it with me.”

He put his arm around the old man’s waist and they just stood there in silence for some time as they admired their creation.

“You know, Woody, the two of us do ‘*quiet*’ very well. Maybe that’s part of my problem with kids. They always feel the need to keep every moment filled with words. They allow no time for contemplation.”

He then changed the topic.

“You ever cooked a turkey, Woody?”

“Not while it was still walking around.”

“That’s absurd.”

“And what did you expect after the opening you gave me?”

“I think that often you see openings where none may have been extended.”

“A complaint?”

“Oh, no. If anything, a compliment, although I advise you not to go advertising that you are seeing things that aren’t there – I’ve heard there are padded rooms reserved for folks like that.”

Woody went to the sink and began washing the popcorn kettle and the pans they had used to mix the corn and syrup and form the balls.

“The mixer of the kids and the old folks is at two this afternoon, correct?” he asked.

“Right, and tomorrow night I go with Franky.”

He offered a grin.

“Did you catch it earlier – Franky’s initials?”

“I can’t say I have given it any thought. I do recall he

has four names.”

“Franklin Anderson Richards Thomlinson.”

The old man grew quiet while he thought about the boy’s comment. Then a smile blossomed and he snorted.

“Yes, I see. The initials. I just imagine if he has survived, socially, this long, he is made of pretty strong fiber.”

“I’m thinking his parents wouldn’t have done that to him if they had really thought about it. It could have been as simple as switching the middle two names around. FRAT wouldn’t have been so bad. I suppose it is nothing I should bring up with him.”

“I suppose your *suppose* is correct. Besides, he is the fourth so I suppose the parents felt they had little say-so in the matter.”

“You know, Woody, your initials are actually pretty cool – www, like your parents anticipated the invention of the internet. If you had a website you could call it www.www.”

He giggled.

The old man loved that sound and let it run its course.

* * *

The mixer had been changed to the retirement home. A school bus brought the children from the County Home. It was Andy’s first visit there. He was more than a little uneasy about the inevitable encounter with Priscilla Waldbreth. They hadn’t parted on the best of terms, but then no moment during their entire relationship ever reached the threshold of, ‘on the best of terms’.

Andy boarded the bus before the youngsters got off. At least half of them – all boys – stood and cheered when they saw him. He smiled and waved, but felt uncomfortable since he understood the accolades were in memory of his worst hours as a human being.

“I just wanted to welcome you here. I must say you clean up very well.”

They chuckled.

“As a former Orphanage kid myself, I just want to remind you to be on your best behavior – ‘please’, ‘thank you’, ‘good to meet you’, ‘nice to have been able to spend time with you’. There are refreshments provided by the residents. They are old people so probably don’t remember what huge

appetites kids your age have, so, I'm just reminding you not to hog all the sandwiches and cookies. Old guys need to eat, too. There is one other serious piece of business. You may not know it, but Miss Waldbreth lives here now. I expect every last one of you to treat her well – 'good to see you again', 'you look well', 'hope you are comfortable here'. Got it?"

They nodded. Clearly what Andy requested, Andy got!

"And, oh, remember they move a bit slower than you do and may not catch everything you say the first time. Be patient with them. Remember, some adult was patient with you when you were little – it's return the favor time."

As Andy and Woody watched from beside the bus, the children, in a fully orderly fashion, followed their director inside. Who's kidding who; they pushed and shoved and yelped like kids leaving school for summer break. The director survived to lead a fieldtrip another day.

"Well-chosen words you offered them, son. By the way, how did it feel to be welcomed like a superhero?"

"Truth? Ashamed. I shouldn't be glorified for being the jerk I was with her."

The old man noted to himself that the boy's attitude had mellowed considerably since his first rendition of the incidents, which indicated the likelihood he would gladly draw and quarter her at their next encounter. They followed the eager youngsters inside.

"Do you think they really comprehend what this change is going to be like," Andy asked.

"It was going to be my question to you. I'm sure the director has been talking with them about it."

"I think after they leave here today, their bus should stop in front of the hotel so they can begin to get a feel for where they will be. Will you make that suggestion to the Director? Better coming from you than me, I think."

"Certainly I will, and a very good idea. In a few weeks after the work has progressed a bit, we can invite them back for a tour. I suppose we should do something like that for the old folks, too."

"I was thinking of taking photographs over a week or so of the work and bring them out in a Power Point presentation. We can show them several of the architect's concept drawings

so they get a better idea about the rooms and the common areas – as end products.”

“Very nice. The dining room is straight ahead. That’s where things begin.”

“Just follow the sounds of chatter, I guess.”

They stopped just inside with the wide double doors swinging to a stop behind them. Neither the children nor the old people seemed in the least shy about moving things along. Presently many of them were dancing to the 1940s-background music. There was laughter as well as serious conversation. Eventually, with trays of goodies in hand, a number of the pairs drifted out into the halls toward private rooms for further get-acquainted goings-on.

“I suppose we shouldn’t let the sandwiches go to waist, Woody.”

Andy turned toward the table, still piled high with things the old folks thought the youngsters would enjoy. Woody followed, step for step. As they reached the table a stern voice sounded from behind them.

“Andrew Hunter?”

It had been a booming male voice, in no way pleasant.

They turned to find themselves face to face with a uniformed policeman and a middle-aged woman – the social worker Andy figured.

“Technically, I am not Andrew Hunter. I carry a copy of my birth certificate if you are interested.”

He removed it from his wallet and handed it over to the policeman who shared it with the woman.

“As you will see, I am Boy Doe.”

The policeman turned to Woody.

“By what name do you know this boy?”

“He seems to go by several depending on the circumstances.”

“Boy, do you have a state ID card?”

Andy shrugged, looked up at Woody and handed over his wallet.

“As you suspected, Miss Mason. This *is* Andrew Hunter.”

He turned to Andy.

“I hereby put you into the productive custody of Miss

Mason, from the Department of Children and Family services. If you'd rather be arrested, I can manage that, as well."

"Wait just a minute, here. For what reason?" Woody asked.

"The warrant states that he is an unruly, unsupervised minor and a thief, thereby posing a threat to society and is in imminent danger due to lack of food, shelter, education, and adult supervision."

"May I see the warrant, please," Woody continued, cordially.

The policeman handed it to him.

"Why this says you are looking for a nine-year-old. Does this lad look to be only nine?"

"See the date," the policeman said pointing. "Two and half years ago."

"You mean to say the poor, helpless, boy you are looking for has eluded the iron clutches of the law for thirty months. That doesn't sound like the helpless lad outlined in the warrant. I assume you have fingerprints or some other way of positively identifying him."

The two intruders looked at each other.

"We have this ID card," the policeman said at last."

"You are looking for a boy named Andrew Hunter. What does that ID say this boy's name is?"

The policeman read the name from the card.

"Andrew Martin Hunter."

"So, you admit this boy's name is not the same as the boy you're after."

"You are twisting things, sir."

"I suppose I have been known to do that sometimes."

Andy caught his chuckle in his hand.

"Also, I happen to know that in this state warrants for juveniles have to be reissued by a Juvenile Judge every six months so what you have there is no longer valid."

"I can have it reissued within the hour."

"Except . . ."

"Except, what?"

"I see it was issued at the request of a complainant – Priscilla Waldbreth. You will have to locate her, of course, and have her resubmit the paperwork requesting a reissue of the

warrant. Do you know where she lives if, in fact, she is even still alive.”

“I should arrest you for obstruction of justice, old man.”

Woody held out his hands as if ready to be cuffed.

By that time the commotion had attracted a dozen or more residents. Humorously, they all approached the officer, hands out in Woody fashion.

The officer became livid.

“We will be back and you, sir, will be arrested for contributing to the delinquency of a minor.”

Andy’s eyes danced and he looked up at Woody and in all innocence asked:

“Do I know you, strange sir?”

The growing group of onlookers became more and more amused. A tall, woman of stately posture, wearing a black suit with floor length skirt, moved forward from the group.

“I am Priscilla Badbreath, I mean Waldbreth. My driver’s license.”

She held it out to the policeman. Andy was at a complete loss. What was going on?

“The original warrant was clearly at fault. It should have been for a Scandinavian child named Rap Scallion. That has to nullify the whole shebang, officer.”

Andy couldn’t believe what he was hearing. This was most certainly not the Miss Waldbreth he had known. The policeman continued.

“You are saying you are the person who had the warrant issued.”

“That is correct. Surely you aren’t so inept that you aren’t able to make that connection between *my* license and *your* warrant.”

The policeman stammered, eventually managing to speak.

“What was your relationship to the boy at that time?”

She paused, looked over at Andy and – all quite unbelievably to him – offered a wink before turning back to the policeman.

“We were living under the same roof. I was learning about taxidermy at the time – that’s *hide tanning* if you’re not

familiar with it. This lad was very often a partner in my studies. In the end, his work took all the prizes.”

“We will leave and someone will get back to you within 24 hours.”

He handed her license back. They turned to leave.

“Oh, there is one thing more, Officer,” Woody said reaching into his hip pocket. You might be interested in this document.”

“What’s that? . . . You are Woodrow Wentworth? . . . You are the boy’s legal guardian? . . . Why on earth didn’t you speak up?”

“Oh? I thought I had been speaking up.”

“You are just unbelievable!”

“Why, thank you for that. The same to you.”

He lowered his head slightly and motioned the tip of his hat.

The two hurried out of the room to a chorus of laughter.

Andy approached Miss Waldbreth and moved her aside from the others.

“Well, I suppose it is legitimate to say there was a time when neither of thought this sort of a moment would ever transpire.”

“I am sure you are correct.”

“First, I suppose, thank you.”

She nodded. Andy went on.

“Are you comfortable here at the retirement home?”

“Yes, relatively comfortable. And you.”

“I have a fantastic life, thank you. Later I want you to meet Woody.”

“Yes. I saw him in action. It appears you two deserve each other.”

Andy grinned.

“Oh, we *do* in every possible way, ma’am.”

“I hear you are still painting.”

“Yes, ma’am. Doing well enough to support myself in pretty good fashion.”

“Really? That’s wonderful.”

“Your lines about taxidermy were some of the funniest I’ve ever heard – even if it was basically just a private matter between us. I have to say your wink, preceding it, fully

puzzled me. And the way you pronounced your name at the beginning really set me back on my heels. I should have known you knew.”

She offered a warm smile.

“What a nice chat this has been, Andrew. Thank you for your civility.”

“It *has* been nice. I look forward to many more once we are living in the same building – again.”

She drew a full smile and laughed silently.

“What, Ma’am?”

“Can you imagine a time in either of our lives when we would have said we were looking forward to living in the same building, again?”

Andy chuckled and smiled.

“I want you to see some of my paintings. Do you have another minute? I have pictures of some of them on my phone.”

“And I suppose you don’t even see the part of that statement that remains preposterous to people my age.”

“That a phone can show pictures. Woody has pointed that out to me on more than one occasion. He says being a phone is actually the least of its many functions these days. You will like Woody.”

They scrolled through a dozen of his recent paintings. It was clear she was impressed. Andy offered his hand for a shake and Priscilla seemed pleased to take it.

He returned to the old man.

“Wow! Considering how badly a number of things could have gone during the past half hour, things have turned out remarkably well, don’t you think.”

“You’re welcome,” Woody said kidding the boy.

“Yeah. Thanks. That was a huge dose of love all at once, old man.”

“I have the idea your heart is up to receiving it.”

“That’s a wonder-filled thing I’m discovering about love – no matter how much comes my way there is always room for it.”

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Visit

It was the old man's first time alone in the Palace. He was intrigued by his initial uneasiness and sense of trespassing – perhaps, a touch of loneliness, even. He built a fire, made coffee, chose a book, and settled in for the rest of the day.

Andy left at 2:30 so he would have a few minutes with Amy before Franky arrived. His new friend arrived promptly, as if some efficient secretary had arranged it. The reality was it had been his butler/valet/driver/confidant, Randolph. The old gentleman remained in the car. It was how things were done on his side of the tracks.

Andy introduced Amy. Then, as pre-arranged, she left the boys alone. She didn't mind. That afternoon there were two handsome hunks for her to survey and attend to. She may have overdone it, but the boys didn't seem to mind – they were boys, after all.

Eventually, with two *Belly Busters* washed down with three pitchers of Mountain Dew, the boys left. Franky left two twenties on the table to cover the tab and offer an outrageously generous tip for the nice girl.

"I fully intend to pay my way," Andy said sounding a bit miffed.

"I invited *you* and the next twenty hours are on me. When I come to your place, it can be on you."

Andy expected Franky's place to be luxurious. He wondered how his new friend would react to his ultra-plain digs – his Palace – later on. He figured if he turned out to be a true friend, it wouldn't matter. He relaxed. As they exited the restaurant the limo pulled up to the curb and stopped. Franky just stood there. Andy wondered why he made no move to enter it. 'His Randolph' got out, rounded the front of the car and opened the rear door. They entered. Inside, Franky turned to Andy, explaining, a bit sheepishly.

"Randolph believes it is his purpose in life to make me completely helpless and when I don't let him he puts on a huff and becomes impossible to live with."

"Live with?" Andy asked.

“He has taken care of me since I was a toddler. His room adjoins mine. When I was younger, the door was always open. In recent years, he has become scrupulous about providing me my privacy. Truth be told, I probably feel closer to him than to my parents even though he is nearly five times my age.”

“I understand about that. I guess you have your Randolph and I have my Woody. Woody is the best thing by far that has ever happened to me, well, other than being born and maybe puberty.”

They shared a knowing chuckle.

During the ride, Franky pointed out the many features of the back seats – two, facing each other. The boys were in the far rear. There was a bank of buttons that controlled music, video, live TV, phone, computer and on-line access. There was water from a faucet with paper cups and a refrigerator stocked with sandwiches and pop. The frosted window behind the driver went up or down at the press of another button. The overhead lights could be dimmed and changed from true light thorough blue, green and red. The windows were dark – outsiders could not see in although passengers could see out. The two seats could be collapsed to form a large bed.

“It will be great and completely private in here for dates when I reach sixteen – my parents won’t let me date until then.”

Somewhat humorously Andy scooted away slightly. Franky thought it was hilarious.

“You just keep getting better and better. I keep forgetting you are younger than I am.”

“I am finding that age is mostly irrelevant between people. Most of the time Woody and I even forget we aren’t the same age.”

“That’s how it was between Randolph and me when I was little – not so much anymore. I have become the teenager and he has converted into an ever-vigilant, panic-stricken overseer, terrified that I will somehow go on an uncontrollable, hormone induced, rampage and leave him trampled in my dust. I do nothing to lessen the fear. It seems to work to my advantage.”

“Until he begins chaining you to your bed at night,” Andy added with a grin.

It would have been an insult to refer to it as merely a *house* – three stories, a steeply pointed wood-shingled roof, brown stone and wood-framed cream stucco sides, 22 rooms, six bedrooms, eight bathrooms, servants’ quarters, a small gym and an indoor/outdoor swimming pool. Outback, tennis courts. From the roof sprouted half a dozen brown-brick chimneys. The acreage was enclosed by a ten-foot-high, brown stone wall, complete with locked front, wrought iron gate and gateman. The grounds were appointed with huge old trees. Andy could imagine a wonderful green expanse in spring when the snow was gone – most likely populated by a dozen flower patches. A flag rippled in the wind as it sat atop a tall pole near where the circular drive widened at the porch so riders could enter and exit expensive vehicles.

“Prison,” Franky said pointing to the building as they got out of the limo.

“I don’t understand.”

“It is designed to meet all of my needs so I never need to leave it except for school and my eventual funeral.”

“The car that was following the limo turned in after us,” Andy said, an uneasy question implied in his observation.

“BGs.”

“BGs?”

“Body guards. I seldom see them, but I know they are always there. Once I start dating I fully intend to embarrass the hell out of them.”

Andy had only a vague – though intriguing – idea about what he meant, but didn’t pursue it.”

Once out of the car, Franky stepped backwards across the driveway and pointed up.

“Third floor, three middle windows, blue drapes, my cell.”

He turned to Randolph.

“Thanks, Sir. You know I always appreciate your help. This is Andy, by the way. Sorry I failed to introduce him earlier. The excitement of getting a mostly unsupervised furlough away from here, I suppose.”

The old man nodded and offered a smile. It was

evident from the look on his face how deeply he cared about his young charge. That past hour and a half had spawned dozens of questions for Andy, but he would be patient in seeking answers – prison, cell, furlough, body guards, and so on and so on and so on.

Inside the huge entry hall, Franky pointed again.

“Elevator back there or stairs up here. I prefer the stairs.”

“I’ve always been a stairs guy, myself,” Andy said.

Franky took off on a mad tear up the steps with Andy right behind. He had wondered if a boy would be allowed to act like a boy inside such a lavish house, edifice, mansion, manor, lodge – whatever it might be. He noted a welcome sense of relief welling up inside him as he extended an elbow into Franky’s ribs in his attempt to pass him.

They were laughing themselves into helpless masses of jelly by the time they hit the third floor, collapsing on the top step, breathing heavily through broad smiles.

Presently, Franky spoke.

“Around the stairwell to the center door on the front.”

They stood and walked to the door. There was a framed sign on it.

“All girls will please undress before entering.”

Andy was beginning to think the years between twelve and fourteen must hold unimaginable changes in a boy’s outlook, including his basic motivation for living. The visit should be a useful time to make mental notes. Franky pushed the door open and motioned Andy in ahead of him.

“Please don’t judge me badly regarding all the expensive crap my parents and grandparents have forced on me, Andy. And under the tree down in the living room is another load of Christmas Crap I neither asked for nor want. It’s a fact of my life I hope we can talk about some time.”

Andy got a fleeting peek at the tree as they passed the open living room door in the big hall. Whether or not the contents of Franky’s room could legitimately be classified as crap, might be up for discussion, but that it was expensive and seemingly endless was not. The two Queen sized beds and matching six drawer dressers barely put a dent in the floor space. There was a study desk enclosed with book cases, a

computer table with every imaginable accessory, a weight lifting set-up, both pool and foosball tables, a chess table with chairs and overhead light, a large dark-stained crate containing dozens of pieces of sports equipment, a tanning bed, a massage table, a couch, a recliner, and a TV large enough to live in.

Andy gulped. That intrigued him. He had read about people doing that when coming upon something unbelievable, but had never experienced it, himself.

There was a rap at the open door. It was Randolph.

“The lad’s duffle bag, Master Franklin.”

“He set it on the floor inside the room.”

“Sorry I forgot that, Sir,” Andy said walking to him. “Didn’t mean for you to have to bring it up.”

“It is why I exist, young man.”

He winked.

“Have a good evening.”

He pulled the door closed after him.

Franky shrugged.

“If you have stuff that needs hanging, use that closet.”

Andy came right back with:

“None of my stuff has yet even been convicted.”

Franky put on a puzzled look. Andy explained.

“Needs *hanging*. Not *convicted*. I believe it is a malady I caught from Woody. He thrives on the absurd and since catching it I do believe I’ve grown a full inch.”

“The boy not only explains it, he offers an in-real-time example. We are going to get on fabulous – ly, if you’re a grammar nut.”

“I want us to get on well, but you should know that I haven’t gotten on well with very many peers in my life. Please be both patient with me and blunt about my missteps.”

“I am a teenager so I can’t in good faith promise to be patient, but I’m very good at blunt, beginning with suggesting you have to dummy down your language pattern if you want to get on well with the average run of the mill girl.”

“I get the opinion I am running well behind you in the hormone department, Franky. I fully expected you to end that last sentence with, ‘run of the mill *kid*.’”

Franky offered a shrug.

“I do think about girls a lot – probably every second or third breath to be honest.”

Andy jumped in:

“Don’t get me wrong. I really, really, like girls. It’s just that I still also like reading, painting, learning, thinking, creating things, writing, eating, breathing – things like that.”

Franky smiled and continued talking as he watched Andy carefully place each piece of clothing in the top dresser drawer as if it were something all quite precious.

“I suppose you have a simpler, much more comfortable holiday tree.”

“You’ll need to define simpler, I suppose. We bought the tree for pennies on the dollar just as the lot was closing for the season. We decorated it with strands of garland I rescued from a dumpster last New Year’s Eve. At Woody’s suggestion, we made popcorn balls and hung them on the branches. I suppose that’s simple. ‘Tis or ‘taint, we both love it.”

“Many presents?”

“No presents. We don’t choose to use our money in that way. Anyway, our very best presents to each other this year are each other. Be hard pressed to find anything better.”

Franky shook his head. Andy had no way of ascertaining the meaning and chose to let it alone. He closed the drawer. It slid right in with no sticking or wobbling back and forth to get it in place. ‘Amazing!’ he thought.

“What do you want to do first?” Franky asked. “The late afternoon sun will still be flooding the swimming pool this time of the afternoon. Windows top to bottom across the west wall. Shall we begin there?”

“I didn’t bring a suit.”

“Two options, then; swim in our skin or I have a drawer full of suits right here. Myself, I find it a real hoot to run down the stairs and through the first-floor hallway buck naked on my way to the pool. You can’t imagine how that bothers the people in this house.”

“Oh, I have a pretty good idea. I’m coming to think you spend a lot of time conjuring up ways to bother the people you live with.”

“My *keepers*, you mean. I do. Probably to a

pathological extreme, in fact. I promise I am fully harmless to kids like you. I suppose *suits* it should be, then. Bottom left drawer, there.”

“Typically, I only wear a *bottom*.”

After just a moment of perplexed silence, Franky spread a grin.

“Ah! The old man’s absurdities. Do you think the infection is terminal?”

“If you mean do I hope it sticks with me forever, yes. If you mean ‘lethal’, a least I’ll die unbelievably happy.”

They spent the first few minutes in the pool diving, racing, splashing and making gleeful boy noise – translation: the sound of Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders charging up San Juan Hill. That gradually gave way to quieter, more serious conversation as they moved quietly, face to face, in the water.

“So, I have come to know two Frankies and suspect there may well be a third when in the presence of his parents and at school.”

“And a fourth when I am alone being depressed out of my gourd about my life.”

“That one I didn’t see coming. All of this and depressed? I’m sorry. I think I’m pretty good at pulling guys out of depression. I recently rescued an old man contemplating suicide.”

“Woody?”

“I shouldn’t have stated it that way. Please say you won’t ever repeat that to anybody.”

“Sure. One thing, all four of my selves keep their word. I’m intrigued about the two me’s you think you have met.”

“Well, the first time we were together I got to know the thoughtful, compassionate, activist who clearly wants to help improve social conditions for kids and seniors who have been thrown away, so to speak. So far today it has been Franky the Imp – the little devil – who delights in hurting the people who clearly love him the most. I really like the first one. Up to a point I find the second one entertaining – to the point it actually inflicts discomfort, hurt or harm. I think I will like the one that shows his respect for others, once I meet him.”

“You are very good. I suspect a midget child

psychologist hired by my parents to shrink my head and force me to get my act together.”

“I was called something like that by somebody else not long ago. I assure you I am here strictly because I found you to be a great guy and wanted to spend more time with you. I am irrationally picky when it comes to friends. Very few have ever made the cut.”

“So, you set the bar high and I set it low.”

“What?”

“Oh. I didn’t mean *you*. Let me attempt to extricate myself from this quagmire.”

“Just for your information, Franky, the wonderful way you include really great words in conversation was one important check on the plus side as I contemplated our possible friendship.”

“Really?”

“Of course, not, however, it makes for a very comfortable relationship. But, I interfered as you were about to remove your foot from your mouth.”

“Yes, well, my Father says a person has to be friends with everybody because you never know when you may need them. Run those parameters through the old computer and the results would be about as far away from you and Woody as could be possible. You two would do anything for anybody, but not because they might be able to be of use to you sometime. You appear just to love everybody for no reason at all. It is one of the things that intrigued me enough about you to ask Father and Mother if I could accompany them to meet with you the other night. They had spoken about you at length over dinner several nights in a row. The service club thing is bogus, by the way. My school is filled with pig-headed, self-absorbed, greedy, asses. I did plan on telling you.”

“That certainly paints a picture of an odd-looking animal.”

They managed a chuckle. Andy continued.

“You have issues about love and honesty, and you think I can be of help to you so you befriended me, is that what I’m hearing?”

“I suppose that is what you’re hearing. I feel ashamed. Like Father like son, I guess.”

“I sure hope that’s not a hard and fast rule. My father got my single mother pregnant and was never heard from again. No way that I’m prepared to follow in *his* footsteps.”

“I assure you I won’t let you get me pregnant.”

Andy beamed and nodded.

“Very good! Welcome to the club.”

“What club?”

“The Woody/Andy Absurdity Club.”

“Oh. And here I was just thinking what a jack ass I just made of myself by saying that.”

“I’m thinking you will make a far better club member than a jackass.”

“Thanks, if you really meant that.”

“You will learn that Woody and I never say anything we don’t mean.”

“You and Woody are really close, aren’t you?”

“Yes we are.”

“And that has happened in only a matter of a month or so?”

“Twenty two days and about twenty two hours.”

“In fourteen years with him I’m not a hundredth as close to my father.”

“Then I’d say it’s about time you . . . no, let me use Woody’s Socratic method: so, what is your plan to rectify that clearly painful relationship?”

“I have none.”

“Then when will you start making one?”

“Huh?”

“It sounds like you don’t believe you play any role in improving the relationship. That it is totally on your parents’ shoulders. Pardon me for my bluntness, but that’s just plain stupid. You’re too smart to hide behind that.”

“Stupid? Smart? Hiding?”

“You left out, ‘get started’.”

“Even if I buy your premise that I have some responsibility – which I must admit I have never, ever considered – I have no idea how to go about it.”

“I will make a comment and then suggest we move on to another topic so you can come back to that one when you can put your full, private effort into it.”

“Okay. What’s your comment?”

“How would you go about building a relationship with them if they were a girl you wanted to get interested in you? Now, as to what role you can play in the new Hotel project. I think a good place to begin would be for you meet and listen to some of the kids at the orphanage – those who are going be integrated into the program. By getting to know them you’ll be in a better position to proffer ideas and ask important questions.”

“Proffer?”

“*Offer, extend.*”

“Okay. That makes sense. Provide me with the address and Randolph can drive me there.”

“Think about that – showing up in a limo to mingle with kids whose only possessions in the world are one pair of shoes, four pair of sox, two pair of jeans, three shirts, and an assortment of holey underwear.”

“Really?”

“Really, and that’s more than I had when I left there.”

“You lived there?”

“When my mother abandoned me that’s where I ended up.”

“Your mother abandoned you?”

“She was a hopeless drunk. Passing me on like that may have actually been one the better moves she made in her life. I hated her for it at the time of course.”

“Your mother was a drunk. You hated her? What happened?”

“One night after receiving a terrible spanking I ran away only taking with me what I could stash in my old suitcase.”

“You ran away? Where did you live?”

“On the streets for quite a few weeks all by myself.”

“Weeks! Were you okay?”

“Not by any measure. I lived in constant terror and lingering hunger.”

“Then what?”

“Then I broke into the hotel and built myself a place in the basement. I’ve been there a bit over two years.”

“You lived alone for two years – all on your own. How did – do – you buy stuff?”

“I’m fortunate to be a good enough artist that I have been able to sell paintings.”

“I thought you lived with Woody.”

“I do – well, at first it was he who lived with me. Like I said for a little less than a month now. By far the best thing that ever happened to me. I may have said that before. For the first time in my entire life, I am learning about love and about really caring for another human being. As I’m sure you know, nothing in all of life is comparable to knowing love. Like the feeling Randolph has for you.”

“Mother said she thought I would find you interesting – she failed to mention, disturbing. I can’t believe it. Next to you I’ve never done anything of any importance at all. You even built your own place to live? And now you’ve created this mixed living program and arranged for the hotel, the remodeling, and I’m guessing permits and lots of other legal stuff. How old are you?”

Andy chose an interesting way to respond.

“In two more years, I’ll be your age.”

“I get it. You’re saying I’ve wasted the first fourteen years of my life.”

“Oh, no. I think *you* just said that, however. I have said I think you have the makings of a really great friend. Inviting me to spend time with you here substantiates that assumption, I’d say. So far, including the pizza time, I’m having a super time. How about going back to your room and you can teach me how to play pool?”

“You can plan and carry out a major social revolution, but you don’t know how to play pool.”

Andy pulled himself up and out of the water and shook himself off, feeling no response was needed. He picked up a towel and began drying. Franky remained in the pool, treading water and looking up at him.

“Next, you’re going to tell me you teach yourself, have established a college fund for yourself and intend on taking care of the old man until he breathes his final breath.”

“Very good. You seem to understand people quite well. If you have other questions I’ll do my best to answer them, although I prefer to look ahead and not dwell on the past.”

He reached down to offer a hand up. Franky accepted

it.

“Let me try it your way. So, you want to learn how to play pool, young man. It just so happens I have a pool table in my room. If you will accompany me, please.”

“Sounds like fun. Thank you.”

They exchanged smiles.

“Let me call the kitchen and have sandwiches sent up. Milk or Pop?”

“I’d rather go to the kitchen and make the sandwiches ourselves.”

“You are *such* a strange kid.”

“Thank you. Like Woody says, he’d rather be considered strange than to be just like anybody else.”

“I’m coming to believe you two deserve each other.”

“That has also been said recently. We will be happy to make room for one more when he’s ready.”

“I’m way too much of a coward to try to make my way in the world by myself or veer too far from being a clone of my peers.”

“I really feel bad for you, then. I want life to be *my* life, lived according to my hopes, my design and my sweat. Can’t see how I could claim it as mine if I got it any other way.”

[Andy won his *first* game of pool: “It’s just a simple matter of geometry and physics – angles plus force!”]

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Imps All Over the Place

During his seventy-six years, the old man had encountered many more mysteries than had the boy, but that morning neither had an immediate explanation for what met them in the living room.

“Presents?” Andy said, clearly puzzled, looking up at the old man.

“At least beautifully wrapped packages,” Woody replied.

“Did you?”

“No, did you?”

“No.”

Christmas presents – probably two dozen – were spread around the base of their tree.

“Only one explanation,” the old man said.

The boy’s face lit up.

“Santa Clause, you mean, of course.”

“Have you ever wondered if we have come to think too much alike,” Woody asked, pulling him close.”

“Only if you, like I, are *also* looking around for reindeer droppings.”

“That was going to be my line, but I hadn’t yet found a way to properly structure it.”

“That probably answers your question, then.”

Andy moved to the tree and dropped to his knees, reaching among them, working through the tags.

“I’m thinking we are dealing with *Santa Imp* here, Old Man. Look at the tags.

“Woody, Andy, Old Man, Kid, WWW, AMH, Writer Guy, Painter Dude – it just goes on and on, apparently no two are addressed alike. Ah! The clue that wraps it up. Here’s one labeled, *Bottoms*.”

“Explanation?”

Andy related the swim suit humor at Franky’s place. It was worth a new set of chuckles.

“How do we handle this?” Andy asked.

“Options?”

“Well, take them back unopened. Call him and explain

our philosophy about the giving of stuff – although I’ve already done that, clearly not believably.”

“Or,” the old man said, “accept them in the spirit offered, and eventually thank him.”

“Will he expect something in return?” Andy asked.

“I don’t know. He is *your* friend. Apparently, you had some sort of related discussion.”

“Only like all night long.”

Andy thought for just a moment.

“No, he won’t expect anything. You see what he did, don’t you?”

“Just in case I don’t, what’s *your* take on it, son?”

It was worth smiles between them.

“He made sure he only gave one gift to each recipient. By using all those appellations, each name only received one. He is very smart intellectually – still quite inept emotionally. At one level, very selfish. He let his deep-rooted need to give us things overpower his knowledge of our desire not to receive them. Emotionally immature – needing to satisfying his own needs regardless of anybody else’s.”

“But, his motivation was a least partly to see that we didn’t go empty handed this Christmas season – empty handed as he defined it, which clearly was a sad state of affairs to him.”

“Yes. I’m sure your right. Look, here on the tree – an envelope.”

“Well, don’t just sit there panting on it, Fido – open it.”

That garnered a big grin.

“It’s not Franky’s handwriting. More girlish. He probably had a maid write it as part of his feeble attempt to remain anonymous – *frankyanomous* is more like it. He knew he should, but couldn’t quite bring himself to remain unknown.”

“Do I get to hear what it says or must I pass a test over your forensics findings first?”

‘Dear Complete Strangers. I heard your tree was very pretty. It really is. When I finished my annual trip. I found myself on this rooftop and much to my wondering eyes did

appear, a number of extra packages. I hope you don't mind if I leave them here. Prancer and the guys are plum tuckered out from their big night so I'd like to lighten the load for the return trip. Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night.'

"It is signed, *Santaish*."

Andy curled his legs underneath him where he sat on the floor and looked into Woody's face.

"I don't know whether to feel sorry for him, grateful to him, or bothered that I am bothered by his gesture."

"I am probably not the one who needs to figure that out for you. I for one am going to accept it as a gesture of good will and let myself experience good feelings toward him – this frankynomous person. We know how to spread our good fortune around to folks who really need things."

"Okay, then. I can be onboard with that. I'm sure Franky – er, Frankynomous – has never come within spitting distance of a poor kid or homeless man. We can act as his intermediary."

He reached into the pile and tossed a present to WWW.

"It would be funny if that turns out to be a book."

Andy waited patiently while the old man unwrapped it.

"I suppose this *is* funny then – the complete works of Shakespeare printed in a font so tiny I'll need *two* magnifying glasses to read it. Now, one for you."

"Okay. Let's see what *Bottoms* gets. Probably no surprise."

He unwrapped his gift.

"Just as I anticipated – a swim suit – the very one I wore I'm thinking."

He stood and held it up as if to model it.

"Is that just the draw string?"

Again, they laughed. It was ridiculously skimpy in terms of how the old man remembered swim suits.

They turned the process into a very pleasant, hour long event. Woody made sure the name card stayed with each item thinking the boy would certainly come up with some

humorous manner in which to respond.

They both received sweaters, watches, stocking caps, books, games, jigsaw puzzles, candy, a fruit cake, and a lump of coal. The one that held the most meaning for Andy was the two-part, screw together, pool cue. Woody was taken by the open weave, multi- shade, blue cardigan and the robe and slippers.

While Woody worked at collecting the wrapping paper and packaging material into a trash bag, Andy left for a moment in the direction of the vault. He returned with a flat, brown, paper sack.

“I know that we both understood there would be no presents between us, but I really want you to have this – don’t think of it as a present, but as a wonderful memory we have shared.”

The old man took a seat on the couch and slid out the contents.

“Oh, my, son! This is magnificent at so many levels.”

Andy, overflowing with excitement sat in close to Woody so he could begin his explanation of the painting – an explanation that was, of course, unnecessary.

“It is the street scene right at the moment the lights came on that night we met. It’s all done in just three colors. I went with various shades of blue for the background because dark blue can symbolize a person’s dark place while light blue can represent recovery. The white flakes of snow and white light from the lamps atop the posts are all about love and happiness. See how I just barely used any black to indicate the posts and lamps – all the bad stuff about to be left behind in the blizzard. I dulled white to gray tones around the old man to indicate uncertainty – a choice. And it’s the first painting I every signed, *Andrew*.”

The old man pulled the boy close and leaned down, planting a gentle, lingering kiss on the top of his head.

“This is the most precious ‘wonderful memory’, as you put it, I have ever received. Thank you for loving me and letting me love you, son.”

He held him there at his side for some time – not entirely to hide his tears. Presently, he spoke, again.

“I seem to feel an unusual bump in my rear pocket.

Could you investigate it for me, please?"

He leaned forward as if to make it an easier task.

"Could be another lump of coal all wrapped up – a charcoal briquette, maybe," Andy said playing along and feeling some degree of excitement.

"There's a card taped to it. It says . . . he unfolded it . . . Andrew Martin Hunter, esquire. Esquire? I'm not a lawyer."

"Esquire also means the best of the best of all the young knights in training and I will not allow you to deny that."

Andy grinned.

"But we agreed not to . . ."

"You're a fine one to be complaining. Get after it – wonderful memory kid."

He removed the blue paper and sat the small black box, which it contained, in his palm.

"Jewelry? he asked, puzzled."

"We can sit here and have a philosophic discussion about its most likely contents or you can just open it and find out."

Andy nodded and followed the old man's suggestion.

"A gold ring with three stones. It is beautiful. I'm thinking there is a story."

"On my twelfth birthday, my father gave this ring to me. He said the red stone symbolized the great passion I had for living. The blue stone for my understanding of the responsibilities of manhood. And, the white for the purity of my intentions to live a good and useful life. The gold band represented how precious I was to him and mother. I want you have it with all those same attributes. I love you so much. You are saving my life, you know."

Andy looked into his face, puzzled.

"*Saving, not have saved?*"

"Every once in a while, some of those old dark feelings try to sabotage my life, but all I have to do is think about you and things are wonderful again – *saveING*, you see. Your great gift just never stops."

"The longer I know you the harder it becomes to show you how much I treasure *your* love, old man."

"The best thing about love is that you don't have to try – it just envelopes both lives in a way that won't let go."

“Thank you for all of that. I’ve never had a ring. My first one is one that I will treasure forever.”

He hesitated and looked up at the old man as he slipped it on his finger.

“I’m sure I talk about love far more than most boys my age. I think it’s because it is so new and so wonderful to me. I hope that isn’t a problem for you.”

“How could speaking of love ever become a problem?”

* * *

New Year’s came and went. The new bedroom came to stay – forever – judging by the number nails young Andy felt obliged to use in the framing. It was their first night in ‘separate quarters’.

“I guess you’re okay in there,” Andy called after they had both turned in.

“I guess I am. If you think you need to check to make sure, you know you’re always welcome.”

The old man had left the door open a crack to maintain circulation. His light was off. He saw the crack widen and then a familiar face atop a minimally clad young body.

“I see you got the lights off okay.”

“Yes, I did.”

“A good idea to leave the door cracked like that – circulate the warm air into your room.”

“That’s what I had in mind, for sure.”

“I could probably stay a few minutes if you are lonely or anything.”

“What a considerate suggestion. There is certainly room in this humongous bed you picked out for me.”

Andy chuckled as he crossed the room.

“What?” Woody asked.

“*Humongous!* Sounded odd coming from a man of your generation.”

Wood scooted to the back of the bed and threw open the sheet. The boy slid in and the old man lowered it over him.

“Just a bit strange, after being together all these weeks,” Woody said, making the topic legitimate for discussion.

“Yeah. I tried lying on your bunk for a while, but it didn’t help.”

“I see. Well, I am glad you were intrepid enough to locate me in this underground labyrinth.”

“See. We used to always have that kind of *back and forth* before we fell asleep. I guess I missed it tonight. Maybe just a little lonely, too.”

“I can always move back to your room.”

“No. I think this will be best. It’ll just take some getting used to.”

“Okay, then. I think you just *backed* and then I *forthed*. That puts it in your court I believe.”

“I’m worried that something still might go wrong.”

“Between us?”

“Oh. No, never that. With the hotel. Think of all the people who would be disappointed, and all but left out on the street if anything should go wrong.”

“I have thought about that, too. But, if we spend our lives focusing on everything that could go wrong we’d be forever miserable. I’d rather proceed as if things are going to turn out well, then, when those infrequent problems arise, we just move in and fix them.”

“I suppose.”

Silence.

“Do you trust me?”

“One of the fascinating aspects of our discussions is that I have learned never to anticipate where they may go. Do I trust you, son? Yes, fully and completely.”

“Why?”

“I suppose my responding with, ‘Why not?’, would not satisfy you.”

“I suppose you are right. Nobody’s ever seemed to trust me and yet I’ve never intentionally been untrustworthy. Even Miss Priscilla at the orphanage always knew she could count on me to test all the rules and all the limits.”

“I’m sure she was looking at things from the other side of the mirror.”

“I don’t understand.”

“For her to trust you, you had to *abide* by the rules, not *test* them.”

“I can see how she might have misinterpreted that.”

“It sounds like your mother trusted you – to take care of things – run the house – and I suppose more than once take care of her – keep her out of danger.”

“I see where you’re going. But, why *you*? Why would you trust me?”

“My father gave me a piece of advice that has worn very well for me down through the years: *Always trust a person until he proves to you that you can’t.*”

“Hmm. What if you trust somebody new who just hasn’t yet showed his true colors – just waiting to take advantage of your good nature?”

“That has happened a few times – not many. The overwhelming trend in the opposite direction has helped me build a rather unshakable belief in my fellow man.”

“Sort of like ‘a few bad apples in a crate don’t make all the apples in that crate bad.’”

“Yes. Like that. Where did you come by that maxim?”

“I have no idea. Could have heard it. Could have read it. Could have just formed itself as I was speaking. If it’s something I need to be able to prove or to return to, I footnote it in my head. If not, I just enjoy watching it bounce around in there.”

The old man snorted, then yawned.

“I fear that you will soon be talking with yourself, son. I am very tired.”

“It won’t bother me if you go to sleep, old man. I’ll leave quietly pretty soon.”

And he did – pretty soon.

Early the next morning Woody heard it first – somebody knocking at their door – the inside door to the Palace. He slipped into his Christmas slippers and robe, and went to see who was there.

It was Brenda, the hotel owner’s daughter. She seemed upset.

“Come in, please. Let me take your coat and put on the coffee. Have a seat at the table.”

She remained standing, arms crossed.

“I have awful news. I received word from Dad’s attorney that a silent partner in the hotel is baulking at its

transformation. The lawyer thinks it may be a power play so dad will buy out his share, but our money is all tied up in other investments right now.”

“So, is there a plan? Are there next steps that should be taken?”

“Our attorney is consulting with the construction firm this morning to suggest that he stop work until things get ironed out.”

“I see. I suppose there is no timeline for getting things *ironed out*.”

“No, there isn’t. I really have lots of things to attend to so I should be on my way. I will keep you informed.”

“Fine. Thank you for coming by like this. I will be awaiting the tiniest snippet of news.”

She left. That would leave informing Andy up to the old man. It was probably best. He went ahead and put on the coffee. Andy soon arrived wrapped in a sheet.”

“Love your new look, son. Sort of an off the shoulder mummy slash toga look.”

Andy offered a faint smile looking around.

“I thought I heard a woman’s voice. You just get your private room and already you’re on the prowl. I figured I’d better cover up until I saw what’s up.”

“What’s up is that Brenda was here bringing not such good news. Short version, remodeling has had to stop until something can be worked out with one of the silent partners in the hotel.”

“I thought silent partner meant he put his money in, but had no say so in how it was used.”

“That’s usually the case. This is in some way different. She said she would keep us posted.”

“Do we tell the wannabe residents?”

“Let’s wait until we get a better handle on it from Brenda. For all I know, I suppose, she may be contacting them right now.”

Andy’s phone rang from somewhere inside his swaddling clothes. He unwrapped himself until it fell to the floor. He spoke for some time then relayed the essence of the conversation to Woody.

“It was the banker’s wife – Franky’s mother. She wants

to talk with me – alone. I said sure. I supposed that was okay. I can see her 8:30 so I better get ready. I guess I slept in this morning. I'm just getting too old to party all night at your new place."

"How about I fix toast and hot chocolate in a takeout cup while you shower and dress?"

"Great. I wonder what's on her mind that would need to be private between her and me."

The old man looked at the boy over the top of his glasses. Andy replied.

"Okay. Okay. I know. We can stand her and philosophically discuss which of all possible topics it might be or I can just get my butt over there and find out."

"I'd suggest you take the rest of you along as well."

That broke the sudden gloom and coaxed a smile.

The bank didn't open until nine, but a security guard was waiting at the door and let him in. He escorted him to her office on the fourth floor.

"Thank you for coming this early, Andrew. My day is just so full of meetings this was the only time I had open. I must do something about that, but that's another story. Have a seat – drink?"

"Tonic and water, please."

She was taken aback.

"A joke ma'am. I'm fine, thank you. I hope everybody is alright."

"Everybody is *not* alright. How can I put this? Everybody – meaning Franklin, his father and I – have suddenly entered Xanadu – you know Xanadu?"

"Yes. An idyllic, perfect place described in Coleridge's poem Kublai Kahn. I can go on."

"No need for that," she said.

"I *really* do *not* understand," he said.

"I'm not going to ask what you did or how you did it . . ."

Andy figured that was *not* a good start to what he had hoped would be a friendly conversation.

". . . but our son is a changed person since your overnight with him."

At that point it could still go either way, Andy figured. She continued.

“He wears clothes to breakfast, he initiates conversations with us and asks our opinions about things. He insisted on taking most of his Christmas gifts out to the Children’s Home. He bought things for somebody else, but wouldn’t say who, then coaxed dear old Randolph to help him sneak out during the night and deliver them. He follows the butler around asking if he can help. He hasn’t raised his voice and we haven’t heard him swear in days. The servants are relaxed around him for the first time . . . in his life, I suppose. They even smile in his presence.

“We have always received good reports about him from school, but at home it’s always been a disaster. He sat his father and I down last evening and we talked way into the wee hours about things we have never talked about. It seems for a long time he has been angry at us because he didn’t believe he was important to us, that *he* always came in last after work and social life and business trips. In what I believe is the vernacular of your generation, he spilled his guts to us and we soon found that were doing the same in return.”

“What a mess,” Andy said flashing a smile.

She returned it and continued.

“When things came to a more or less natural stopping place last night – well, early this morning – he hugged his father and pulled me close and kissed my forehead – not a peck, but a lingering, loving kiss. He told us both he loved us. We’ve never heard that from him before. I’ve mostly just been crying ever since. It’s what mothers do. This morning his father couldn’t keep from asking: “I don’t mean to sound rude or impolite, son, but what in the hell has gotten into you?”

“The imp in me and the imp in that odd kid who stayed over that night had a long, long heart to heart. His imp turned out to be wise beyond anything I’ve ever heard or read. I blame him entirely for all this and someday will accuse him of it face to face.

“Then he laughed and hugged us both. I got an ‘I love you’ whispered in my ear. Well, I guess I just wanted to thank you – and your magical imp – for being so kind and generous to our precious son. Perhaps I shouldn’t divulge this’ and ask you not to, but three psychiatrists have given up on him, and at \$500 an hour that’s a lot to give up on.”

“I don’t really have a response, ma’am. I very much like the real Franky. If I was in some way able to help him get on with shedding his confused, contrived self, I am pleased. But if he is changed it is because HE came to the decision it was time. When a kid puts love on backwards it leads to a horribly convoluted life. I can attest to that. And just for the record, my imp mostly just speaks fluent Woody. Franky is so fortunate you are willing to change with him.”

Andy knew nothing had been said about their willingness to change, but he figured that ‘seeping the subconscious thing’ from the old man just might work on the parents of teens as well as on teens – it had apparently worked well on Franky. He changed the subject immediately.

“We received bad news from Brenda this morning that put a hold on our whole project. Woody and I are not sure of all the details yet, but I figured you needed to know.”

“Yes. Thank you for that. I’ll give her a call immediately. Oh, Franklin – Franky as I have learned he prefers to be called – said he was going to phone you after school today. Just a heads up.”

“That will be great. You have a good day now.”

“Oh, I will. Do you do hugs?”

“Didn’t used to, but suddenly I’ve become the twelve-year-old king of hugs. I’ve had the best teacher in the world.”

She had to agree; it was one of the best she’d ever received.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Skinny Dipping in a Barrel?

Two days passed. Andy and Woody felt helpless as a seemingly endless flurry of legal documents, emails, and meetings were launched on behalf of trying to salvage the project. The old man snacked continually and gained three pounds. The boy snacked continually and lost three.

“Where is the equity, Universe?” the old man mumbled to himself.

At noon, Andy’s phone rang.

“Andy here. Yes. . . I see. . . When?. . . For how long? . . . You’re sure? . . . No possibility for a change in status? . . . Okay, then. . . Thanks for the call.”

“Well?” the old man asked clearly more impatient than the boy had ever seen him.

“It was Brenda. It seems three forces converged on that obstinate ‘silent partner’ – it turned out to be Franky’s uncle on his mother’s side. Force one: Franky demanded that the man accompany him on a tour – first the orphanage and then the retirement home. Force two: On his visit with the old folks, one Priscilla Waldbreth stepped forward and, apparently wagging her finger in his face, dressed him down liked a first sergeant to a recruit in boot camp. Seems he had been her ward at another children’s’ home forty years ago, and apparently she had some unflattering stories she was willing to spread around in case he persisted in his resistance. Force three: somebody offered to buy the uncle’s holdings in the hotel. Result of it all, the uncle melted like whipped cream at a summer picnic. He has signed documents ceding his interest to our foundation – no money changing hands.

“I have a pretty good idea about the source of force three, but I think I will just let it be.”

“You have certainly whetted my interest, but I won’t intrude on your decision to keep your suppositions private.”

“Oh, no. You seem to be able to read my thoughts anyway. That night at Franky’s he mentioned his trust fund – something north of a gazillion dollars I assume from all the

things he said he could do with it. Putting that together with things his mother related to me, my bet would be on him. The old Franky would most certainly boast about it, although the old Franky wouldn't have done it in the first place. If the new Franky that his mother described is really a *new* Franky, I'm sure nothing will ever be said."

"You must be very pleased about the way you have been able to affect your friend, Andy."

First, his name is Franky not Andy."

"They chuckled.

"Remember, it was a three-way collaboration. None of it could have occurred if Franky hadn't already had a compassionate foundation hiding somewhere beneath his well-practiced brattiness. Knowing his mother, I figured it had to be there. I was more the messenger, teasing his better self with some of the billion, sage, tidbits I've absorbed from you."

"So, may I turn the tables on you?"

"You usually do."

It had been offered with a big grin.

"Just as you contend Franky had to be ready, deep inside, so did Andrew when he and the old man collided – so to speak."

"Hmm. I can accept that. Thank you. It makes me feel more like a legitimate part of the new – no, the *current* – me than before. Wow! I love it when we get our minds all mingled together like this. I sort of promised Franky we could make room for his, if he was a 'mind' to join us."

"Your punning skill is rapidly expanding. You best make certain you really want that to happen."

"You're saying maybe I should *punt* before I become a *punctilious punster* who *punctuates* his verbiage with absurd *punctations*."

"It is amazing that you could produce that on a moment's notice – even noting some marginal entries."

"I take no real credit for it. I just put my brain on autopilot and am often amazed at what transpires. I noticed you said my punning skill was *expanding* and not *improving*."

"Think about it; could 'punning' really ever *improve*?"

"You got me there. I should have realized that when, during the past week, you, the King of Puns, definitely

expanded – a size 40 or so waist now?”

“You say I’m past improving?”

“How can one improve on perfection?”

“You are certainly one of a kind. My life would have been incomplete if we had never met.”

“I’m pleased you see me as one of a kind – I refer you to our previous discussions on the topic. It is still a bit unsettling to contemplate the possibility that we might have never met, so let’s move on for now.”

“Alright, then. What is our next step in seeing that everything comes together without a hitch?”

“I think it’s time for the new residents to get a look at their new digs.”

Woody smiled.

“What?”

“The boy who, on a second’s notice, freely smatters his speech with punctilious, and punctations, chooses to replace ‘newly and thoughtfully renovated residences’, with ‘digs’.”

“Variety is the spice of life! On the other hand, I *really* hate that saying. *Variety* is a fully nonspecific term that very likely includes the most terrible things a human being could ever have to confront.”

The old man laughed out loud.

“I’d say I was not laughing *at* you, but rather *with* you, except I see you aren’t laughing.”

“I am smiling deep inside. I just love it when you laugh – partly the wonderful sound that tickles me no end, and partly how it represents the absence of the dark times that once plagued you.”

“You are remarkable, son. I hope you understand I would love you whether or not you were remarkable. Being so is just a wonderful perk.”

“And me to you. Nothing that could ever befall you will change how I feel about you – not a joyful topic, I suppose, but for some time, now, I have felt the need to express it.”

“Thank you. It is not my intention to become a vegetable anytime in the near future.”

“If that time does come do I get any say in what kind of veggie – you know my feelings about broccoli, and the thought of covering you in cheese dip to make you palatable is just

plain disgusting.”

The moment called for a hug. The moment activated a hug. A singularly magnificent feeling flowed between them. The boy had long since stopped trying to describe or define it – and, amazingly, that was acceptable to him.

Sometime later, they arranged for the new tours, deciding to keep the two groups separate that time. Old folks tended to see children’s walking fast as running sprints. Children saw old folks’ walking as standing still. There were still several areas calling for information and education. They related to two, distinct views of ‘normal’ and something off’ times left in the dust when the lives of old and young were forced to mingle – patience on *both* sides.

Many ‘pairs’ were already emerging and the newly engaged social worker had taken on that process as her first priority. She was assisted by an intern – Denzel. The boys and old ladies could not get enough of the young man.

“Look at the calendar! Suddenly there is less than a month until MOSAY, Woody.”

“MOSAY?”

“My acronym for Merging Of Seniors and Youngsters. I can hardly wait for them to begin their new . . . what? . . . experiences, opportunities, lives, futures.”

“You *are* excited, aren’t you? Do you fully understand why?”

“Come now. A person never fully understands anything – but I’ll give it a shot. Most obviously, and we’ve both confirmed it, the solid relationship between a kid and an older adult has the potential to be life changing – in the best of all possible ways. I really want every one of them to have what we have. Also, it is a new concept – herding youngsters and oldsters into the same corral and forcing them to go at it together.”

The ‘youngster’ chuckled at how his idea emerged from his mouth, and waited for a similar response from his ‘oldster’. His wait was not unrewarded.

“I expect us to keep copious notes as the project progresses so we can write an article – maybe a book – about it,” Andy said. “I expect people will ask to visit and learn about our experience. I already have forty pages sitting in a file on

my laptop. You'll have no problem finding it anytime you want to take a gander."

"May I assume the file is labeled 'MOSAY'?"

"You may. And the password?"

"I'll take a stab in the dark. Love?"

"Bingo, old man. It's like our brains are plugged into each other."

"I assume we each have some things in our brains we would rather keep private."

"I understand that – and yes, although I assume that back when you were a newly pubescent boy you had many of the same thoughts I am now having."

Nothing like making an old man uncomfortable.

The boy continued:

"I'm sure you have more of those private things than I do just because you're older."

"I'm sure you are correct. Perhaps, we need to move on – again."

"Oh, I didn't intend to make you uncomfortable about your growing up years."

"It is not so much that. I loved those new feelings and the possibilities they promised. I also know that being an adolescent is not an easy time in life. Because I know that I can't spare you that, I am really more uncomfortable for you than I am for me."

"You know there is nothing I can't talk about with you. When a guy my age has that with a guy your age, I'm betting that I am going to do just fine. I don't want you solving my problems for me. I won't put up with it, in fact. You understand that, but one of the very best things you have to offer a boy my age is your ability to help open up a range of realistic options for me to explore and evaluate."

"Last year I did a lot of reading about juvenile delinquency – which, I think should just be called juvenile crime and get real about it. Anyway, I was taken by the fact that kids who find themselves in an environment that produces young criminals, are, also, typically in an environment in which kids have no reliable, thoughtful, sources of adult male counsel. What they have are the older gang leaders – neither reliable nor thoughtful. There is nobody there who has

experienced the good side of life – the really successful and productive side of life – nobody that proposes hope for a better way. My suggestion is that instead of hiring more cops we hire old men to sit on street corners so kids can engage them in meaningful conversation about life’s positive options.”

“May I use that passage for the basses of a novel? What a fantastic take you have on the topic.”

“Sure! I propose a 40/60 split in any profits.”

“I won’t ask which goes to whom.”

Andy’s grin widened.

“That does bring up two topics that are relevant to our ‘family life’,” Woody said.

“Shoot. That’s your term and it makes me feel ‘related’ every time I use it.”

“Fine! I propose a 40/60 split every time you . . .”

Chuckles.

“I have contacted my old publisher with a new book idea and he is quite enthusiastic about it – to the tune of a \$10,000 advance on royalties.”

“Ten thousand dollars! One of your books makes you ten thousand dollars?”

“Allow me to extend it to my main point. The attorney who is handling our relationship – guardianship – aimed at keeping us together, says I must be financially solvent – have some form of regular income. You know the history of my financial arrangements. This contract will assure that requisite income. He is drawing up the papers for us to peruse.”

Andy sniffed, slowly, three times, each one longer and deeper than the others. All quite shamelessly he allowed tears to find their ways down his cheeks. That time it was he who pulled himself close and laid his head against the old man. After a few minutes of quiet – that thing Andy thought they did so well together – Woody spoke.

“At least one good thing about these past few moments.”

Andy looked up at him, head cocked.

“Neither of us will need a shower tonight.”

There were smiles through tears, perhaps the most wonderful form of either smiling or crying. The smiles promise hope and better times regardless of the present circumstance,

and the tears remind us that, when properly used, we will grow stronger and wiser from the setbacks and pain that everyone must experience.

“So, is it like adoption?”

“One step below that, I suppose, but it still cements our relationship until you reach eighteen.”

“But adoption would cement our relationship forever.”

“Yes. Adoption is a massive step in a relationship, son.”

Andy spread a grin.

“What?”

“Didn’t you hear what you just said?”

“Help me, here.”

“You referred to me as, ‘son’. Just doesn’t seem like such a massive step to me. You’ve been saying it forever.”

“Hmm. You have clearly been thinking about this. That puts you ahead of me and by that, I mean no derogation of the idea. I suppose I haven’t contemplated it because I am so old and you are so competent.”

“May I just point out that I am a competent *twelve-year-old*?”

“You may and a point well taken. Still my life is winding down and yours is just beginning to surge.”

“Sounds like most parent/child situations to me.”

“You have pre-established an arsenal of pointed comebacks, I see.”

“Would you have expected any less of a *competent twelve-year-old*?”

“I do love you so much, young man.”

“I’ve know that for months. So, that settles it, does it?”

“I have always had a rule to let important decisions percolate for some established length of time before acting.”

“An hour, a day, a week, a month – you’re leaving me hanging here, old man, and you know I don’t do the ‘hang’ thing very well.”

“No more than a month – most likely closer to a week. We need to discuss a number of important issues and together speak with our attorney.”

“*Speak* first or *discuss* first.”

“What? Oh, I see. Discuss, I suppose, although we

need to hear from the attorney relative to regulations or precedents about adoption at my age.”

“I know his number. Shall I dial?”

“Best give my old mind a short time to reset itself, Okay?”

“Sure. A short time is no problem. One Mississippi, Two Mississippi, Three Mississippi. . . .”

Before he managed *‘four’* the boy was curled up on the floor laughing convulsively.

* * *

Sitting across the table from each other enjoying hot dogs and chili, neither brought up that issue that neither could put aside.

“You mostly know about my childhood, Woody. Can you share some things about yours? I think it should help me form a more complete picture of you.”

“A thoughtful and reasonable idea. I haven’t been intentionally trying to hide anything from you. Anything specific?”

“Well, since you asked, how old were you when you first had . . .”

“ . . . pecan pie. Fourteen, actually, at a pie supper. A guy would use his entire week’s Saturday job earnings to buy the pie his girl brought so they could sit together. The proceeds went to some charity.”

Andy grinned.

“Astute catch, old man. I’ll settle for that. What else you got?”

“Let’s see. I remember my early life as relatively problem free and happy. At least one parent was always nearby. I had a number of friends. We liked to swing and teeter and climb trees and play a variety of ball games. Okay, here is an incident I am told happened when I was about five. I don’t personally recall it.

“Apparently, I asked mother why people wished me a MERRY Christmas but a HAPPY New Year. Never dummifying down the language she used with me she explained the two greetings were like *idioms* and it was the *idea* not the specific *content* that was important – both implied a good time. The next person who wished me a Merry Christmas was our

minister. I nodded at him, knowingly, and said: "I understand, sir. You're just an idiot."

Andy laughed.

"What happened?"

"I assume Mother rushed in to cover for me although that was never part of the story. It suggests, I think, that, from an early age, I enjoyed sharing whatever information I figured I had – the precursor to life as a teacher and writer.

"Oh, and another one that might put an appropriate face on something you may have wondered about. Again, this has been related to me. Apparently at the first parent/teacher conference in first grade – we had no kindergartens in those days – the teacher opened with something like this: 'I really like Woody. It is just that I can't figure out *what* he is.'

More laughter.

"So, you're saying not only do you enjoy absurdity at *this* stage in your life, but when you were six, you *were* an absurdity."

"If not an absurdity, at least an enigma in the case of that teacher. I can't understand why, although I did prefer sitting under my desk rather than in the seat, I held books upside down when reading to provide at least some degree of challenge, and, when she was out of the room, I would often gather the children in the library corner of the room and read to them."

"How did your parents react to things like that?"

"I am sure they took it as high praise for their superior and thoughtful child rearing techniques. They always encouraged me to be myself. More than a few times during my teen years they chided me to succumbing to the behavioral patterns of my peers – clothes, hair, music. They never interfered. They just pointed it out – the options thing you mentioned, I suppose. 'Who do you really want to be – yourself or a clone of Mike and Stinky?'"

"Stinky? You had a friend named Stinky?"

"Yes, it was more because his last name was *Stiniky* than body odor."

"This is great, Woody. You got more?"

"There was one time when I was about your age, I suppose. Mike, Stinky and I had been skinny dipping most of

the afternoon at Purdy's Creek. That's how boys often spent summer afternoons back then. We suddenly realized it was late so scampered out of the water to get dressed. Our clothes were gone! At first it seemed funny – until reality set in. It was a mile walk back to town and then ten blocks to Mike's house – the closest place of refuge.

"To our chagrin, we didn't find a single scrap of 'cover up material' between the creek and the edge of town. It had become twilight, which we decided was in our favor – though just how, remained to be seen. So, still buck naked, we came upon a large, wooden barrel, held together as they were with heavy wire encircling it in several places. I had an idea – like you, I was often the one with ideas. Using a heavy stone I knocked out the top and bottom boards forming a tube of a kind. We stood back to back to back making a triangle of sort, raised what was left of the barrel above our heads and slipped it down over us. It was not a comfortable squeeze on several levels."

Andy interrupted.

"You could say that in way you were dancing cheek to cheek."

The old man's belly rippled. He raised his eyebrows and nodded.

"Our next step was to walk, more than a little awkwardly, to Mike's house, sticking to the shadows as much as possible. The further we walked, the more barrel staves loosened from the wire binders. Eventually one dropped off. Then another and another. By the time we were a block away from his house we were huddled there together clinging to nothing but three wire hoops. We took off running across back yards, vaulting fences and flower beds until we reached the outside stairs that led up to his room in the attic.

"Mike loaned us clothes so we could make it home without exposing the seat of our problem, you might say."

Andy was having trouble containing himself. He had to ask.

"Did your parents find out?"

"Nothing was ever said, but my clothes that were stolen eventually turned up back in my dresser drawer."

"How do you explain that?"

“My best guess is that it was my father who stole them. He had his own Imp that surfaced every once in a while.”

“What made you think it was him?”

“The next time I wore that red T-shirt he commented on it – something to the effect: ‘I like that shirt although it tends to make you look *skinny*. You’ve *barrel-y* worn it this summer. I think it brings out the color in your *cheeks*.’”

“I wish I could have known him – your father. Oh! Hmm? Come to think of it, it seems like I probably do – or a near facsimile.”

“Funny how that happens!”

“Do you mind that in some ways you resemble your father?”

“Goodness no. I admired him more than anybody I have ever known.”

“So, I guess that cinches it, then.”

“As is often the case, son, I have no idea what you mean.”

“It only seems fair that if the man you got to admire most was your father, then I should have that same privilege.”

“You, young man, contain more Imp than my father and I put together. You have more than made your case.”

“Sorry if I’m bugging you, but that seems to be one of my best things – bugging people until I get what I’m after.”

“I understood that five minutes after we met. Thank you, by the way.”

Andy smiled and nodded. He figured if it had been that trait that had led to his new life he probably needed to thank himself as well. He added it to his smile, but otherwise kept it to himself.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lots of Good Stuff

The next three weeks were busy and passed quickly. Andy and Franky spent time together on several occasions and were fast becoming best friends.

“So, I have this thing I need to talk over with you, Woody.”

“Shoot.”

“I’m sure you have seen that Franky and I are becoming close. We enjoy each other, share lots of interests, and relish conversations about topics we both believe are important – war, famine, sickness, poverty.”

“What uplifting topics. Had the urge to jump off a bridge lately?”

It was worth a quick, if dismissive, smile.

“That’s just it. The way we go at such things is to look for solutions and that becomes quite uplifting. But, more to the point, those are the conversations we used to have – you and me – all the time. I guess I feel guilty about having them with him instead, now.”

“Ah, the old ‘worried about leaving the old man in your dust’ syndrome. Two things; it seems to me we still have our share of discussions that are important, challenging and enjoyable. I’m elated that you have found somebody your age to engage in the kind of deep thinking you need to continue doing. It is the duty and privilege of a parent-type to help the child slip seamlessly from dependence, through parity, toward independence. If you only ever bantered over important topics with me you’d have a one-sided take on things. I am pleased you are able to expand your circle.”

“I’m not sure that was two things, but it helps. I can see how all of that benefits *me*, but how about *you*? I believe there is something genuine about being concerned that I might be neglecting the important adult in my life.”

“Let’s make a deal. When I feel neglected I will yell, holler and scream at you about it. When you feel I am intruding on your transitioning from young person to adult you must promise to do the same.”

“I doubt if we can make that deal.”

“Why not?”

“Because I fully believe that you are totally incapable of yelling, hollering, or screaming, let alone at me.”

“How about I just come and make a statement then? Will that be acceptable?”

“It will. About that parent thing you just brought up. Any new information on the adoption? I’m getting uneasy about it, *mere guardian-man-in-my-life*.”

He offered a smile.

“I expect to hear the final decision later this week, *mere ward-child-in-my-life*.”

More smiles.

“I have the final countdown of things that need to happen leading up to the grand opening,” Andy said. “I’d like for you look it over and make sure we have everything covered. Your suggestion about spreading the responsibilities for the ceremony out among others has certainly made it easier. I really do tend to be a control freak – even Franky has seen it. He calls it my need to micromanage things.”

“Does he comment on it?”

“Yes. He said the smartest and wisest person should always be in control and since that will always be me, I should shut my pie hole about it and accept my responsibilities like the over controlling, overthinking, big-hearted doofus that I am.”

“Seems somebody else said something similar to you not long ago.”

“It may not seem respectful to say this, but it’s like *you* have to say things like that, but a guy friend doesn’t have to.”

“It’s more genuine and believable coming from him. I fully understand that. One more reason I treasure the fact you have such a fine, close friend.”

“It is so hard to believe I have somebody like you in my life. Can’t we just skip the document from the judge and elope or something?”

The old man laughed out loud sending his tummy rippling again from his lap to his chin. The boy beamed. He always loved that.

* * *

They made their final tour of the facility on the morning just prior to the grand opening which would occur that afternoon. Many of the workmen were there applying last minute dabs of paint, adding final pieces of trim, oiling hinges and making sure the keys left in each room worked in the lock. Andy made it a point to shake the hand of each workman and thank them. Most of them turned the thanks back on the two of them. The why, how, and who behind the project was the worst kept secret in the city.

They returned to the Palace and sat at the table – Andy with his Dew and Woody his coffee. Andy spoke.

“Sure seems like everything is going to be ready. The mayor’s secretary confirmed that he will be here to say a few words. I told her for him to keep it to five minutes because after that a trap door would open up in the floor and drop him into the coal bin. She chuckled and I got the idea she *would* pass it on. Brenda suggested there needed to be a row of chairs at the front for all the dignitaries to sit in. I sort of vetoed that saying this wasn’t about dignitaries or anybody taking credit – it was all about kids and old folks. She saw my point.”

“It’s been quite a journey from the unwrapping of the ham salad here in the kitchen that day to all of this, hasn’t it, son.”

“I’ll say. Quite a wonderful journey. We have it all set up to run itself. I’m afraid I’ll feel out of place when I visit up there.”

“I’m sure you will during that protracted five-minute interval between the end of the ceremony and when you begin the next project – kids and seniors living in homes with real families, I believe I heard. Maybe something about building on new rooms.”

“That would be a wonderful thing wouldn’t it. Kids and seniors deserve to be part of a family just like everybody else. They all have important things to contribute. That’s how it is in many European and Asian cultures, you know. Young people are welcomed with open arms and nurtured by everybody in the family. Old people are respected and their wisdom is relied on.

“Then, after that, I’d like to explore augmenting our

educational system with the tremendous advances the Scandinavian countries – especially Finland – have made – shorter school days, no homework, no set curriculum, only fantastic teachers, teens paid to attend college and the highest achievement test scores in the world at all levels.”

“So, after you’ve achieved all *that*, what will you work on *next* month?”

Andy understood. The old man would never discourage him, but would, when necessary, help him keep his feet on the ground.

“I need to get some paintings finished. I’ve fallen behind. These past few weeks it seemed like my free time always became a tossup between school work and painting.”

“You go paint and I’ll make more notes about my book. We have six hours before the ceremony.”

“I want to be there at noon. That’s when the new residents all arrive. I’ll see them all settled in before the doings. Brenda said she was expecting a dozen big wigs – her term.”

“Okay, then, we have *four* hours before the ceremony.”

“Do I need to shower again beforehand?”

“Didn’t I hear you singing in the shower earlier this morning?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m quite sure – short of you running a marathon between now and then –that you will be fresh as a daisy.”

“Is that really a good thing for a guy?”

“Go. Shoo. Paint.”

The boy painted. The old man wrote. Apparently, they did *quiet* rather well even when separated.

Several hours later, Andy retuned.

“I think I’ll wear my new black jeans and the Blue snowflake sweater Santa Imp got me for Christmas. That be okay, you think.”

Sounds fine. I like that outfit. Shoes?”

“Oh. Probably not these red sneakers. That only leaves my black leather boots or my blue sneakers. They are getting pretty ratty. The boots then?”

“That will all go together very well. Suggestion. Wear the jeans *over* the boots – less casual that way.”

Andy nodded and smiled.

“I think Einstein is credited with saying something like, after spending all day probing the secrets of the universe the decision about whether or not to wear plaids with stripes seemed a trivial matter.”

“Your point?”

“I’d prefer to go in a shirt open to my navel, cutoffs and bare feet, you know. That’s the real me. But, I understand I have to find a compromise that will be more or less comfortable both for me and for society. Jeans over boots it can be.”

“My young man is thoughtfully – and more or less willingly – learning important lessons every day – and for the record, remember your chest *is* bare under your shirt.”

* * *

Brenda had the moving-in process so well organized the old folks, who had things to bring, hardly felt they had been uprooted. While they were taken out to eat at a nice restaurant, their things were moved into their new rooms so when they arrived at the hotel their familiar things were at hand. The kids were in awe of the new surroundings. Moving in for real, however, was nothing like their several visits, which had largely consisted of games of chase and hide and seek. The kids had asked that the room doors to the common area be left open at night – one last attempt at staying connected with their familiar folks from the home.

After making the rounds of the rooms Woody and Andy stood at one end of the common area. Andy spoke – all quite seriously.

“I’ll bet you one piece of toast, spread in grape jelly, that by morning, most of these kids will have dragged their blankets out here and will be nestled up against each other in one big pile of uneasy, thumb sucking, boys and girls. I think I’ll come up and just be here tonight, okay.”

“Of course. What a great insight.”

“Takes one to know one, as the saying goes. I drug my blanket all over that big old cold building in search of a spot that felt safe and comfortable – some place I belonged. I never found it there, you know.”

“I’m glad that has finally changed for you,” Woody said.

“Yeah, for me, but not for them and so many more just like them.”

“We can only do what we can do for those within our reach.”

“I understand that, even if sometimes it sounds like a cop-out – an excuse for being okay about leaving all the rest of the hungry kids in misery and terror.”

“Time to put on a smile. I find that not only makes the people around me feel better, but it does wonders for me as well.”

“One more or less genuine smile coming up. I’m glad we’re here together through this.”

“You make it sound like torture.”

“It is! None of this pomp is necessary. Move in and get on with their lives – that’s what I think the best approach would have been. Get some jigsaw puzzles started. Make cookies. Work on that homework.”

“I’m sorry you have to be unhappy about the climax of such a wonderful undertaking.”

“Not really unhappy. Just at cross purposes with a facet of our culture that I see I have to accept in order to achieve good stuff out there. How about we stand way at the back so nobody will be gawking at us?”

The old man nodded:

“Maybe we can even find a shadow.”

They exchanged near smiles.

* * *

Each of the old folks had a chair. They were arranged in a series of semi-circles facing the front. Their youngster either stood behind them or sat on the floor beside them. Emily, as chairman of the board, made a few simple welcoming remarks. Brenda as the representative of the hotel, said something – nobody would remember. She introduced the mayor who, much to Andy’s delight looked the floor over with some diligence before looking out on the gathering. His words were appropriately short and to the point. Again nobody, including him, would remember what he said.

After a smattering of polite applause, the president of the bank, Franky’s father, stood and walked to the front of the

gathering.

“We all understand that this project could not have been completed without the time and talents of many dozens of individuals from the owners of this building who are graciously providing the space, to the architects and contractors and carpenters and electricians and plumbers and too many others to mention. Let’s give all of them a big round of applause.”

When that died down he continued.

“There are two individuals, however, who had the idea, who honed the idea, who engaged the necessary people to develop the idea, who fought each battle as it came up regarding the idea, and without whom none of this could have happened. They have never sought the spotlight and specifically asked not to be included in the festivities today. So, of course, we are going to ignore their wishes and include them.”

There were chuckles from the audience.

He placed his open hand above his eyes and searched the room for them. As if on cue, the kids all turned and pointed – they knew where they were. Woody tried to wave it off. Andy crossed his arms and put on a pout, standing with his feet apart as if to dare them to drag him to the front. The crowd applauded. The banker was persistent.

“Please come forward. We don’t expect speeches. Just let all of us say thank you. That is important to us.”

Several youngsters went to them and began tugging – leading them up front.

Andy whispered to Woody out of the side of his mouth.

“As my new best friend would have said, ‘what in the hell do we do now?’”

“Walk, breathe and smile. We will turn around. They will applaud. It will calm down. You will step forward and say exactly the right things.”

By then it was time to turn around. No time to discuss the point. They turned. They smiled and waved back toward the clapping and finger whistles. Things calmed down. Everything just the way the old man had predicted up to that point. Woody urged the boy forward with a gentle hand against his shoulder. Silently, the boy spoke to his brain.

‘Okay, you’re on autopilot, dude. Go for it.’ He began speaking.

“Once there was a terrified eight-year-old boy all quite unceremoniously dumped off at an orphanage by his mother who turned and drove away out of his life forever. He was angry – angry at his mother, and angry at himself for having driven her away. He was terrified. He took out his anger on the place and the people who ran it. He broke things just because they were close at hand. He disobeyed rules just because they were rules. Eventually he ran away, partly because he thought he hated the place and the people, partly to punish them, and partly just because he could.

“It had been a terrible, short-sighted decision – to run away. He had no place to run to. His life on the street was scary beyond belief. It was dangerous – constantly. He was always cold and hungry and thirsty and frightened. One day he discovered this hotel. He broke in – not something I suggest for you young people to try. (Chuckles) He – I – made a comfortable place to live and found ways to support myself financially. Sometime later I came upon an old man – he hitched his head in Woody’s direction. It was during a terrible blizzard. I asked him to come with me. He tried to say no. Perhaps my very best trait at that time in my life was being able to pester people until they would hand me their heart if that would mean I’d just leave them alone. (More chuckles)

“It was my dearest friend in the whole world, here – he likes to be called old man or Woody. As you will notice he still has his heart. I guess that means he was an easy mark. Well, together we decided to go to my place if only long enough for him to get warm. We’ve been together almost three months. We have made a family and are hoping to adopt each other if some old, foot-dragging judge will just get up off his keister and sign the papers.

“My point is this: Woody and I never want another child to have to go through what I went through – what many in this audience have had to go through. Nor do we want older people to ever have to come to feel worthless and go through what Woody had to go through. This place came to mind, and a wide assortment of wonderful, loving people agreed to come

on board and make it happen. Some offered money, many offered their specialized skills, and many their time and determination.

“All places need a name. I built my place in the basement here. I call it my Palace. Sometime in the near future I hope you residents will get together and find just the right name for this place – your place.”

A boy stood up. “How about the Andy and Woody Place?”

There was a surge of approval applause and enthusiastic nodding.

“No. No. This is not about Woody and Andy. This about the people who are going to enjoy wonderful lives here together, and teach us all how to make it work.”

“An old man in the front row stood and raised his cane to get attention. “In that case, how about dubbing it, *Our Place*?”

A murmur made its way back and forth across the gathering. An older woman stood.

“I second the suggestion and call for unanimous consent that this, now and forever, will be known as *Our Place*.”

Kids stood and cheered. The old folks clapped. Andy spoke.

“Do we hear any objections to the name, *Our Place*?”

A hush fell upon those in the room. People looked around and then faced forward again. Andy let it go on for several moments.

“*Our Place* it is, then. May it be the safest and happiest place on Earth.”

Applause erupted and people began moving around talking with each other in happy, determined voices.

A middle-aged man stood; tall, distinguished looking, more than the hint of gray weaving its way through his black hair. He approached the front. All eyes followed him. He approached Andy and Woody and shook their hands. Positioning himself to the side so he could be seen and heard by both the boy and the old man, and the audience, he introduced himself.

“It seems that I have the honor of being what this young

man so fondly referred to as that foot dragging old judge who needs to get up off his keister and sign the adoption paper.”

He turned to Andy who by that time was clearly embarrassed. The man continued.

“As you have by now noticed, I am no longer dragging my feet and my keister is fully free and unattached from any seat – well, so to speak.”

There were chuckles from the gathering – mostly high pitched. He reached into his suit coat pocket and withdrew a single, folded sheet of paper. With some drama, he unfolded it and donned his reading glasses.

“It says here that one Woodrow Wadsworth Wentworth, the adult, hereby agrees to adopt, Andrew Martin Hunter, the minor.”

He turned to Woody.

“Is it your wish to agree to this new relationship and do you promise to fulfill your responsibilities as guardian and parent for so long that is reasonably required?”

“Most certainly, your Honor.”

The judge turned to Andy. Andy spoke first. No surprise to those who knew him.

“Can we cut to the chase, your Honor? Of course, I agree, in sickness and in health and blah, blah, blah.”

“I guess it just needs your signatures here above mine, then. We seem to have a room full of witnesses who I assume will happily attest to the forging of this new family.”

The judge produced a second copy and they signed them both. The judge handed one toward Woody. It was intercepted by Andy.

“I’m the book keeper in our home. Aren’t I supposed to kiss the bride or something now?”

The crowd got to its feet and applauded. Woody pulled the boy close and planted a big kiss on the top of his new son’s head. Andy added his own to the old man’s cheek.

“Looks like we are officially Father and Son,” Woody said to him, quietly.

“*Officially*, yes. In my estimation, we’ve been that for at least two months.”

They walked down the aisle back to the rear of the room. Had there been rice to throw – well, there would have

been a LOT of explaining to do.

* * *

They continued to the rear stairs. As they made their way to the basement Andy offered a smile and a comment.

“You know. I have still never entered this building through the front door.”

“And I have the idea it is your preference never to do so.”

“Stupid I suppose, but the place is mine when I come in the cellar door. I’m afraid it would seem different if I used the public entrance.”

The old man had to admit, as nice as the rooms were upstairs, his preference and loyalty were to the Palace.

They changed from the clothes they had donned for the occasion – Woody’s coat, tie and shoes, for his favorite, orange and blue, Hawaiian entry and his new slippers. Andy performed a complete change reemerging in cutoffs and bare feet.

“Now, that’s better,” he said taking his perch down the couch from the old man. “And you were right, you know.”

“Right?”

“Yeah. My chest is bare underneath my shirt.”

There were several pieces of business left for them to attend to. Andy began.

“I want to clear the air about something – come to an understanding so it will never cloud our thinking – our relationship.”

“Sounds serious. Please continue.”

“My mother rejected me and your son rejected you. I figure that is just their loss and says much more that is damning about them than it does about us. We are both remarkable individuals – we are caring and compassionate and honest and responsible and we are each making positive contributions to society – your books and my paintings. You have already brightened thousands of lives and I’m preparing myself so I can do the same.”

The old man proffered one addition.

“Don’t forget a little thing recently dubbed, *Our Place*.”

“Oh. Yeah. I really never thought of that as something

we were doing *for* anybody. It was more just something that needed to be done – for us to do. Hmm. Good for us, then.”

“Yes, good for us, then.”

Andy continued.

“There is another important thing for us to get settled. What am I to call you, now?”

“Is that for *me* to decide?”

They smiled.

“Let me begin again. Can we now come to agree on a term for me to call you that will be comfortable and meaningful to both of us?”

Woody chuckled.

“Of course. I have been very happy about the terms you’ve been using – Old Man and Woody.”

“I think soon after we got comfortable with each other I figured they both really meant ‘parent’. But, I do have the right call you ‘Dad’ now, correct.”

“Not only the right, but probably the duty.”

Andy beamed. It faded to serious almost immediately.

“Do you realize I have never, in my whole twelve years of life, called anybody, Dad?”

The old man considered it rhetorical so remained silent waiting for more.

“That makes it a very special term for me – you can understand that?”

The old man nodded. Andy caught his gaze and held it.

“Well, I have spent a good deal of time considering it and need you to understand this in all seriousness: It has absolutely been worth the twelve year wait, Dad.”

The old man motioned his son to him and they held each other for some time.

Presently, Andy separated and offered the third item on his agenda.

“About the last name thing – my last name.”

Woody looked surprised.

“Believe it or not, I have never given that any thought. Clearly you have.”

“I have. As you know, I’ve run through a bunch of names. It presents a dilemma. I really want to be a

Wentworth, but Andy Wentworth just sort of sits there – blah. Now, *Andrew Martin Hunter* has real pizzazz – makes a statement that just flows like the smell of apple blossoms wafting across the lawn on an early spring morning. You see my quandary?”

“I both see it and smell it. Two words: *professional name.*”

“Ah. Like *Marion Morrison’s* John Wayne, or *Frances Gumm’s*, Judy Garland, or *your* W. W. Worth. It’s things like *this* that I keep you around for, you know. So, our attorney says I need to file a name change form at city hall. Since Martin was my own creation purely out of necessity when teachers and such demanded that I have a middle name, I think I will go with, *Andrew Hunter Wentworth* for my legal name. What do you think?”

“I think it reeks of great wealth and upper class snobbery.”

“Yeah. That will be like the greatest prank anybody has ever pulled on society.”

“If you’re going for a misnomer, I can think of no more accurate *misnomer* for my loving, compassionate, down to earth new son, son.”

“I think we have a deal then. I know you say love can’t be graded on a scale from a little love to a lot of love – that love is just love – but I’m thinking we need to revisit that. What I am feeling right now is most certainly somehow different – more meaningful – from what I felt before.”

“There is no greater incarnation of love than the love we feel for family. I will give you that.”

After a few moments of doing the quite thing, *which they did so well*, Andy had a question.

“The new book you’re writing – can you tell me anything about it?”

“Well, there are only two main characters – one who appears very much like you and one who appears very much like me.”

Andy nodded as if not at all surprised.

“Got a name for it yet?”

“I think I am going to go with, *An Old Man in Winter.*”

The End