



The Season of Love

FOURTEEN FEEL GOOD STORIES

Including

Five Winter Holiday Stories

by

Tom

Gnagey

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**Including, among others,
Five Winter Holiday Stories**

**By
Tom Gnagey**

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So, here we are, author and reader, face to face . . .

Since I seem to be in the driver's seat, I choose to wax philosophical.

Love, its demonstration, and its sharing, come in many forms, many shapes, and many sizes. It is frequently unexpected. Sometimes, if one is not prone to look for it, it will be missed. What a terrible loss for all parties!

The fifteen short stories in this volume are what I, as an author, call 'Feel Good' pieces. They may tend toward the Pollyanna. They may seem somewhat predictable. They may even come off as sappy. The only consideration is that in the end, I hope each story leaves the reader feeling good.

Traditionally, the period of the winter holidays is a Season of Love – a time we reflect on how the world is better because of the power of love. I have included six holiday stories – originally my Holiday Cards from the past several years. I believe the other nine stories also fulfill the mission of defining and illustrating love. I hope you agree.

Helping others feel good is often the most powerful demonstration of love one has available, so cherish it, practice it, and – of course – read about it right here!

So, go hug somebody and then come back and get started.

Tom Gnagey
(by many pen names)

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**STORY ONE:
A Season of Love
A short Christmas story.
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There is just no well-mannered way to say it. Abigail Briggs was an oddball. She had been an oddball for most of her eighty-five years. She dressed in floor length dresses, which could only seem truly comfortable posing for a Civil War tintype. Her thick, shoulder length, gray hair was left to its natural, uncombed, state. Her head was always dressed – a sparkly tiara, a green pill box hat, a garishly plaid babushka, a bright red head band sporting a long, fluffy, purple feather. She lived in and around her family home – two story, Victorian, unpainted, and in disrepair since she returned from college all those years before. Weeds in hues of green and yellow flourished to outlandish heights in the summer; leaves carpeted the grounds with a spectacular display of colors in the fall; snowmen and snow forts were lovingly built and rebuilt during the winter. And every year, come Thanksgiving evening, a beautiful, tall, pine tree was trimmed with tinsel and handmade ornaments set to glisten at passersby through the large, floor to ceiling, bay window in the living room. It was her one redeeming feature as far as the small community was concerned and though never admitting it, nobody would ever miss going to see it.

Adults avoided her – politely whenever possible; it was not an unkind town. Teens taunted her from afar; teens find ways of covering for their own insecurities. Young children ran and hid at her very name; untested lore will strike fear into

a body. Well, all the young children except William Sebastian Farnsworth the third – a very large name for a very small boy. He was ten going on eighty. He had few friends and was generally lost at home as the fifth of five – the only boy and clearly an unplanned ‘blessing’. The next oldest was fourteen – fourteen, fifteen, sixteen and seventeen to adequately set the stage. It was mentioned that he was lost – ignored – except at those times when his black hair was not impeccably slicked back, his cheeks did not gleam with clean, his leather shoes were not buffed to a sheen, and his boarding school slacks and jacket were not in place and immaculate. Oh, he didn’t attend a private school but his clothing, unlike those of his age mates, never included things as pedestrian as jeans, Tees, hoodies, sweats, or shorts. And barefoot in the summer? Forget it!

William Sebastian Farnsworth the third was a loner – not particularly by choice but his obligatory, misguided, upscale facade was as out of place in Kingston as was Abigail’s intentionally frumpy appearance. His mother was oblivious – she’d harangue about shamefully bizarre Abigail as she combed her son’s hair, straightened his tie, and administered spit baths to keep his face spotless. Being the only ten-year-old boy in town with inappropriately fancy duds, no friends, and ever spotless cheeks, he and his thick lensed, wire rimmed, spectacles spent long hours alone reading in the window seat that overlooked the Briggs house next door.

Often his eyes would wander to the house and grounds below and his mind would fanaticize about living across the way instead of at home. More and more he found such thoughts and observations were bringing smiles to his face – sometimes nervous chuckles to his lips. He even found himself loosening his tie and slipping out of his shoes – once, even his socks!! Whenever the old lady was in sight he would wave. She never looked up in his direction so his best attempts went unanswered. Still, he garnered growing joy just thinking about the possibilities she prompted by her mere presence.

On Thanksgiving evening, while the party with all the important folks in town was just getting into full swing downstairs, William Sebastian Farnsworth the third decided it

was time to make his move. One must understand the momentous significance of this undertaking. William Sebastian Farnsworth the third had never – well seldom – disobeyed his parents, and leaving the premises without permission or escort was positively prohibited. He donned his thick wool, knee length, winter coat, capped his head with his winter hat, and slipped into his black rubber, buckle-up, winter boots. He slipped out the back door and made his way through the shadows to the front gate next door.

The only lighted room he could detect was the living room. Looking beyond the as yet undecorated tree, he could see Abigail in a long red dress with puffy sleeves and a tight collar. She was dancing, swaying this way and that, twirling again and again, all as if holding the waist and staring into the face of some tall and graceful, invisible, partner. As he neared the porch he heard music. Nothing he recognized but it was sweet, drum-driven rhythmic and thoroughly to his liking – native African, he suspected. Arriving at the door he hadn't clue one about what he was going to do. He could move closer to the window and watch, in whatever clandestine fashion an ten year old boy might be able to muster. He could just sit on the steps and enjoy the music. He could take to the lawn and add one more snowman to the cadre already set in place so lovingly by Abigail's old hands.

Dismissing those possibilities, he found himself knocking on the large wooden door. Her shifting shadow, which had been cast against the window, suddenly disappeared. He took the moment to appraise his feelings and was impressed by his inner calm – punctuated only by excitement and expectation, not fear or specifically defined trepidation. It was a pleasant realization. The curtains draping the window in the door parted and her face appeared. He had previously ascertained that she wore a perpetual, doll-like, smile so he couldn't ascertain just what reaction she was experiencing relative to his presence. He would assume it was positive although he realized that might be setting himself up for disappointment. If he were prepared for anything in life it was disappointment. He seldom allowed himself hope but that night he was willing to take the risk.

The door opened.

“Well as I live and breathe. Master Farnsworth, I believe. What a delight to have you at my door. Come in. Come in. The fire in the fireplace will warm your youthful risibles.”

The lad wasn't sure what risibles might be but felt sure it had not been an inappropriate remark. Abigail Briggs had been called many things but never uncouth or crude of tongue.

“Thank you. I am William Sebastian Farnsworth the third. I'm ten but most say I seem older. I was wondering if, living here all alone like you do, if you might enjoy having company on this Thanksgiving evening.”

She closed the door behind him and directed him through the sliding doors from the entry hall into the living room. The fire was roaring, a necessity, he figured, to keep such a large, high-ceilinged, room so toasty warm. She held out her hand and he offered up his coat and hat. He wondered how she'd react to a boy his age being gussied up in some coat, tie, and pleated slacks. If she noticed nothing was said.

“So, Master, ten-year-old but seems older, William Sebastian Farnsworth the third, what do your friends call you?”

“William Sebastian Farnsworth, ma'am. Well, that really isn't true. Your phrasing of the question assumes that I have friends and that doesn't fully apply in my case.”

“I see. What do they call you at home?”

“William Sebastian. They all know I'm a Farnsworth.”

He smiled, thinking things were off to a fine beginning.

“That fancy name is way too much for my old head to remember. Doesn't somebody call you Billy or Bill or Will or Willy?”

My Grandfather, William the first, is called Will. My father, William the second, is called Bill. No short cuts seem to be left for me.

She took his hand and led him across the red and blue braided rug to the couch that faced the fire. They sat. She looked thoughtful.

“It just doesn't seem right that you don't have a short cut to that ostentatiously, humongous, moniker.”

The lad smiled.

“You talk just like I figured you’d talk. I like it a lot, by the way. That wasn’t meant as a put down.”

“I never accept put downs and since I don’t, I can never be put down. You see how simple that is. Something I learned from Eleanor Roosevelt.”

The boy thought for a moment. When his wrinkled brow smoothed, he nodded and smiled.

“I like that. Wish I’d understood that back when I was just a kid.”

“Better late than never, I believe is a saying that seems to fit the circumstance.”

Again, he nodded and smiled.

“About your name, young man. Bill and Will are taken and you seem far too astute and mature for your age to be a ‘y’ boy.”

“I don’t understand. A ‘y’ boy?”

“Billy or Willy. I never liked ‘ys’. They seem to be meant to imply immaturity or lessened value. No. We have to devise something more appropriate.”

“I had an idea about it once,” he offered, “but everybody at my house laughed at me for it. I believe you wouldn’t laugh even if you thought it odd.”

“Oh, I would never laugh at anybody for their honest effort. I only laugh when I am certain the person is intending to make me laugh. Then I enjoy it. Tell me!”

“Illia. It’s like the middle of William.”

“You know what you’ve done, Illia?”

“No. What, ma’am?”

“You performed a WM-ectomy.”

“I get it. I removed the w and the m. A WM-ectomy. You’re just as great as I thought you’d be.”

The old woman’s smile broadened but the boy sensed a sad tone hardly covered by it. Perhaps that’s what the constant smile was all about – covering some unremitting sadness. He understood about such a thing.

“I am so glad you decided to drop by this evening. I saw lots of cars at your house. A big Thanksgiving Feast, I suppose.”

“I suppose. I don’t really know anybody who came –

the mayor, police chief, banker – all ritzy, tootsy-wootsies in by book. I don't care for any of them much and they don't even know I'm in the room when I'm walking through it."

"So, you took a little French Vacation, did you?"

"I don't know that term."

"A vacation without really going very far from home. The French used to just move around the corner or down the street during their summer holiday – away from home and yet not."

"I get it. And yes. I guess I am on a French vacation, then. Bonjure!"

It drew another smile and her wonderful, head tossed, soft chuckle.

"Should you let your parents know where you are?"

"They know – in my room reading til ten o'clock and then to bed. If they remember, they'll come in and check to see that I'm still breathing after the guests all leave. I'll be home by then. No worries."

"Still . . ."

"Let me be honest here, Miss Briggs."

"Oh, Abby, please."

"Okay. Abby Please."

They touched their heads together as they chuckled together over the little joke. Illia continued.

"I was being honest. My parents would never let me come over here. They think you're some kind of a nut case and would undoubtedly be concerned for my safety."

"Like the kids at the Gingerbread house?"

"You have the picture."

She offered a studied frown – just the hint of one, actually.

"I certainly wouldn't want to jeopardize our new friendship so I suppose it will be alright so long as you leave in plenty of time to get home before they go to check on you."

The boy nodded and smiled.

"I do know what folks around here think about me, Illia. I learned long ago that people will think whatever they will think and a person has very little control over that unless he just gives in and behaves and thinks the way those others think he should behave and act. I have always tended to just

be me. I can't imagine how dreadful it would be to have to become the person somebody else wanted me to be. Ugh!"

She shuddered and shook her head.

Illia repeated her action. His smile dulled and the creases returned to his brow. Abby sensed the situation.

"Surely there are times when you get to be yourself."

He shrugged and averted his eyes to the fire. Abby allowed him his silence, folding her hands in her lap and joining his gaze into the dancing flames. Clearly what was going on inside his head was more important than making conversation with an old lady.

"I do have fantasies. Sometimes when I see you dancing in the back yard I stand up and dance along. Sometimes I pretend I'm a pirate – more like Robin Hood than Blackbeard. I swing from the mast on a rope and claim the booty from the evil captain for the waifs of the city's back alleys. When I present it to them they carry me on their shoulders shouting my name. It often becomes quite a celebration."

"How wonderful! I love fantasies. Just now, before you knocked, I was reprising a winter ball I attended with my one and only love at seventeen."

"The dancing, you mean? I watched you for a few minutes. I hope you don't mind. I really wasn't – well, yes I was - snooping."

"When a person leaves his drapes open, his goings on are automatically public property. Onlookers will think what they will think. It's why I'm looked upon as a misfit. I refuse to close my drapes – inside or out."

"Good for you! I wish I could be that way. How do you do it?"

"We each have to discover our own means for de-draping our lives."

"De-draping. I love it. You are wonderful. I'm thinking it will be quite a chore for me. My mother has seen to it that my drapes are very thick – heavy and most certainly opaque."

"Would you like an idea? I never force my ideas on others unless I have their permission."

"Yes. You have my permission to force. Wait. That can't be right."

Again, they giggled.

“First, exchange the thick, heavy drape for a dozen thinner ones – just as thick and heavy when all of them are in place together. Then, select one you can discard and practice living without it. After you feel comfortable lightened that much, select another, and so on.”

“You’re a very wise person, Abby. What you are suggesting is that first, I have to discover just what it is that I feel the need to drape – keep secret – not reveal. Then, I can go about considering my options.”

“And you, Illia, are a very perceptive young man. There is a secret to all this that makes the de-raping all quite simple and rapid.”

“Really. Give. Please.”

“Love yourself.”

“First you’d have to be loveable.”

“No. First, you’d have to believe you were loveable. There’s a difference.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Okay. I’ve known you now for how long, maybe fifteen minutes? And my impression is that you are very loveable.”

“You don’t really know me.”

“The part I do know is loveable and that’s all that matters to me.”

“I’ve never known anybody who thought like you do. I’m not sure I really understand.”

“You seem to trust me; may I assume that?”

“Yes, you may.”

“And I find the part of you that I know to be all quite loveable. If you trust me then there must really be a part of you that’s loveable. Right?”

“I guess. Right.”

“So, to begin with, you really must love that part of yourself or else you really don’t trust me, do you.”

“I’ll need a minute to think that through.”

“I do hope it becomes the best minute you’ve ever experienced.”

Again, they sat in silence. Abby enjoyed the dancing shadows on the walls set in motion by the ever-shifting entourage of flames. Illia was oblivious to all things outside

his point of focus.

Eventually, Abby moved to the tree and began surveying it top to bottom. She turned her head to one side and then the other. Illia stood and joined her.

“My loveable part needs a hug. I imagine you dispense those.”

“I sure do. Come here and prepare to get the stuffin’s squeezed out of you.”

They lingered over the moment before separating.

“How are you at tree decorating, Illia?”

“I don’t know. Never been allowed. I’d like to try it out, though. Where are your ornaments?”

“Still inside our heads.”

“What?”

“We shall make them up as we go. Envision and create! It’s one of my favorite things in the entire year. There are bits and pieces of things in that cardboard box – colored paper, glitter, doilies, pine cones, string and yarn, tubes, newspaper, and we can get other things as your visions require.”

They began and continued as they talked. Abby went on with her thoughts.

One year, long before you were born, I set the tree outside and decorated it completely in snowballs. It was magnificent if I do say so myself – and I do. It isn’t bragging. It’s just confirming that I was personally pleased with it and that is all that ever really matters. I live to please myself not others.”

“I’m just the opposite. When I don’t please everybody else at home, my life becomes very unpleasant. I’m like seventh on the get pleased list and things seldom reach that far.”

“Well, here it is going to be different. Let’s get to work and make this tree the most beautiful tree we’ve ever seen – one we can treasure in our memories forever.”

And they did. And it was. And it would be remembered.

“I wish it could be this way at home, but that’s too much to hope for. I guess I gave up hoping for things like that long ago. I suppose you have a thing about hoping like you seem

to have about everything else.”

“Is that your invitation for me to share it with you?”

“Yes, it is. Please. Lay it on me. I love this thing.”

“This thing?”

“Yeah. This whatever it is we have going on between us.”

“Here’s how I handle hope. I just refuse to ever be disappointed and I do that by only hoping for things I know will come about. I look for the little, certain, steps that seem well within my grasp and I hope for them.”

“Explain. Maybe use this evening as a for instance.”

“My hope for this evening was to have a perfectly grand time decorating the tree and remembering about Christmases past. I always have a perfectly grand time decorating the tree and my life has been filled with magnificent Christmases, so I was hoping for things I was sure would come true. And then, you knocked and helped me make it an even grander time – a time beyond anything I had hoped for, you see.”

“I think I use the word ‘assume’ where you use ‘hope’. I would say that you assumed you would have a great evening based on past evidence.”

“Oh, there is a big difference. Merely assuming is dull and lifeless – just accepting the likely, the mundane, and the inevitable. . . . You know that word?”

“Inevitable? Yes. My teachers say I have an extremely large vocabulary for my age.”

She nodded.

“Hope adds a marvelous extra element of wonder-filled anticipation. Assumption says things are most likely going to happen. Hope says the things that are definitely about to happen will be wonderful, magnificent, breathtaking, astonishing, and on up the ladder of fantasticness.”

“I see what you’re saying. I’ve never thought of it in that way. It’s sort of like looking forward to every new moment because you are always sure something great is about to happen but you never know until it does. Every moment brings a grand surprise – if you’ll just expect it – look for it, I guess.”

“You said that so beautifully. You certainly are mature beyond your years. My mother said it this way; live in each

moment and not in your dreams. Fill each moment with wild anticipation that the best life has to offer is about to engulf you. Use your dreams to set the stage for later action but never dawdle there – never retreat into what might have been or into what maybe someday could take place.”

“What about my pirate dream?”

“What about it? You tell me.”

“Well . . . I think I got it. As long as I’m just feeding dream kids, no real kids are getting helped. If I’m going to live in the moment I have to find ways of feeding real, flesh and blood, kids. This is soooo wonderful!”

“Let me add one thing that you may actually not understand for a number of years yet. And the reward will be in the act, not in the adulation.”

“I think you mean I’ll get that wonderful feeling, which comes in my dream when they lift me on their shoulders, just by having done the good thing and not from the expression of their gratefulness. I could do it anonymously and feel just as great. That’s what I think you mean. I’ll need to try it out.”

Abby turned and faced Illia, placing her hands on his shoulders. She shook her head.

“You are my precious treasure, William Sebastian Farnsworth the third.”

She pulled him close and they delighted in their moment. Illia released first and turned back toward the tree.

“Ours is the most magnificent Christmas Tree I’ve ever seen. Do you think that’s a selfish or rude thing to say?”

“Do you?”

“No. I’m just recognizing that it went far beyond the hopes I had for this evening and that I am very pleased with our accomplishment. And it doesn’t matter whether anybody else in the entire universe agrees – it is magnificent in my eyes and no force in the universe can change that for me.”

“Where have you been all my life,” Abby asked?

The lad did not understand it had been rhetorical.

“I’m not sure about that, but all my life I’ve been next door, mostly alone and well-dressed, reading and dreaming and wishing my life was different, better, happier, more fulfilling. I’m the one who should be asking, ‘Where have you been all my life?’”

They moved backward across the room so they could get a floor to ceiling view of the tree. Each one silently reaffirmed its beauty and what it meant to him.

“You know, Abby. In all of time and in all of space there has never before been and never again will be a Christmas tree just like this one. That makes it very special, doesn’t it?”

With her gaze still fixed on the tree, Abby reached out and put her arm around the boy’s shoulders.

“And in all of time and in all of space there has never before and never again will be a person just like you and that most certainly makes you a very special being, doesn’t it?”

He sighed. He nodded. For the very first time, he believed.

Christmas has been called the season of love. That Christmas, the idea took on a wonderful new, life enriching, meaning for William Sebastian Farnsworth the third. He could hardly wait until he was old and gray and would be able to pass the secrets on to some other, hope deprived, ten-year-old boy. Perhaps, he didn’t need to wait. What about that!

STORY TWO:
Blue Skies and Bluebirds
A short story set in late December
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In the whole of the known universe, the old man's passing had only been a truly momentous event in the life of Bert Benson – age twelve, quirky, brilliant, nerdy, social outcaste, and gangly seventh grader at Central Junior High School. He only allowed himself to be shirtless in the privacy of his room for fear the wide yellow stripe, which he was quite certain ran down the middle of his back, might be seen, thereby giving the kids yet one more thing about which to tease him.

He was a reader (no surprise, perhaps) and his quick mind enjoyed material generally well beyond the ken of other youngsters his age. He read and studied Ghandi (the pacifist, not the rock band), Roosevelt (Eleanor, not FDR), King (Martin junior, not Tut), Schweitzer (Albert, not Mary Lou on whom he currently had a crush), and Jim Henson (Elmo's daddy). His musical idols were Peter, Paul and Mary – unknowns to most with birthdates after 1965. Taken together, he believed these folks had led the 20th Century charge toward peace, love, inclusion, compassion, and social conscience. These were things to which young Bert was also personally committed, some for his own safety and well-being, but mostly for the preservation of the human species, which he felt was rapidly moving to destroy itself through violence, intolerance, and self-centeredness. (If not self-evident, Bert was also a Class 'A' young worry wart. Bright youngsters tend to see more big

things legitimately deserving of worry.)

The passing, referred to above, was first announced in a cold, blunt, headline on page three of the afternoon paper: Michael P. Watson, Longtime Weatherman at WPQ-TV, Is Dead. The man had no family. The local joke had been that if all Watson's avid viewers were gathered together they wouldn't fill the chairs around a kitchen table. Nevertheless, Bert had always identified with the stodgy old gentleman – his honesty, integrity, and thoroughness. He looked you right in the eye and his grandfather had told him that was the mark of a man who could be trusted. The two were a match philosophically and physically. Although Bert had never seen the man with his shirt off he was certain they shared that other trait, as well. Michael P. Watson had been his local hero.

They talked on occasion – often as the old man walked home from the studio in the early evening. Bert felt comfortable sharing thoughts and other personal matters with him. He was just about the only person in Bert's world who understood the boy's concerns and dreams, and was willing to listen to his ideas and wonderments in a fully nonjudgmental manner.

Bert remained frightened most of the time. Factors such as obvious social deterioration were scary in a somewhat removed sort of way, but navigating his way to and from school with the goal of remaining unbloodied, with bones intact, and free from a painful new purple shiner, was simply terrifying. It had always been that way, but Junior High was multiple times worse than grade school – even the girls were frightening, having been unexpectedly reconstituted over the summer as towering Amazons.

So, the old man's death was a personal tragedy for Bert. In addition to that, it meant that the huge, life changing, event scheduled for Christmas Eve – the one into which Bert had poured every spare moment and ounce of energy since the first day of June, just past – was suddenly doomed to total and complete failure. He would have to bear the burden of his huge disappointment alone because the momentous event had been his secret – one he never intended should be known by another soul. (There had, of course, been Mr. Watson.)

Confusing? Backtrack in his life to the winter break of

the previous year. His family, down with the flu, had been unable to accompany him to the midnight church service. Still, Bert took it upon himself to keep that family tradition alive. He enjoyed the walk through the gently falling snow, the singing of the familiar seasonal songs, and hearing the story of Christmas retold. He enjoyed the feelings of safety and wellbeing that settled within him there inside the church. And, surely on Christmas Eve – the early hours of Christmas Day, actually – the Spirit of the season would protect him from being set-upon during his short trek home.

Not so. The disagreeable details need not be revisited other than to confirm it had made for less than a comfortable holiday vacation – ice packs, bandages, and tears that stung the open abrasions crisscrossing his pale, young, face. However, the experience coalesced several related – synergistic, even – facts of life for Bert. He was a coward. Even if he hadn't been, his physique would not be his ally during any sort of physical confrontation. And even if it could have been, attempting to take a stand against half a dozen dark-hearted bullies represented pure stupidity and a preordained painful if not fatal failure. Suppose that somehow, he even might manage to emerge the victor, victory through force contradicted everything the lad stood for.

So, he was thoroughly afraid of and unprepared for confrontation. Yet, he felt compelled to somehow stop the violent tendencies so prevalent among the youngsters in his small town – most certainly for his sake but also for the sake of the hoard of local bullies. Life would deal them eternal unhappiness and setback after setback if they didn't define and assume a more acceptable – if not genuinely helpful – social role.

What were his options? He could continue trying to make it appear that he was ignoring them, as if to say, "I won't allow your actions to intimidate me". The fact of his dependence on adult escorts and taking roundabout and secret routes from one place to another had probably already invalidated that approach. He could press charges when they hurt or harassed him, but that would merely make them go about their evil deeds in more clandestine ways and, having felt wronged by Bert for having told on them, they would have

continued, if not stepped up, their malicious assaults on him. He could tell their parents but that incorporated all the problems of the previous proposal plus the fact many of those dreadfully misguided, eye-for-an-eye-mentality parents, would step in to support their children's actions, reinforcing their misguided and hurtful approach to problem solving.

It soon became clear that no force he could exert against them had much chance of success. If not force against them, then what was left? Force from within them. That caught both his attention and energized his creative juices.

It had been the Eureka moment of all Eureka moments in his young life.

"All these years I've been going about this thing the wrong way – the exact wrong way, in fact. I have this magnificent brain power – clearly superior to theirs. I must channel it in some way that will influence these Neanderthals to want to change – or, better still, to need to change. Instead of avoiding them I must embrace them if I am to influence them."

Having diagnosed the central problem inherent in his previous approaches to solutions, he felt certain that an effective, intellectual, resolution was suddenly within reach. At the outset, he had to somehow make himself valuable to them. A guy doesn't attack what he values or needs. More than that, he had to find a way to maintain his safety after such time as his immediate usefulness might pass. The second part would be the more difficult of the two.

As will sometimes happen, the full package came to him in a flash one night during that fascinating moment between wakefulness and sleep. It was often the time when his most creative ideas freed themselves from deep inside his mind. The plan had two facets. For the first, he already possessed an abundance of the necessary skill. For the second, he had much yet to learn. He immediately set to the task.

The short version goes like this. Step one: Bert began making himself available as a tutor – he called it coaching to combat the inevitable assumption that to accept tutoring implied for all the world to see that one was thereby admitting

he was too stupid to learn on his own. Coaching, on the other hand, seemed manly – macho even – and implied that some naturally occurring, raw, level of talent was clearly present. The message sent was that with just a few expertly honed suggestions the person's innate skill would be able to blossom and flourish. He doubted if any of these kids would ever make the academic major league but figured even advancing to double 'A' would be a huge, comfortable, improvement.

Bert felt both brilliant and fortunate when the term actually proved acceptable and his services caught on. He multiplied the power of the concept by enlisting the assistance of the coaching staffs at school and in the summer sports programs to recommend him as an academic coach to those students he had targeted. His service was free and could be done without anyone else's knowledge for those students who preferred it that way.

Step two: (The one having necessitated a good deal of research and study.) As part of the coaching process he required each participant to learn an eyes-closed, 'mental relaxation and focus-setting' skill, always practiced at the beginning of each session. That it helped, became immediately apparent to all the participants, so they willingly allowed Bert to administer the exercise in his soft spoken, intentionally monotone, recently deepened, voice. In reality it went beyond those setting events and induced a hypnotic state during which Bert seeped powerful, socially positive, life-enhancing, suggestions into the subconscious minds of his 'clients'. He had some ethical reservations about it, but concluded that, as a group, these kids had already demonstrated they couldn't be properly influenced by the generally accepted, necessary, social conventions modeled within the community, so any help he could provide was fitting, proper and acceptable. (He was only twelve!!)

The suggestions included both those that focused on Bert's admittedly self-centered need to put a quick end to his own mistreatment, and others that were more general, designed to lead the kids toward nonviolent, logical, forward looking, solutions in all areas of their lives. The former he instilled virtually immediately by logically establishing the suggestions that he was no threat to them, that they looked

pitiful in the eyes of others for picking on such a weakling, and that he was, in fact, extremely helpful to them, so he, and others like him, were to be consistently protected rather than harmed or hassled. His personal safety factor experienced an immediate improvement – amazingly, even beyond his current group of clients.

The second set of suggestions was more complicated. He designed it as series of short steps – suggestions – that established gradual changes in the kids’ basic behavior patterns. He feared that too much, too soon, would not only cause suspicion and raise eyebrows among the adults, but might also negatively affect the kid’s psyches – he wasn’t a psychologist and felt caution therefore represented the prudent approach. (He was just 12.) And of course, he didn’t want people to get the idea that these positive changes were in any way connected with him. That could make everything unravel and he’d not only be back on the bullies’ hit list but might well find himself in trouble with the school or even the legal authorities.

Bert’s final step depended on what he had come to understand was the most powerful force the Universe had ever unleashed on young adolescents – peer pressure.

Bert understood about peer pressure.

“I’ll bet you’re afraid to pound on Bert just because his Dad and Mom are professors.”

(Ugh! Ouch! Tears! Terrible hurt.)

“Let’s waylay Bert and beat him silly after school – take his money. You ain’t afraid, are ya?”

(Ugh! Ouch! Tears! Terrible hurt.)

Oh yes! Bert understood all about the insidious side of peer pressure! It led him, however, to contemplate the less often considered, other, side of the phenomenon – how it might be used in socially positive ways. He soon had ideas and before long had incorporated them into his plan. This is where the untimely passing of Michael P. Watson entered to complicate the picture.

Using a concept he had discovered during his recent study of hypnosis and related states – called seeping the subconscious – he had surreptitiously led several student body leaders and teachers to organize a Peace in Our Time

Rally for Christmas Eve at the little park that was the town square. Explanations are in order.

Seeping the subconscious is a relatively simple technique used to deposit positive ideas into other people's minds for them to later discover as their own creation. They may then either reject them or act on them. A suggestion is made to someone, and before the person has even a moment to react to it, the one having made the suggestion changes the topic to something completely different. This prevents the person from outwardly rejecting the suggestion at the moment it is planted and allows it to seep around inside the subconscious mind becoming detached from its actual source. The crucial aspect is, at the outset, not allowing any time for the idea to be rejected. Therapists and savvy parents find the technique exceedingly helpful when working with adolescents – far more effective than confrontation or sermons.

So, Bert devised the Peace in Our Time Rally concept. It involved participants publicly signing a pledge book promising to act according to several peace and compassion-based tenets to be presented to each rally participant on a laminated, pocket sized, carry with, reminder card.

With those things well in mind, Bert set about his program of seeping.

“Hey, Tommy. I was thinking that maybe you and Bianca might somehow use your influence on the other kids to get them all to treat each other in kind ways and solve problems through peaceful channels. By the way, you were really great in the game last night. How many points did you finally end up scoring? And that takeaway and last minute basket was out of this world. I love to watch you play. Gotta run, now. See you later.”

Similar contacts were made with two influential teachers and they were all revisited – re-seeped – on subsequent occasions expanding the initial, general concept to include the necessary specifics. Before long, the student council had – on its own, mind you – come up with an idea for a Christmas Eve Peace Rally in the park on the square.

Over the course of those previous seven months Bert had been a busy boy, working with some three dozen kids – typically doing short term, specific skill, coaching. That having

been the case, he was only currently involved with six of them. Having planned ahead from the outset – as was his proclivity – he worked out a strategy designed to nudge his collection of ‘bad boys’ to attend the rally and experience the necessary pressure to openly pledge their support for all their peers to witness. Not having been able to know earlier where or when it would take place he could not – during the course of his previous work – administer fully accurate, specifically detailed, attendance instructions.

So, he had given them all the innocuous, generic, suggestion that they would feel compelled to watch Watson’s five o’clock weathercast on Christmas Eve. When they heard the old gentleman’s familiar sign off phrase – “Until tomorrow, then, may blue skies and bluebirds be your constant companions” – they would be reminded – required, through the power of suggestion, as it were – to attend the rally, the specific, accurate, information about which would have been widely circulated by then.

Bert felt certain it was not the kind of event any of his target kids would attend voluntarily no matter how much time and studied effort he had poured into civilizing their psyches. The plan had seemed flawless until its keystone, Michael P. Watson, passed away. Bert recognized that the rally held generally applicable positive virtues for the masses and was pleased about that, but the devastating turn of events – the now inevitable non-participation of his ‘bad boys’ – saddened him. He had been building his expectation – his life – toward the event for most of the year. It had given him purpose and a grand new sense of self-worth and pride. The letdown was both upsetting and depressing. He was further bothered by the fact that he seemed to be more concerned about the impending failure of his plan than of the old man’s demise. He suddenly realized that he was very angry with Michael P. Watson for having died on him. More guilt. He would attend the funeral; that might help make up for it.

The big evening – well, the formerly big evening – was upon him. The rally was scheduled for seven o’clock so the kids could be with their families later on. Bert timed his arrival for exactly seven and stood at the rear of the towering crowd – he was surprised, impressed, and pleased by its size.

A dozen copies of the Peace Register had been prepared to speed up the signing process. Tommy and Bianca mounted the bandstand that stood on the north side of the snow packed park. Tommy gave a very nice talk about the important and necessary role young people must play in the cause of peace, tolerance, and compassion at home and, also, in the larger contexts. Bianca emphasized how it was the responsibility of every member of their generation to commit to becoming a positive cog in the movement. She explained that by signing the register that was exactly what they were doing – committing to the cause of peace in the presence of friends and family – therein indicating their determination and intention to live their lives in ways that fostered and utilized peaceful approaches when relating with one another.

To add an additional tone of solemn legitimacy to the event, they had invited Reverend Thomas to be present on stage beside them, and to provide a short prayer; which turned out to be more of an eyes-closed, up-beat, pep talk than a prayer, but all the better Bert thought. It brought the first genuine smile to his face that day.

With great flair, Tommy and Bianca signed first for all to see, thereby lending their considerable power over the others regarding the commitment.

At that point an extraordinary realization began overtaking Bert. Looking around, he sensed that he was surrounded by ‘his bad boys’ – every last one of the possible thirty-nine by his count. How could that be? Why were they there?

One thing seemed certain; the previous year such a gathering would not have been to deliver good news. What about now? When his eyes would engage one of them he would receive a smile in return. They were not those, “Enjoy the moment, kid, because you’re about to receive the whippin’ of your life,” sort of sneer-filled smiles he had witnessed so many times before. They were, puzzling as it was, genuine looking smiles.

(Unknown to Bert, Chanel 7 had run a tribute to Mr. Watson in place of the weathercast that afternoon. It had ended with his well-known – and in this case – his all-

important tag line, thereby prompting – requiring – the unexpected attendance at the gathering.)

Then, it happened!

Bert hadn't wanted it to happen.

He had done his best to make sure it wouldn't – couldn't – happen.

Having it happen just might seal his doom or in the least put him in traction.

Regardless, it happened.

With no real segue, Tommy turned to a fully unexpected, topic.

“In light of some new information that we have only recently received, the faculty and student council have decided that it would be totally unfair – unjust even – for us to take credit for this historic event here in the Adamsville square on this Christmas Eve, when it was, unknown to any of us, the private brainchild of another of our fellow, Central Jr. High students – up to now an unsung hero among us you might say. Will Bert Benson please come up here?”

It really hadn't been a question but, my, how Bert wished it had. He could have quickly assembled a number of self-protective answers.

A collective gasp of disbelief and puzzlement swept across the gathering as furrow-browed heads turned this way and that in search of the ‘runt of the litter’ as he was commonly referred to by the others. Bert tried to slouch down and disappear among the taller kids, but ‘his guys’ weren't about to let that happen. Big Butchy – formerly the baddest of the bad – and another of the larger, oft retained, boys boosted Bert up onto their shoulders and worked their way through the sea of young people to the bandstand where they deposited him with some care (well, sort of).

Bert was terrified! More than his usual base-line level of terrified, it constituted a level five-out-of-five reading on his scale of personal terror, dread, and panic. Bert's knees shook. Tommy offered him his hand. Reverend Thomas spoke directly to Bert.

“It has come to our attention that all of this was your idea and that you used your very best skills of sneekiocity to prod the rest of us to take up this important cause, which, of

course, should have been ours all along.”

Then, leaning down and whispering just for Bert to hear, he added: “Thinking it best that some adult knew what was happening, Michael P. Watson, informed me of your plan just hours before he passed on. He felt sure that, after the fact, you would understand.”

Straightening back up to his full six, six, height, the Reverend continued so the group could hear.

“At this time, Mayor Oglesby has something for you.”

The Mayor, with humorous effort, managed to navigate his considerable bulk up the four steps to the bandstand. He tipped his hat, acknowledging the crowd’s applause and whistles, then, turned to Bert. For the first time in recent memory the mayor refrained from his long-winded tendencies. His words were not self-serving but short and strictly to the point.

“Bert Benson, as five-term mayor of our ever-improving community (well, almost not self-serving), it gives me the greatest pleasure and personal satisfaction to bestow upon you the key to our city – an honor never given without due consideration and then only to the most deserving. Thank you for your vision and efforts – even if they were, as reported, of the sneakiest, possible, nature.”

The crowd laughed and roared again, clapping high in the air. Butchy determined it wasn’t loud enough so he turned to the crowd and urged them on. They responded – it was Big Butchy!

Bert accepted the oversized key and nodded in embarrassed appreciation. He was unable to speak. Fortunately, it was not required. His inner voice, however, spoke all quite clearly. With tearing eyes, he looked toward the stars.

‘Merry Christmas, Michael P. Watson, my dear, dear, friend. May blue skies and bluebirds be your constant companions.’

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**STORY THREE:
THE OLD RECLUSE AT TEN-TEN SPRUCE
A Story for the Christmas Season
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SECTION ONE: Footprints in the Snow

It wasn't the first time one of the old man's windows had been broken by a stone throwing lad. Nine-year-old boys had a thing about him – well, it was really more about them although they didn't understand that. The need to be accepted as macho by their friends settled into their young beings well before common sense and positive social values arrived to offer guidance. For some reason, breaking glass at the old man's house had become a rite of passage in that neighborhood. Anyone viewing it through mature eyes understood there was nothing brave or daring about the act. It was, in fact, quite cowardly, always undertaken late at night when the lights in the old, long unpainted, two story, house at 1010 Spruce were out. The pelting always occurred from the safety of the alley, just outside the rusted iron fence that encircled the overgrown lawn. The house was occupied by an elderly man whose only possible offense was that he preferred to keep to himself.

It was well past ten o'clock that early December night. The freshly fallen snow glistened in the full moon. The old man was returning home by way of the alley. It was unusually late for him to be out and about. He came across foot prints unmistakably laid down by a boy's size six sneakers. What would a youngster be doing out so late? He moved into the

shadows of the buildings that lined the alley to the east and continued on his way. There at the fence behind his house was Mark from down the street. The old man stopped a few yards from the boy. Had it not been the precursor to such a mess inside the house, it would have been humorous. The boy threw a stone. It bounced off the siding. He threw another. It hit the porch roof and rolled off into a snow bank. Although fully untalented in the requisite skill, he was persistent – something the old man could appreciate.

Six more attempts were bungled before the old man was upon him. His large old hands firmly engaged the top of Mark's shoulders from the rear just as the unmistakable sound of shattering glass commandeered their attention and caused them to look up. The old man winced. The lad pulled his firmly fisted, bent-at-the-elbow, arm down through the air as lads do in celebration of victories large and small.

Mark looked up and back into the old man's face.

"Good evening, Mark. It looks like we have broken glass to pick up and a window pane to replace, don't we?"

There was no response.

"If you'd rather, I suppose we could just walk back down the alley to your house and have a discussion with your parents."

Mark shook his head from side to side with a degree of sincerity that seldom surfaces in the absence of abject terror.

"Then you relieve me of one of these packages and lead the way to my back door."

With a second, lingering, puzzled glance up into the old man's face, the boy accepted the large paper bag and began making his way toward the back porch.

"What are you going to do to me?" he managed as the old man pushed the door open ahead of them.

"Have you heard what kinds of things I do to boys who I catch breaking my windows?"

Mark nodded and sniffled back tears. The lore was rampant with tales of horrendous punishments.

With the door closed and the light turned on, the old man motioned to the kitchen table where he sat the cardboard box he had been carrying. Mark followed suite with the bag and stepped back – every muscle in his young body quaking.

Demonstrating no indication of urgency, the old man removed his stocking hat, red scarf, and long black coat, hanging them in an open closet beside the door.

“You, too, son. This job will take a while. Remove your shoes and socks as well. They are soaking wet and I don’t want you soiling my carpets.”

There was some truth in that but mainly he figured a lad without shoes and socks was less likely to bolt out into the cold, snowy, night.

“Move ahead of me down the hall to the front entryway. Then take a right and we’ll climb the stairs to the second floor.”

They entered a small, unused, bedroom at the rear of the house – the site of the broken window. It was a six by eight-inch pane within a window having 16 such small panes. The old man had brought along a broom and dustpan from the kitchen. He handed them to Mark.

“Watch the glass on the floor. Don’t want your feet to get cut.”

Quite obviously, the boy had no idea how to go about the task.

“Here. Let me demonstrate. You hold the dustpan.”

He methodically swept some of the glass shards into a pile at the center of the drop zone and then handed the broom over to the boy again. He worked diligently. From time to time the old man held the pan to the floor and received the glass, dumping the contents into a wastebasket.

“Nice job. You seem to learn quickly. Now we need to very carefully remove all the glass that remains in the wooden frame. We can lay those pieces right into the wastebasket.”

It was soon accomplished.

The old man crossed the room to an old dresser stored there and took a roll of duct tape from the bottom drawer.

“For tonight, we will have to cover the opening with this. I’ll tear off pieces and you put them in place. Begin by sticking each piece to the glass pane above and then run it down across the opening to the one below. Then back and forth, left to right, the same way. Tomorrow we will replace the glass and putty it in place the way the others are. See?”

He pointed and ran his finger around the dry putty on

another pane. Mark nodded. The old man tore. The young boy secured them according to the instructions. He got better with practice. They were soon finished.

“Nice job, Mark. Thank you. Now, about your parents.”

“You said if I fixed this you wouldn’t tell them.”

“I didn’t actually say that but I’m sure we can work something out so they won’t have to know unless you decide to tell them.”

Mark got that ‘how dumb can you think I am old man’ look on his face.

“Will your parents not be worried about where you are this late?”

“No. I’m staying over at Jimmy’s place. His folks think we are asleep. I left through a window.”

“I see. How enterprising. You have been planning this for some time, I see.”

“You could say that. I been nine now for almost two months.”

The old man directed the boy back down stairs to the kitchen.

“I usually have cocoa on cold evenings. Do you know how to fix cocoa?”

“No. Well sort of, maybe.”

“I’ll take that as a probably not. Do you like cocoa?”

Mark nodded. The evening was becoming more and more puzzling to the lad.

“Turn on the hot water and let it run until it gets real hot. Then fill that tea kettle, by counting to ten. That will be enough water. Then set it on the left front burner and turn this knob to high.”

“Mom don’t let me cook.”

“You will probably find I am not very much like a mother.”

It brought the first quick smile to the boy’s face. The old man raised his eyebrows.

“How about cinnamon toast to go with it? I love cinnamon toast, myself.”

“That sounds good.”

While Mark fixed the water, the old man spooned the dry cocoa mix into two mugs and popped two pieces of oat

bread into the toaster.

“You like yours with or without butter?” he asked.

“Don’t know. I really never had any before.”

“I like it with so that’s how I’ll fix it. You can decide if you like it that way.”

The teapot whistled, startling Mark. He laughed nervously. The toast popped up. The old man pretended that startled him. Mark laughed for real.

With the snack prepared at last, they took seats across from each other at the small, round, table.

“So, when does Christmas Vacation begin at school?”

“The eighteenth. We get seventeen days this year. Longest I’ve known.”

“Going anywhere with your family?”

“Nope. Stayin’ home, I guess. You?”

“I’ll be here. I don’t really have any place to go. No family and few friends left anymore.”

“Died off, I guess.”

“Yes. That or moved away or into nursing homes.”

“You don’t seem to need a nursing home.”

“And I’m both proud of and thankful for that.”

“I’m sorry you don’t have any family. Mom says family is the most important thing of all. My two grammas usually come for Christmas morning at my house. Max – that’s my big brother – says they smell like old ladies. It don’t bother me. I guess I just like the way old ladies smell.”

“So, what do you think of the cinnamon toast?”

“It’s great. I watched how you made it. I bet I can do that at home.”

A few moments of silence followed. Mark spoke.

“So what’s the deal gonna be about my parents?”

“I have a ‘deal’ of sorts in mind. It sounds like it’s time to try it out on you.”

Mark looked puzzled but sat in silence.

“Look inside the box and the sack we brought in.”

Mark got to his feet and did as he had been instructed.

“Junk the way it looks to me.”

“Old and broken toys. At Christmas I collect them and fix them up right here on this table.”

“Why?”

“Do you know about the Children’s Home – the shelter – at the end of Walnut?”

“Know where it is. Homeless kids and their mom’s mostly stay there I hear.”

“Right. Well, the kids there at Christmas time don’t really get to have a Christmas. Their mothers can’t afford presents and the Home has a very small budget so it can’t do much more than light a Christmas tree for them.”

“That sucks! So what you’re saying is you fix up toys other kids have thrown out and take them to the Children at the Home?”

It ended up a question.

The old man nodded impressed again by the boy’s quick mind.

“With so many folks out of work this winter the Home is overcrowded. There will be more children there without presents than usual.”

“Why don’t you just buy them new toys?”

“I’m a poor old man living on my Social Security. I can’t afford to do that and anyway I’d rather add a part of myself to the gifts this way. What I can afford to do is buy paint and supplies to refurbish the old toys.”

“Refurbish?”

“Fix up. Try to make them like new.”

Mark nodded.

“I could help you. My teachers have always said I’m the best artist in the class.”

“I’ll just bet you’d be fantastic help. I had in mind requiring you to help for a few days in lieu of my telling your parents. But since you volunteered . . .”

“That was going to be like blackmail.”

“And what you did to my house was like willful destruction of private property.”

“I suppose that makes us like even then, okay?”

“Better than okay, I’d say. I sense a problem about this arrangement, however.”

“What’s that?”

“What will your friends think about you coming here to visit?”

“Oh. Gosh! I hadn’t thought about that . . . I’m pretty

good at sneaking around. I'm sure I can get here without anybody seeing me."

It was not the end game the old man was hoping for but he would take what he could get.

"After school, tomorrow, then?" the old man said.

It was more a requirement than a question.

"First the broken window and then we'll begin on the toys."

"Sounds good. I got some old toys I can bring and I can get some from my little sister and Max. This is going to be great!"

Again, silence as Mark turned his cup up high to coax out every last drop of cocoa.

"I really don't get you, you know," he said at last, arms crossed and resting on the table.

"Oh!"

"Yeah. I break your window and you end up treating me to toast and cocoa. You don't even seem to be mad at me. Like I said, I don't get you."

"How would getting mad at you have fixed my window or made things better between us?"

More silence but that time it was clearly productive silence.

"I guess it wouldn't have. You'd get mad and drag me home and my folks would ground me – dad would spank me. They'd be mad at me and I'd have a real reason to be mad at you so I'd want to do other bad stuff back to you. That's how things usually work, you know. I see it happening everywhere."

"Congratulations to us, then!"

"Huh?"

"I think we just broke that 'usually' chain of events. Instead of becoming enemies we became friends. We are friends, aren't we?"

"Yeah. We are. Yeah. I see. Congratulations to us."

Mark offered a high five that went nowhere. They exchanged a mutual shrug and chuckle.

"I can do up the dishes," Mark said.

"The warm water feels good on my old hands. How about I wash and you dry?"

“Deal . . . You know why we got to be friends instead of enemies?” Mark offered after a few moments.

It had been a thoughtful question and the old man was intrigued.

“Why is that?”

“ ‘Cause we got to know each other. I used to think you were a wicked old man who needed to be – what’s the word – punished, I guess. I never knew why and I never asked. You never done nothin’ to me. It’s just the word out there – that you are a recluse.”

“You know the meaning of ‘recluse’?”

“Bad man, I guess.”

“Actually, it means a person who keeps to himself. It implies nothing about how good or bad the person might be.”

“Really? Sorry! I guess none of us kids knows that.”

“And now you do.”

“Yeah. Thanks, I guess. Now I do.”

“Want to know a secret?”

“Okay. Sure. But I tend to blab secrets – at least really good ones.”

“I feel fortunate that you broke my window tonight.”

“What?”

“If you hadn’t, we would have never gotten to know each other and I find that I really like you.”

Mark smiled and nodded. The boy had more to say on the topic.

“There should have been a better way for us to meet but you never talk to anybody. You just keep your head down and walk right on by when you come to somebody. You never answer. Maybe it’s just being a recluse but it doesn’t seem very friendly, you know?”

“I’m nearly deaf and have lots of trouble hearing especially with all the background noises outside. Talking with folks is very difficult – especially higher pitched children’s voices. It just becomes embarrassing for me and uncomfortable for everybody concerned. I’m sorry if I seem unfriendly.”

Mark nodded thoughtfully.

With the dishes done he slipped back into his nearly dry socks and shoes, donned his jacket, and left. The old man

stood at the door and watched him make his way down the alley and out of sight.

The snow had begun again.

The old man wanted to share with everybody about his wonderful evening, but he had no one with which to share it.

Mark wanted to share with everybody about his wonderful evening, but felt he didn't dare.

SECTION TWO: The Deadline

School was out at three o'clock. At three fifteen the old man heard four, intentionally loud, raps on his back door. He smiled and walked from the living room, where he had been reading, to the kitchen.

"Prompt, I must say," he said as he opened the door.

"We agreed after school and this is after school."

Mark entered and closed the door. He slipped out of his shoes.

"My socks aren't wet."

He hung his jacket in the open closet.

"Ham or egg salad," the old man asked as he opened the refrigerator door.

"I don't get it."

"Sandwich. Ham or egg salad. I figure a lad your age is hungry after school."

"Yes. Thanks. Egg salad, I guess."

"Milk?"

"I like milk."

Mark took 'his' seat at the table as the old man assembled a sandwich and poured a glass of milk.

"I looked up window fixing on the web during study hall. You got some of those little triangle wedges used to hold the pane in place?"

"Yes, I do."

"Is your putty hard drying or soft drying?"

"Hard."

"Good. The article said that was best."

"Is it the kind in a can or the kind in a gun?"

"Can."

"I guess you can show me how to make that work. I've

seen Dad use a caulking gun. Figure I know how to do it that way.”

The old man sat the snack on the table and took a seat. Mark talked himself through the sandwich and all the way to the quick swipe across his lips with the back of his hand, which seemed to signal the snack was finished.

“I have the equipment set out upstairs in the bedroom.”

“Did the patch hold? I heard the wind kick up during the night and I got worried.”

“It held fine. Like I told you; you did a good job.”

Within the half hour the pane was properly ‘wedged’ in place and hard puttied for eternity – or at least until the next neighborhood boy turned nine.

“We did a good job don’t you think?” Mark said/asked as he stepped back to survey the work.”

“Excellent, I’d say. You are very talented with your hands. You pick up on things fast.”

Mark nodded suggesting that he agreed.

Back down stairs they covered the kitchen table with layers of newspaper and set out the supplies – several small cans of paint, brushes, wood glue, solder, sandpaper, a knife, brads, and other odds and ends.

“Pick something from the toy box for us to begin with.”

Mark looked over the possibilities and selected a dump truck.

“The dumper lever is broke. One headlight is lost. The paint’s all flakey. Can we refurbish it?”

“And he remembers new words as well. Yes. I’m sure we can refurbish it. I imagine you can fashion a new lever from this piece of number nine wire. May need the pliers and the wire cutter from the tool box on the counter. I’ll get to sanding so we will have a nice smooth surface to paint.”

“Sounds good. Since we can’t match the headlight maybe we should replace both of them so they look alike,” Mark offered thoughtfully.

“Good idea. What could we use?”

“Not sure.”

They each set about the task they had before them. Time passed in silence.

“How’s this for a lever? See. It fits right into the slot. If

we bend the end of the long section that runs under the bed and through to the other side it won't slip out."

"Nice job. It may take two of us with needle nosed pliers to do that bending."

"I think you're right."

The cooperative bend was achieved. Mark smiled into the old man's face. It was returned with a nod. Mark ran his hand across the surface of the truck.

"Good and smooth. What color shall we paint it?"

"What color do you think a four or five-year-old boy would like best?"

Without hesitation Mark had the suggestion.

"Blue with red trim. The tires need a coat of black don't you think. Let's paint the new lever red to match the trim."

"Sounds like a good plan. What about the headlights?"

"I was thinking about using one of those silver thumbtacks for each one. They would sort of look like headlights. We could break off the pin part and just glue on the round shiny part."

"Excellent! We can do that after the paint dries. Don't forget that we need to come back to it, now. I usually make a list of details like that."

"I got a great memory. We won't forget."

They were both very pleased with the finished product and the old man sat it on the top of the refrigerator to dry.

They finished three other toys that first afternoon – a doll that only needed one arm reattached, a double winged plane that had fallen apart in every dimension, and a yo-yo in need of new string and a paint job. Mark emphasized the obvious by painting, Yo-Yo on one side.

"It's nearly five. I imagine you should be getting on home now."

"I guess. This has been a really good time. Did I do okay?"

"You are undoubtedly the best assistant I have ever had."

Mark wondered but didn't ask if the old man had ever actually had an assistant before. He chose to be pleased with the compliment and be on his way.

"More snow predicted for tonight," he said as he

opened the door. "Be careful if you go outside."

"I'll do that. Thanks for the warning."

The next morning the old man awakened to the grating sound of a snow shovel scraping against the concrete sidewalk out front. He looked down from his bedroom window. There was Mark at six in the morning clearing the walk and steps. The old man's cheeks moistened.

* * *

"I believe one of Santa's elves shoveled my walk this morning before school. Did you happen to see him at work?"

"No. Can't say I saw any Elves at work in this neighborhood."

The boy beamed.

The old man was really just fishing to see if Mark would take credit. Mark understood and played it super cool – well, super cool for a nine-year-old. No more was said about it although both understood the facts of the matter.

Their work sessions continued every afternoon and all of Saturday morning. During that time, they finished all the toys the old man had brought home. Mark began bringing in things from home and from friends. By the end of the second week they had two dozen toys ready for the children at the shelter.

"That will be one toy for every child," the old man announced clearly proud of the accomplishment.

"Only one? That's not enough. Geez! I get a dozen all by myself. We gotta do better than this. I know I can hit up lots of families and get bunches of more stuff. Is that okay?"

"It is, but I don't see how the two of us will be able to get many more than another dozen or so done before Christmas Eve. We don't want to begin skimping on quality. What we have is really good stuff."

"Yeah. It is. Hmm. I'll think on it. We got one week and I'm out of school now, so we can work lots more hours."

"We can give it a try but we are just about out of supplies – paint and dowels and such. My check isn't due for another two weeks."

"Well, I'm luckier that way. My allowance comes every Saturday morning and tomorrow is Saturday. I get ten bucks. Will that be enough?"

“It should keep us going.”

‘Ten dollars,’ the old man thought to himself. ‘That’s as much allowance as I got in an entire year at that age.’ He didn’t mention it.

Three days before the big event, which would play out on Saturday night, they still had lots and lots of broken toys to work on. It had become clear to both of them that they were about to run out of refurbishing time.

“And,” Mark observed, “We haven’t even begun to wrap them.”

“Oh, I don’t wrap them. It would be nice but I’d rather use my money for supplies. Paper is outrageously expensive.”

“But half the fun is ripping off the paper,” Mark observed.

Nothing more was said of it.

They agreed to begin at five a.m. the next morning – Thursday. The old man was up at four, setting out those toys he thought they could fix the fastest thereby making as many presents as possible in the time that remained.

He heard Mark’s familiar knock at the back door and called for him to come in.

“I got some news. I hope it’s okay with you. I guess I should have talked it over with you first but I sort of got carried away, I’m afraid. I’m told that I often get carried away.”

“What on earth are you babbling about, boy?”

“There’s just no way to ease into this. You need to answer the front door.”

“I didn’t hear anyone knock.”

Mark rapped against the wall and grinned. The old man assumed a puzzled look. Mark urged him down the hall as if shooing geese into a barn. He opened the door. There stood Mark’s parents, his brother and sister, and two older women he assumed were the grandmothers. He turned to Mark and waited for an explanation.

“Last night I told my family about the broken window and how me and you had become friends and what you always did for the kids at the shelter and how I’ve been helping you and that this year there are lots more kids and how we don’t have time to get everything done in time by

ourselves. So, they all wanted to help, even Max. We brought card tables and more supplies and other stuff that Mom suggested, and my grandmas both found gobs of wrapping paper in their attics and Mom made food and so here we are. I hope this won't spoil it for you."

"Spoil it! I should say not. This is about the kids and nobody else."

He turned to the guests who were still stranded on the porch.

"Come in. Come in. Please forgive my bad manners. This boy of yours is remarkable and now that I've had this introduction to his family I can understand why."

* * *

On Christmas Eve, Mark and the old man – dressed for the umpteenth year as Santa – arrived at the shelter with bag after bag of presents. Twenty-seven children and fifteen mothers each received four gifts apiece – all wrapped in the bright, colorful, paper of the season that just begged to be ripped to shreds.

After the gifts had been distributed and opened, and after all the bright eyed oos and ahhs had been oooed and ahhed, one small package remained. The old man in his Santa costume took it off the tree, read the tag, and, placing a finger beside of his nose, looked around the room as if fully puzzled.

"Is there a boy here named Mark?"

Mark raised his hand all quite tentatively, as puzzled for real as the old man was pretending to be.

'Santa' lovingly handed it with a wink to Mark. Inside was the gift of all gifts as far as that boy was concerned. It was the very stone that had broken the old man's window. It was glued to a blue wooden base which was inscribed in red with the simple phrase –

"Here's to our rock-solid friendship. Thank you.

– The old recluse at 1010 Spruce."

STORY FOUR:
Two Warm Days One Cold December:
A Story Offered in the Spirit of Christmas
Tom Gnagey © 2012

The only seat available in the small cafe that afternoon was in a booth across the table from a disheveled looking old man. He was reading a paper neatly folded against the table beside his mug of long cold coffee. In his red and black plaid, wool, shirt and wide black suspenders – which struggled just a bit to contain his portly tummy – he looked older by a decade than his sixty five years. His hair – a good match to his full, white beard – was in disarray, untouched since it had exited his black, stocking cap, which lay beside him on the seat atop his thread bare, black, winter coat. He held his head raised slightly so he could focus on the article through his gold framed, half-lens, glasses. It was not that he was unattractive in appearance; it was more that he was out of the ordinary, quaint – eccentric would be the word.

The front door opened and a boy entered in a swirl of snow. He was ten, perhaps eleven. It was difficult to tell, disguised as he was by the ear flaps tied tightly under his chin and the long, dark blue, oversized coat. His cheeks – what could be seen of them – were red and chapped. He surveyed the room, shivering, stomping off the snow, and easing back into a spot beside the door, clearly waiting for a stool to open up at the counter.

The cold air and tinkling of the bell atop the door had attracted the old man's attention. Without hesitation, he motioned to the boy to take the seat in his booth. The lad

offered a faint smile but shook his head and stayed put. The old man caught the eye of the waiter – an older man with whom he had shared at least most of the same presidents. They had a whispered exchange. Presently, a mug of steaming hot cocoa arrived, sitting on the table across from the old man. Again, he motioned for the boy, pointing to the mug and raising his eyebrows repeatedly. The lad looked around the room and, with some caution, slowly made his way toward the booth.

Without a word, he slid into the seat, never taking his eyes off the old stranger's face. He removed his hat, unzipped his coat and lifted the mug to his mouth. He managed a series of short, staccato, nods – of approval, apparently – as he sat the mug back down. He slipped out of his coat, leaving it behind him on the seat. The boy's neatly pressed white shirt and blue tie intrigued the old man.

“Going to a party?” the old man asked.

“No. Job interview.”

The old man sipped at his coffee, shuddering and making a face, intended to humorously reflect the disgusting flavor of the hour-old, long cold, black, coffee. The boy smiled and shrugged in delight. He caught the waiter's eye and pointed to the old man's cold mug. A fresh mug arrived. It had been an interesting exchange of unrequired helpfulness.

“So, boy, a job interview, you say?”

“A four o'clock appointment here. Max needs somebody to keep the front sidewalk shoveled. There's a sign in the window.”

The old man nodded and lifted the mug. He closed his eyes and lingered over the aroma before drinking. It amused the boy.

“And you come dressed in a shirt and tie to a shoveler interview?”

“It's how we do things at my house. The butler insists.”

Things were becoming curiouser and curiouser, as has been written before. A rich kid applying for a job shoveling snow on what was arguably the coldest day of that December? There had to be a story there.

“I assume you must like to work?”

“Yes, sir. My tutor says hard work makes the man.”

A butler and a tutor. The old man looked beyond the boy out the front window fully expecting to see a limo and entourage of English, man servants, standing at attention. Then he returned his gaze to the boy – his tattered jacket and cap, specifically. The boy took note.

“They are my old things,” he explained immediately. “My working clothes, you could say.”

The old man nodded. It could reasonably explain their shabby appearance, he supposed. They both sipped at their drinks. It was becoming an intellectual standoff of sorts.

“So, you drink coffee and read newspapers, I see,” the boy offered, hoping to perhaps direct the focus away from himself.

“I also eat sometimes. You hungry?”

The boy did not respond but the old man sensed that his mental wheels were spinning. The hesitation continued for a long, silent, moment. The old man beckoned the waiter.

“Two cheeseburgers, medium well, and fries with ketchup. What do you like on your burgers, son?”

“Mustard and pickle.”

The boy was clearly surprised to hear his own words and slumped his shoulders as if uncomfortable – embarrassed, perhaps.

“Make it so, then. Two cheeseburgers with mustard and pickle. Save a couple of slices of that peanut butter pie just in case we have room, later.”

The boy's brow furrowed. He remained silent and sat back.

“This is great,” the old man said. “I hate to eat alone.”

“You got a wife?”

The old man figured it was an appropriate question following the eating alone comment.

“No. Do you?”

The boy chuckled out loud at the absurdity. The old man amended his answer.

“Actually, I had a wife for over forty years but she passed away recently.”

“I'm sorry for your loss. I can't imagine being married for forty years. Well, actually, I can't imagine being married. For some reason my mother is closed mouthed about such

topics. What I do know about that man/woman stuff, comes mostly from my friends and I'm sure they're really as dumb about it as I am so I figure that means that I really know less than nothing about it."

The old man was privately amused. The boy seemed bright and had a fine command of the language. Still, he felt the conversation was moving in an inappropriate direction – at least over their first cheeseburger together. He moved to change the topic. The lad seemed honest and was certainly open about things, he'd give him that. It was the boy who actually moved on.

"You got any kids?"

"Again, I had a son but lost him in a boating accident."

"Wow! Sorry again. You've had a lot of sorrow, old man. I didn't mean to bring up bad stuff for you."

"I'm sure you didn't and rest assured that I have dealt with those things satisfactorily and am moving on."

"Moving on by sitting in a grimy old cafe reading the paper, slurping day old coffee, and having to buy a kid hot chocolate in order to have a friend?"

It had been pointed and interestingly observant, based on what the boy knew of him. The boy was again merely being honest with no intention of causing distress.

"And, a cheeseburger and fries. Day old coffee, a cheeseburger, and fries," the old man added with a smile

They chuckled together over it. The boy had a wonderful smile but it seemed unpracticed, as if he were surprised every time it showed up on his face. The old man had to wonder. He wasn't one to press, however. He had learned that if things were meant to come up they would find a way all by themselves.

"You're in what, fifth or sixth grade?"

"Sixth. On Christmas vacation now. It's why I can get a job."

"Have favorite subjects?"

"Reading and social studies. Someday I'm going to be a famous writer. I write almost every day, already."

"What a wonderful goal. A writer. Books, stories, articles? What do you have in mind?"

"Books. I want to write things that are both interesting

and entertaining – sort of educational I guess but lots of fun and with great characters. Does that make any sense?”

“Complete sense.”

The old man figured one of his first would be about the birds and bees for sixth grade boys – well footnoted, of course. He decided not to consider what that cast of characters might include.

“Why are you smiling?” the boy asked.

“I guess because it is just so nice being here with you.”

“With me? How can that be nice?”

“You are fun. You are a great conversationalist. And, you seem to be uncharacteristically honest for a lad your age.”

The boy looked down into his lap, then leaned forward to his mug and lingered far too long over a seemingly never ending sip.

The burgers and fries arrived. The boy scarfed his down. The old man wrote it off to the hollow-leg stage of a growing boy's development. It was good watching a boy eat, again.

Max approached the booth.

“You the kid here about the snow shoveling job?” he asked.

“Yes, Sir. That's why I am here. I guess I got sidetracked over hot chocolate. Sorry.”

“I had figured on hiring an older boy – high school age. You look a bit small. I get a lot of snow out there. Can you be here at five every morning after a snow? I open at six and need it all cleared off by then.”

“Not a problem, sir. I've been shoveling since I was a pup and I imagine I will work for less than an older kid.”

“Job pays the same – either age. Tell you what. There's a good two inches on the walk out there right now and it's getting deeper by the minute. Go show me what you can do. Shovel's by the door.”

“Yes, sir. I already spotted it. I can suggest a better model but I can make it work.”

Max raised his eyebrows in the old man's direction.

The boy stood and began bundling up.

“Thank you for the burger and stuff and for the conversation. You are very good at it, too. Will you be back

here sometime?"

"He's a regular, kid. Every afternoon at two like clockwork."

The old man nodded, looking back and forth from one to the other. The boy shook his head as if indicating pity. To him that didn't indicate a man who was moving on.

"I hope to see you again, then. This has really been nice. I gotta go hit the slopes – get it?"

"Yes. I get it. Clever, in fact. Remember to put that in one of your stories."

"Books."

"Yes, that's right. Books."

"You know the boy well?" Max asked one he had trotted his way to the front of the room.

He slid into the recently vacated seat.

"Never seen him before. Seems well bred – polite, good vocabulary, dresses with care and is straight forward and honest beyond anything that seems reasonable for his age."

"Good enough for me. I hope he works out."

Max stood and approached the front window to eyeball his interesting new employee.

Now, most shovelers began close to the building and shoveled the snow straight out into the gutter at the street. This kid, however, began by cutting a path side to side across the front of the building so walkers would have an immediate passageway.

They seemed appreciative. One lady even tipped him.

"And smart and considerate," Max muttered under his breath – an addition to the old man's list.

The old man left. Outside the boy seemed pleased to see him but his face also showed concern. He leaned on the shovel.

"Do you have a warm place to stay tonight?" he asked.

It was the last thing the old man had expected to hear.

"Yes. Thank you. I do. I am fine. I have a place to live."

"Good. Just wondering – the old coat and cap and your uncombed hair."

"Oh. I see. How considerate. I appreciate your

concern. And you? Live close by do you?"

"Yes, sir. Just north a few blocks – well, north east I guess."

It seemed to have been a hastily constructed afterthought – the 'east' part. 'Why', the old man wondered. It certainly added lots more haystack in which to sequester the proverbial needle. The old man nodded and smiled.

"Okay, then. I hope to see you again. Don't overdo it young man."

"Nor you, sir."

Nor you, sir, the old man thought. Could it be that this was a Harvard man disguised as a little person? It garnered a private smile as he buttoned his coat collar, bent into the wind, and headed south.

* * *

"Fries will be on me today. I got paid – twice. Yesterday afternoon and this morning. I love this snow!"

It had been the boy's opening volley as he shed his wraps and slid into 'his' seat opposite the old man.

"Good to see you, too," the old man said kidding the boy about his abrupt entrance.

"Oh. Yes. Hello. Hope you are well. Blah, blah, blah. I earned ten bucks! Max said I did a good job. Actually, I did an excellent job but I figure he will come to recognize that as time goes on."

The report had been delivered with wide eyes. Was that, 'work making the man' thing, coming through or something else, the old man wondered.

"I brought you a story I wrote last night. It's about an old man and a boy and how they set out to slay a dragon on a far off, stark, rocky, mountain top. What do you think of that idea?"

It sounds very interesting – exciting, I imagine."

"There aren't any girls in it. I really don't understand girls well enough to write about them. I'd like to learn, you understand, but until I do, I figure I should stick to writing about what I know."

The old man thought better than to explain to him that males never really understand the female of the species. That fact of life would befall the lad soon enough.

“A good idea. I can assume then that you know all about dragons and stark, rocky, mountain tops?”

The boy grinned.

“About as much as anybody really knows about them, I suppose.”

It was worth a chuckle between them. Max delivered a basket of fries.

“I ordered them on the way in so you couldn't refuse,” the boy said, offering one of his carefully rationed smiles.

“I see you're letting my employee of the week support you now, old man,” Max joked.

“So, he's working out, is he?”

“Best help I've ever had. There may just be a raise in his near future.”

The boy beamed as he followed their faces back and forth during their exchange. He consumed the fries while they talked.

“I gotta go, guys,” he said unexpectedly. “I shop for old Mrs. Alcott on Wednesday afternoon. It's about that time. You tell me what you think of my story tomorrow. I'm hoping it will grow into a book. Be thinking about where that mountain could be, would you? I'm leaning toward the Andes.”

Not waiting for a response, he left, slipping into his coat, hat, and gloves as he approached the front of the cafe. It seemed the old man had been given a homework assignment.

“What do you make of him? Max asked.

“Probably the most normal, fully abnormal kid I've ever met,” the old man answered.

Max nodded, believing he understood the somewhat convoluted description.

The old man was not normally a nosy sort, but something about the boy just called out for somebody to get nosy in his direction.

* * *

According to the boy's application, he lived at 2436 North Main. 2436 North Main, as it turned out, was an abandoned hotel sitting just on the edge of old town – a rapidly deteriorating section of the city. Hardly a mansion and ne'ery a butler in sight.

It was eight o'clock on a very cold Christmas eve. The fallen snow continued to swirl, driven and re-driven by the significant wind that wound its way down and around the streets between the tall buildings. There was a single, faintly lighted window on the second floor. The front door was boarded up. On closer examination, the boards were nailed to the door, not to the frame as it had cleverly been made to appear. The old man let himself in.

It was pitch dark inside. He felt his way up the staircase and approached the door with light showing beneath it. He had no speech prepared. He had no idea what he was going to find.

He knocked.

There was no response.

He knocked again.

The light went off.

"Your limo is here, Sir," he said at last.

There might have been some giggling inside the room. If there had been it ceased immediately.

"I'm going to turn the knob, now."

The old man had no confidence the door would open. Amazed, it did.

The darkness of the hall met the darkness of the room – well, almost. Inside there was a Christmas tree of sorts standing in one corner and lit with a multitude of tiny colored lights. The old man's eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness and he could see relatively well there in the marginal illumination.

"That was funny – the remark about the limo. Sorry I lied to you about stuff, but I don't want to go back to a foster home."

He pointed to a chair at the table. The old man took a seat.

"I liked your story, by the way," he said referring to the dragon piece. "It seems you have another story, also. I'd be pleased to hear it as well."

"I got eggnog. You like some eggnog? It's non-alcoholic. That's the kind Mom liked."

"First fries then eggnog. You are quite the . . . food guy."

The old man couldn't recall the word for which he was really searching – provider, maybe.

“Certainly. What's a Christmas Eve get together without eggnog?”

The carton sat on the window ledge behind the drapes to keep it cool. The room was cold. The boy was bundled up in his coat and hat. In one corner, there was a mattress and a stack of blankets bearing the hotel's name. The beverage was poured. The boy took a seat across from the old man.

“Like at the cafe, huh? You and me sitting across from each other. You like my tree? Found it in the alley behind the bowling alley. Sort of scrawny but with the lights I think it is perfect.”

“I agree. Perfect. Electricity?”

“The security system is still on. I tapped into its electric feed.”

“Very clever. Your story, remember?”

“Long version or short version?”

“Let's try the short one on for size to begin with.”

“Mom died fifteen months ago. She was a live-in maid for the Atherton's – the big Victorian house on Milltown Road, just north of the city. We lived in two rooms in the basement. Only home I ever knew. When she died, they placed me in a foster home – got no relatives – sort of like you, I guess. They had way too many rules. Mom and I had an arrangement. I agreed to use my best judgment and not come home bleeding and she gave me lots of slack. So, I ran away. Left a note saying I was heading for an Uncle's in Canada. Don't know if they believed me but nobody came looking for me – not where I was, anyway. Been here at the hotel for about a year. It's my first Christmas here. I do odd jobs for money. With food banks, it doesn't take much money to feed a scrawny kid like me. I figured showing up at school would just raise way too many questions so I have been teaching myself from books a librarian gives me when they are too worn to circulate. I'm probably way ahead of where I'd be if I were in school doing the work some teacher thought I needed to know. I'm sort of independent that way.”

“I see. How do you explain your perfect English?”

“Willard, the butler at the Atherton's. From England.”

He took an interest in me. We spent lots of time together. He helped me with homework and taught me to play cricket, if you can believe that. I really miss Willard but figure it is best not to put him on the spot by contacting him.”

“I see. You have things pretty well thought out, I guess.”

“I think so. It's hard being a kid all alone, though.”

“I can only imagine.”

They shared a silent moment.

The old man looked around playfully.

“Something seems to be missing here. I just can't put my finger on it.”

The boy understood a game of some sort was taking place.

“Oh. I have it. There are no presents under your tree.”

The boy turned to the tree and his expression saddened. He shrugged.

“But I got a tree. That's good, right? And egnog.”

“It is very good.”

The old man rubbed his chest.

“What's this? There seems to be something in my inside coat pocket. What do you suppose it could be?”

The boy's interest peaked. He broke a smile.

“I don't know what it could be.”

“Perhaps you could help me. Here, I'll hold the coat open and you reach in and take out whatever you find in there.”

The boy's smile grew. He did as had been suggested.

“It's something all wrapped like a Christmas present.”

“Really? Who's it for?”

“There's a card. It says” TO: The cocoa drinking, fry eating, cheeseburger devouring, snow shoveling boy with no name.”

“Gee. Who do you suppose that could be?”

“That's me, er, I.”

“Well, then I suppose you should open it. You want to guess what it is, first?”

“It's not very well disguised – it's a book – a hardback book about an inch and a half thick.”

“Let's see if you're right.”

The boy was enjoying the byplay. He carefully removed the cellophane tape and peeled back and saved the paper.

"It is a book. It's a Thesaurus!"

"And you know what a Thesaurus is?"

"Of course. A book of synonyms like writers use. Thank you. I don't have anything for you."

"Why you already gave me mine. The delicious eggnog. The first I've had this season and thank you, by the way."

The boy opened the book.

"There's a message written inside the cover: To the boy with no name. Be sure I get a copy of your first published book."

"I'll do that. Thank you so much."

The boy's smile faded as he looked around his room.

"Now what? Cops? Juvie? A foster home? I have to warn you. I will run away from anywhere you put me."

"Do me one favor, first, then, will you?"

"I guess, if I can, but no promises."

"Come with me. I want to take you for a ride."

"You got a car?"

"Sort of a car. It's down on the street."

They were soon on the sidewalk. There was no car.

"What gives here, old man?"

The old man pointed down the block. Two headlights lit and headed their way.

"It's a limo."

"So it is. We'll sit in back."

"I don't get any of this, old man. A down and out old guy with a limo?"

The old man put his finger to his lips. They drove on in silence for ten minutes, finally turning into the circular drive that led to a huge house behind a tall rock wall. The car stopped.

"What is this all about?" the boy asked as he surveyed the mansion with obvious interest.

"It's a little place I call home."

"This is yours? You're putting me on."

They got out. The old man pointed to the only window that was lit. It was on the second floor.

“That's a boy's room up there. Hasn't been occupied for over thirty years. I thought you might like to try it on for size. If it seems to fit, then we can see what next step we might be able to take.”

“Me live here with you?”

“I thought that was what I just said. You must learn to listen better if you're ever going to become a good writer, young man.”

They exchanged a face to face smile. The boy moved close to the old man and put his arm around his waist. He began nodding.

“Mom would have approved of you – whether you're homeless or rich.”

“And my family would have approved of you – whether you're rich or homeless.”

They shared another smile. There would be many more of them in the wonder-filled years to come.

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STORY FIVE
A Christmas to Remember
We each have that special one.
by Tom Gnagey
© 2013

“Sometimes you grown-ups spend too much time being sensible instead of being smart!”

That had been the final volley in ten-year-old, Brian Woods’ tirade at the supper table that cold, early October evening. It had all related to the boy’s questions about why he had never been allowed to see his Grampa Woods. Questions had never been answered satisfactorily, in fact, unless they had begun in deviously disguised phrases, his questions had never been allowed to be asked.

Brian had garnered bits of pieces of related information – some from eavesdropping on adult conversations and some from things his older brother and sister had told him. There had been a falling out of some unspecified nature, between his dad and grampa, back at some unspecified time and continued full blown for some unspecified reason to that very day. It was Brian’s contention that nothing was more important than family and if Grampa had been excluded from his life by the other adults, without his approval, it was like a crime against humanity – at least the part of humanity he knew to be his family.

If Brian had one outstanding characteristic that nobody in his family would deny, it was that he seemed to have been born a determined lad. When he first began eating solid food and figured out he hated mashed peas, he would manage to

spit them out even while continuing to enjoy the sweet potatoes into which his mother had mixed them. When he figured it was time to remove his training wheels, he did it himself – clandestinely – over his father's objections and immediately rode off like an experienced pro. When his request to study pirates rather than tall masted ships in 4th grade history was denied, he arrived to deliver his oral report in full pirate get-up, complete with black bandana cinching down his hair, matching eye patch, long black coat secured with a wide belt and huge shiny skull and crossbones buckle, and most miraculously in the eyes of his enchanted classmates, a genuine peg leg. (How did he do that!) His fully exciting report, delivered in authentic pirate brogue, complete with sword rattling and some jumping from table to table was accepted by his teacher and received an A (although, in Brian's opinion it deserved an A+).

So, if Brian Woods wanted a grampa in his life, there would be a grampa in his life. Nobody in that kitchen doubted it. Everybody in that kitchen shuddered at the prospect. The rift in the family may have for some reason been sensible, but there was most certainly nothing smart about crossing one determined Master Brian Woods.

Actually, he knew several things about the man in question: his birthdate (which made him just shy of seventy), the fact that his father had grown up on the East side of the city (a working-class area), his first name (Wayne), that he had been a jeweler by trade (a maker of custom rings), and a tournament level chess player. Brian's dad played chess and had taught him. It was one thing they treasured between them, their Sunday morning game. The two of them truly got on very well, sharing interests in reading, tennis, and ice skating and the boy had reason to believe his grampa had been some sort of champion ice skater.

There were two things on the East Side that the boy was counting on to help him in his search. He had a cousin that lived just outside the east edge of the city. It was near a wonderful skating pond – thirty yards wide and nearly a hundred long, all hidden within a beautiful little woods. Large as it was it remained secluded and unknown but to a few, primarily because it was on family property. Brian was

allowed to visit his cousin on weekends and during the winter months they would skate their young hearts out. Sometimes his father would join him. Those were the two things – his ability to visit his cousin on the East Side and the ice skating. He figured his grampa's interest in skating meant he just might show up there at the family pond, either to skate or at least to watch and reminisce about the olden days. That hope, of course, he kept to himself.

The first snow storm and deep freeze of the winter occurred a bit earlier than usual – the last week in October. Brian was there ready to skate the day the ice was pronounced thick enough to be safe. He and his cousin, Vinnie, had their routine. Years before they had built an over-sized rock circle in which to keep a campfire safely contained. During the summer, they cut enough wood to last through the longest of skating seasons and stacked it close by. Quite creatively they had built the north half the circle of rocks six feet high so it would reflect the heat to the south where they had fashioned places to sit and recline. The little wall also diverted the north wind in a rather successful fashion around the area. All in all, it was very comfortable – cozy even if anything outdoors could be considered cozy at five above zero.

During that first visit in October the boys could see that their place had been used recently – partially burned logs on still dry white ashes remained within the circle. For Vinnie, it was more than a little unsettling – thinking some stranger might be lurking around their spot. For Brian, it was exciting – perhaps a tramp that had traveled the world with wonderful tales to relate. They were cousins not clones.

They re-laid the kindling and soon had a small blaze working its magic. Next, they built a semi-circular snow wall to the south about four feet high. It was far enough away from the fire so it would not melt but close enough to help contain the warmth within that little area. On one end of it they carved out an area into which they unloaded cans of pop, hotdogs, and a few other perishable items. It was covered by two small logs to keep the animals out. While they were away skating, the fire would warm the stones and create a very friendly place to which they could return.

The warmth often attracted birds that would perch atop the stone wall, and squirrels that for some reason forgot to hibernate. The boys would take seeds for the birds and nuts for the squirrels. That day, when they returned from their first extended session on the ice, there was another creature occupying their spot.

“Hi. I’m Brian. This is our spot, but you’re welcome to stay.”

Vinnie was not at all sure he was welcome to stay so hung back a bit. Brian moved to the old man in the ragged clothes who was sitting on a log warming his hands.

“That’s very kind, Brian. I’m Wally.”

“You’re old.”

“That’s relative.”

“I don’t understand.”

Vinnie mustered some courage – or gave in to the cold – and joined them on the log with the old man between them. Wally attempted an explanation of his ‘relative’ comment.

“I am older than I was yesterday, but I am younger than I will be tomorrow and much younger than I will be ten years from now. So, like I said, old is a relative concept.”

“You talk like a professor,” Brian said.

The old man shrugged and pointed to the setting.

“This your handiwork – the circle, the wall, the snow bank?”

Yes, sir. OURS,” Vinnie added as if suggesting the old geezer should skedaddle.

“I’ve used it a few times – mostly during warmer weather. I thank you for having constructed it. Hoped someday I’d get to meet the folks to whom it belonged.”

More professor talk.

“And now you have,” Vinnie added, continuing his ‘you are not welcome here’ campaign.

“I didn’t catch your name, young man,” Wally said turning in Vinnie’s direction and offering his hand.

“I’m Vinnie. Me and Brian are cousins and my dad knows exactly where we are. He may even come up to check on us pretty soon.”

“He sounds like a wise man.”

“How’s that?”

“Giving you boys your head to develop this place on your own and allow you to enjoy it here together. He clearly trusts you. That’s how it needs to be between fathers and sons.”

“You sure your name is Wally?” Brian asked noticing for the first time the pair of skates at the far end of the log.

“My birth certificate reads, Walter, but the last time I was referred to by the name was when my father told the nurse what to enter on that document. Been Wally ever since. Why do you ask?”

“No special reason.”

“Of course, there is a special reason or the question wouldn’t have been asked.”

“Okay. I’m sort of on a quest to find my grandfather and he’d be about your age and he liked to skate and he’d know about this pond.”

“I see. Your grandfather is missing?”

“Has been all my life. It makes me mad that my mom and dad won’t come clean about him.”

“Come clean?”

“Tell me why they won’t let me see him.”

The old man nodded as if to say it had been a good response. Brian was pleased that he had apparently made his point so easily.

“I suppose he has a name – your grandfather.”

“Wayne – Wayne Woods.”

“A nice alliteration, Wayne Woods. You know alliteration?”

“I think it means when words that set together begin with the same sounds.”

“Close enough. Take my name, Wally Troskivich. Nothing. Just sits there, hanging out all quite pathetically.”

“I’m Vinnie Vernacky. That’s like your literation thing, right.”

“It certainly is. And a great one – same sound pattern front and end. Vinnie Vernacky. Truly great!”

Vinnie was suddenly more comfortable. He relaxed and put a good-sized log on the fire.

“We got hot dogs and chips and pop,” Brian said. “Be glad to share.”

“I’ll tell you, a hot dog sounds wonderful. I haven’t had a hot dog in a decade.”

“That’s how long Vinnie and I have been alive.”

“Got sticks for roasting?”

“Sure do. Behind the snow bank.”

Brian got the hot dogs and buns. Vinnie got the sticks. Wally, with deliberate care, skewered a hot dog onto each stick, handing the first two to the boys. It seemed like a very important thing to the old man – like it was full of wonderful memories.

“Sorry, but we don’t have catsup or mustard. We figured it was better to fill up the room those would take in our backpacks with candy bars.”

“The old condiment vs. candy dilemma. I fully agree with your position. Who needs condiments when there can be candy?”

It seemed an odd statement but both boys nodded their agreement.

They roasted mostly in silence. The old man held his high above the flames doing the slow roast thing. Vinnie’s was a bit closer to the fire. Brian’s was smack dab in the middle of the leaping flames.

“I get mine charred,” he remarked as if in explanation.

“However, you like it, I suppose,” Wally said.

“Oh, he don’t like it that way,” Vinnie said. “He’s just too impatient to wait and do it right. Wait til you see how he destroys marshmallows!”

It was cause for chuckles all around.

The old man became serious and turned to Brian.

“So, you say your parents won’t tell you about your grandfather?”

“Right. Like I said it makes me mad.”

“Perhaps they have good reason to keep it from you.”

“Can’t see how there can be a good reason.”

“I suppose you can’t – until you know the reason.”

“I hadn’t thought about it that way. You mean if I did know the reason I might understand why it’s all like it is.”

The old man nodded and drew his hot dog close for examination. He moved it back into the heat.

“Still, it doesn’t seem fair.”

“What is fair? Would it be fair to tell you the truth when it could only possibly be upsetting to you? Would it be fair to tell you if it put another of your loved ones in a bad light – like if they had harmed the person in some way? Would it be fair to tell you if they really didn’t know and could only speculate?”

“You have a way of destroying a guy’s lifelong resentment about it. I feel sort of empty about it. I guess I feel sort of ashamed, too. I should have just accepted their judgment about it all.”

“Should is another of those pesky words that gets in the way of really understanding things. It’s an all or nothing word. I don’t like all or nothing words. They don’t leave room for new information or rethinking things.”

“What’s a better word?”

The old man thought for some time, while he slid his hotdog off the stick and into a bun – a bun without catsup or mustard.

“Perhaps and possibly are two really great words. Put one of them in front of should, for example, and it changes the whole tone of things. It suddenly opens up lots and lots of eventualities – prospects – possibilities.”

“You mean like, ‘Perhaps, I should have just accepted their judgment about it all’.”

“How does that change it for you?”

“It makes me understand there may be some alternatives to how I’ve been thinking about it all. It’s like it gives me permission to search for some other or some additional meaning.”

“Not only permission, but maybe requirement. Too many folks stop thinking way before they should. They just accept the first thing that makes sense. That way they can never be sure if there may be something better or more true, or more helpful.”

The conversation made Vinnie very uncomfortable. The conversation opened up wonderful new possibilities for Brian.

“How do you know about this place?” Vinnie asked.

“I played here when I was a boy and a teenager. Kissed my first girl under that big Oak tree over there.”

“Yuck!”

It had been a pointed, finger down the throat, soprano, duet.

“I tend to forget how it was at your age. Forgive me. I certainly didn’t intend to yuck up your morning.”

Brian smiled, appreciating his sense of humor. It went over Vinnie’s head.

“So, it’s possible you knew my grampa as a boy, right?”

“Are you trying to put me on the spot, young man?”

“Probably. It’s like been my mission in life since I was eight. It’s going to be difficult to shake.”

The old man nodded. Vinnie offered a second round of hotdogs. The old man waved it off. Brian was up for it. That time he held his stick a bit higher. He didn’t notice.

“I didn’t know if I’d like you or not,” Brian said. “I haven’t had the chance to be around many old people – ones that are older than they were yesterday but younger than they’ll be in ten years.”

Even Vinnie joined in the chuckle that provoked.

“Have you formed an opinion – you aren’t required to tell me what it is.”

“I like you. You only seem old on the outside. Want to skate after while? I assume those are your skates.”

“I came with the full intention of skating but once here it didn’t seem like such a good idea. My old bones are not up to it.”

“Sounds like a ‘should’ thing to me.”

“What. I don’t understand.”

“I hear you saying, ‘at my age my old bones should not be up to it.’”

The old man nodded.

“You have a very clever, quick mind, young man. Do you also offer suggestions or just observations?”

“Vinnie and I are here. We can help hold, push, pull – whatever you need.”

Vinnie entered the conversation.

“I got a cell phone if we need to call 911.”

It called for private raised eyebrows between Wally and Brian.

“By golly! Why not? I came to do it. Perhaps, I should.”

They spent the next hour on the pond. The promised

holding, pushing and pulling was not needed. They boys were amazed at the way the old man moved across the ice – forward, backward, circles, bent at the waist one foot glides.

“You are very good, sir. Can you teach us to jump a log. Vinnie’s big brother can jump logs but he won’t show us how.”

Before the afternoon was over the two boys were jumping not only one log but three at a time. They felt like Icecapade professionals. They learned two secrets: always gain just the right amount of speed before the jump and never leap higher than absolutely necessary. Those would-be lessons that would serve them well on many fronts later in life.

The boys offered supper but Wally insisted he needed to go. He stood.

“Will you be back? When will we see you again?” Brian asked.

He had come to like the man and feel close to him in just those few hours. It was as if all his hopes about a grampa had suddenly surfaced and attached themselves to the old gentleman.

“I’m on my way south for the winter. This early cold spell caught me off guard. Perhaps next winter. Thank you for your several kindnesses. I have had an exceptionally good time here with you today, but now I need to hit the trail along the river. Hope to be in Georgia by Thanksgiving.”

“But I don’t want you to go. It looks like you’re the closest thing to a grampa I’m ever going to get.”

“It sounds like your mission has been put on the back burner.”

“Like I said before, your good advice pretty well scrubbed my mission. I’m not sure what to do. I’d like to talk with you more – lots more.”

Wally reached out and put his long arms on Brian’s shoulders.

“Love the family you have. Appreciate them and help them and comfort them and grow yourself into a person they will all be proud of. I’m sure that’s what your grandfather would want. By the way, will you care for my skates until I return? They are quite a burden on such a long hike.”

He handed them to Brian, then stooped down and

picked up the small bag he had with him and slung it over his shoulder. He nodded at each boy, turned, and walked down the hill into the woods.

Although Brian believed the encounter should have buoyed him up, improved his outlook and raised his spirits, it hadn't. During the next weeks, he felt a sadness overtake him. He did stop asking about his grandfather. For the first time, he had to be pushed to do his homework and chores around the house. He became quiet and almost passive. His family took note.

As Christmas grew near, his parents became concerned to the point his father called his sister – Vinnie's mother – to ask if she knew about anything unpleasant that might have happened when Brian and his cousin were together at the pond skating. She had no information but said she would look into it and get back to him.

It was the holiday tradition in Brian's family that they each handcrafted a gift for each other. In other years, it had been a joyous undertaking for him, but that year, although he went through the motions, it had lost its luster. He had always made a gift for his grampa – some out of hope and some in simple defiance of his parents.

Christmas Eve arrived. His father asked him to ride with him in the car while he delivered several things his mother had baked for friends. Reluctantly, he agreed.

By the time they arrived back home, it would be time to open the presents, have eggnog and fruit cake, and stand around the piano and sing carols as his mother played.

As they pulled to a stop in their driveway, Brian sighed deeply.

"I'm sorry if I've been a brat the past month, Dad. I just can't get into the holiday spirit this year. Things on my mind. Private stuff."

"Don't worry about it," his father said. "We all have times like that in our lives. They pass. Perhaps, you'll find something this Christmas Eve that will help get you back on track."

There was that word again – perhaps. Brian felt fortunate there was no lecture associated with it – like, 'you should try to snap out of it for everybody's sake.'

Oddly, Brian thought, his father walked on ahead, not waiting for him to get out of the car, which had always been the arrangement – kids and mom first and then dad at the rear.

The inside door was standing open when Brian arrived. He pulled open the storm door and stepped into the living room closing the inside door behind him. His mom was there. His brother and sister were there. His dad stood behind his mother and flipped the switch that lit the tree that stood in the front window just to Brian's left.

"Merry Christmas," came their cheery greeting.

It was followed by a moment of silence, as if, perhaps, Brian was expected to say something. That was when it happened.

The voice that came from behind the tree seemed somehow familiar. It wasn't until he put the voice together with the words that he understood.

"Hey, young man. I think I'd like that second hotdog, now."

A tall figure stepped out from beyond the tree. Brian's face lit up.

"Wally! How in the . . . I don't even care how."

He moved quickly toward the old man and melted into his outstretched arms. He understood. For some reason that was not his to know, his grampa was not to be a part of his life, so, Wally had somehow been located and run in as a substitute – well, not a substitute. Wally was Wally and that was that.

His father spoke.

"Wally has agreed to stick around until you learn how to properly roast a hotdog, whatever that may mean."

Brian looked up into Wally's face.

"You need to know right now that perhaps I will never learn to do that properly."

The two of them chuckled together. The others smiled, not really understanding. That was the Christmas Brian would remember forever (well, so would Wally who all quite unexpectedly had a wonderful, handmade gift awaiting him under the tree.).

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**STORY SIX:
AND THEN . . .
A short story
by
Tom Gnagey**

"Shoo, Kid! Scat! Vamoose! Get away from me and stay away from me! Move on down the street. I don't want you here. You're a class 'A' little pest and a pain in the behind. Surely you can understand what I'm saying, right?"

The boy beamed into the face of the young man in the wheelchair.

"Thanks for inviting conversation with a question that way. I'm sorry if I seem to be like that to you. I'm really not and you'd know that if you'd just take time to get to know me. And, since you are going to be my dad and I am going to be your son, you really should try harder in all of this, you know!"

It had been one of a dozen such exchanges between the ever smiling, always smudged face, soon to be homeless, nine-year-old, Erby, and Jack, the wheelchair ridden, twenty-four-year-old, recently returned disabled veteran, and new street person. Erby's ever present, cavernous, black fedora sitting atop his rail thin frame presented an interesting contrast to Jack's scalp squeezing, reverse set, ball cap, dwarfed by his muscular upper body.

Jack was the twelfth in a series of candidates for father that Erby had investigated since he learned his single mother was dying. From the time he'd been old enough to walk, she had really never been well enough to care for him. If truth be known, it had been more him taking care of her. Still, he

understood the need for an adult in his life and being a boy he figured a man would be best.

"I brought lunch," Erby announced, lowering his backpack to the sidewalk and kneeling beside it. "P B and J. I know you like peanut butter but wasn't sure if you liked strawberry or apricot jam best, so I made one of each. I like em' both so I'll take the one you don't pick."

"I'm not going to eat your food, Pest."

Erby assumed that meant Jack had no preference so he placed the strawberry combo on the man's lap.

"Only had one box of juice in the fridge so I figure we can share that and then finish out with water. I brought a bottle that I filled up at home. Me and Mom are against havin' to toss all those plastic drink containers. Has to be bad for the planet's health, you know."

He continued talking as he struggled to stick the straw into the box.

"I'm told this is the old part of the city. Never been much beyond 43rd street north and 21st south. All that looks about like this. Maybe there's just a extra big old part to this city."

Having finally won the battle with the juice box, he handed it to Jack.

"You can drink first. Everybody says I'm healthy as a horse so if you got germs I figure my system will kill 'em off. Wouldn't want to infect the guy that's gonna be my dad, you understand."

Jack accepted the juice without comment. It was a hot June day and the canyons of city streets trapped and magnified the heat. Erby nodded, strictly for his own benefit, accepting Jack's sudden change in behavior as full agreement about the proposed family arrangement. Jack shook the box to ascertain how much was left and handed it back to Erby. He then picked up the sandwich. He told himself it was just to shut the kid up but in reality, he was hungry.

"You got a name, Pest?"

"Erby."

"What kind of a name is Erby?"

"It's short for Herbert. Me, my dad, and my grandpa all have that name. Grampa was called Herb. Dad was called

Bert. I figured I deserved something just for me so I went with Erby."

"You named yourself?"

"You'll find I tend to look out for my own interests."

"Where are they, your dad and grandpa?"

"Dead. Grampa from old age. Dad from the war."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's not a problem. I never knew my grandpa and Dad died when I was still in diapers. That's what mom says."

"Good sandwich. Thanks. Just don't make this a habit. I'm only eating to hush up your whining about stuff."

Erby wisely chose not to respond, but smiled to himself.

"Shouldn't you be in school?"

"First of all, it's summer vacation. Second, it's Saturday. Third, I only go to school just enough to stay out of major trouble. I figure after five years in school I know just about everything that's useful. Schools ain't big on useful, you know. I can read and write and do my numbers up through long division and fractions. The best thing about school is Kenny and Butchy – my two best friends – but I can really do more with them away from school so that's a wash, I'd say."

"You talk like an old man, Pest."

"It's been said before. I'm not sure what it means. This is me and that's just how it is. I like me how I am. I figure I'll stay pretty much this way until I hit thirteen. I've noticed it's about then that guys start wanting to hang around girls and frankly from there on it seems like life goes downhill fast for us."

Jack chuckled.

"What? That was nice to hear you laugh like that. Tell me why and I'll try to keep it up – whatever it was."

"You like to hear me laugh?"

"Never heard it before. Yeah. It's great. You seem so sad all the time. Laughing is a good sign. Hard to be sad and laugh all at the same time. See. I'm good for you."

"You're a pest, that's what you are."

"You got a girl friend?"

"Had one once."

"Why do you say once?"

"When I came back like this she dumped me."

"I'm sorry. I'll never dump you. You can count on that. What is wrong with you, by the way?"

"Paraplegic. Got shot in the lower spine. Can't use my legs. Can't use anything from my waist down."

"You can still pee, I hope, or else you'd explode, I suppose."

Again, Jack chuckled.

"I got hit just below my peeing center, I guess. I can manage all those kinds of functions."

"I'm sure that makes life better for you."

"Better? Knowing my butt will be welded to this blasted chair for the rest of my life?"

"I didn't mean to upset you. I just meant it's better to be able to pee and stuff than not to."

Jack shrugged clearly never having given much consideration to the positive pee-factor before.

"Well, I got to get back to Mom. She forgets to eat if I'm not there to remind her. She's lost so much weight I keep telling her she needs to eat."

"Lost weight?"

"She has lung cancer. I heard her and one of her friends talking and she told her that she only had a few months to live. She asked her if she'd take care of me after she died. I didn't hear if she said yes or no. Don't get me wrong. Her friend is okay, I guess, but she's a girl and I'm pretty sure I'll do better with a guy."

"You do realize that you aren't going to have any say so in who you have to go live with, don't you? That's how the system works, believe me."

"Not now, maybe, but when you tell them you want me for your son and I tell them I want you for my dad, I'm sure they'll listen."

"You don't even know who they are, do you?"

"One of the they's is Miss Parsons. She's come a couple of times to talk about stuff with Mom. I was supposed to go visit someplace with her today but I cut out. Can't risk having her just dump me off somewhere, you understand. I'm going to have my say in it all."

"My suggestion to you, Erby, is go home and see what the Parsons lady has to offer. It might be pretty good."

"This is so great?"

"What?" Jack said clearly confused.

"You giving me advice just like a real dad would do. Me telling you my problems and you helping me out. We are going to be so good together."

"You didn't hear a word I just said."

"Yes, I did. You care about me and want my life to go good. I figure that's a really big first step toward you loving me like a dad."

"You are exasperating, Pest! You know what that means?"

Erby's response was delivered in a mechanical monotone.

"To rile, anger, annoy, provoke. I've been called it so often I looked it up. I don't intend to be any of those ways so I figure there's just something wrong with the people who see me like that. I'll help you get over it, whatever it is."

Jack looked away wishing the lad had selected any other street in the city on which to go dad hunting.

Erby tucked the water bottle in beside Jack and patted his leg.

"You'll need water if you're going to sit out here all day. I'll bring you more later on. We can begin to make plans."

"There will be no plans. Please just stop this before you get your heart broken over it."

"See! There you go again, caring about me. I think we've made a lot of progress this morning, Jack."

"Ugh!"

Jack raised his arms and pounded the air as if beating on the gods that were allowing this to happen.

"Oh, I've been meaning to ask you why you carry that short length of hose on the side of your chair – a chair we really need to clean up soon, by the way."

"I keep it there to beat small boys who insist on pestering me."

"I'm sure that isn't true. For defense against muggers, maybe. That's my best guess. I'll see you this afternoon."

Erby entered the third-floor apartment through the window from the long-rusted metal fire escape in back. He wanted to make sure Miss Parsons wasn't there. After a brief,

belly to the floor, reconnaissance mission, he determined it was just he and his mother.

"Lunch time, Mom," he announced removing his hat and kneeling down beside the couch where she was lying.

She reached out and brushed his hair back from his forehead.

"You forgot to take a bath again."

"Not really. I knew I was not taking one."

She smiled.

"You need to keep clean. They'll think I'm not able to take care of you if they see you dirty and your hair standing out every which way like it is."

There was that word again, they, and twice in one sentence.

"After I make you some soup, I'll go take a bath, then. You're the best mom ever. Cream of chicken or chicken noodle?"

"You always do a good job of picking. Surprise me."

Erby selected the cream of chicken thinking anything with cream in it was probably better for her. His logic was actually superior to most his age. He just didn't have a very broad base of knowledge from which to launch it or test it.

While his mother sipped at the soup, Erby disrobed and left for the bathroom. He scrubbed himself like no nine-year-old boy had ever scrubbed himself before. He washed his hair and even his ears—behind as well inside. Whether the progressively intensifying facial grimaces were a necessary part of the process or a natural reaction to excruciating pain caused by the soft, soapy, washcloth was not immediately evident. Nobody – especially 'they'— was going to say his mom wasn't able to take care of him.

He dripped his way back into the living room toweling himself top to bottom. His mother finished drying his hair and did what she could to comb it.

"Should be clean clothes in your dresser, as infrequently as you change."

He was soon back fully clothed looking church-going spotless.

"I met a guy," he said snuggling in close to her as she sat there leaning back on the couch.

"A guy? I've told you to be careful out there."

"He's a paraplegic; that means he can't use his legs. He can still pee, though. If he couldn't, I suppose he'd be a para-pee-a-plegic. He's in a wheelchair. He's younger than you but I've decided he'll make a good dad after . . . you know."

"They won't let you choose a dad like you choose soup off the shelf."

"That's what he says. It's why I think I need for you two to meet so you can approve of him and give me to him."

"It's just not that easy, Herbert."

There was a hint of resentment in his response.

"People have been saying that to me for most of my life and I've almost never found it to be true. Will you just meet him at least? For me?"

"You drive a hard bargain, young man."

"I know. I think it's one of my best things, so far. That and kissing girls."

"You kiss the girls?"

"Of course, not. Geeze! I was just kidding. I hoped it would make you laugh."

"Then, thanks for the try. I'm sure I will smile about it often."

—"So, then, when will you meet Jack?"

"This is really important to you, isn't it?"

"Other than getting born by you I suppose it's just about the biggest thing ever."

"Okay. How about tomorrow morning, about ten?"

"I'll set it up. How about down at the bottom of the stairs here in our building. He can't come up. He's in a wheelchair."

"And this will be okay with Jack?"

"Probably not but if I wait around until things are okay with everybody I'll likely be left out in the cold."

It brought tears to his mother's eyes.

"I didn't mean it the way you took it. I just want to have some say-so in all this. I want to do it with you. I want to help you find me just the right person. I've already discarded eleven that I've looked over so it ain't like I'm rushin' into it."

"You have been a busy boy, I guess. It's set for ten

then. You understand I'm not promising anything and more than that I really doubt if it can possibly change anything."

"That's a deal," Erby said fully ignoring her attempt to keep him within the bounds of reality. "It just seems right that you should meet him before he becomes my new dad."

With some effort, she stood and went into her bedroom, sobbing quietly.

"I'll go set it up with Jack," Erby called after her, always feeling helpless when she cried.

She closed the door. Erby went into his room and searched for a comb to carry. He figured he could never know when one of the theys might be spying on him. The one he found was way too long. That presented no problem. He soon had it broken in two, slid the shorter section into his back pocket, and was out the window and down the fire escape. It wasn't that he didn't like wearing clean clothes; it was the necessarily, careful, approach to life required to keep them that way that he found so irritating and distasteful.

It took a half hour to locate Jack. It often seemed to Erby that the man enjoyed playing hide and seek with him. He was rolling down a brick-paved alley in the other direction.

"Hey, Jack. Wait up."

Jack didn't stop.

Erby ran full out to catch him. He arrived puffing and smiling construing it as having been a great game of chase.

Jack stopped. Erby spoke.

"I got great news."

"Who are you? I don't know you. Clean face. Combed hair. Neat clothes. Like I said, I don't know you."

"It's Erby. Of course, you know me. This is the cleaned-up version."

He did the swirling, turn-around thing, then tipped his hat and bowed.

"I must say you clean up pretty well."

"There you go carin' again. Mom says she will be happy to meet you tomorrow morning at ten at the bottom of the front stairs in our building."

"What? You make it sound like I asked you to set it up. I didn't. I don't have any reason to meet your mother. I swear. You're like a run-away steam roller, Pest."

"I know you'll like her. She's pretty and has great hair. She's a little thin now, but she can dress so you hardly notice that except in her cheeks. I wrote the address and time on this piece of paper and I'll put it in your pouch here."

Jack threw up his arms and sat there speechless as Erby worked at unzipping and re-zipping the pouch. The boy avoided direct eye contact but took Jack's silence as a good sign. He changed the subject before the man could begin objecting all over again.

"What's in the black case on the back of your rig?"

The unexpected characterization of his chair provoked an unplanned chuckle.

"Well, what's in it?"

"My Sax."

"Why do you need so many sacks?"

"No, no. Not sacks like bags, sax— s-a-x —like in horn, a reed instrument, a musical instrument, technically a baritone saxophone."

Erby shrugged.

"Sorry. I'm lost."

"Put it on my lap. I'll open it and show you, but then you have to skedaddle out of here."

Erby had always been quite selective about which directives he would and would not follow and figured if he didn't indicate agreement he had no responsibility in such matters. With some effort, he managed the heavy case up onto Jack's lap.

Jack opened it. The instrument gleamed like gold. It was the shiniest thing Erby had ever seen.

"Can I touch it, please?"

"The manners come out when you really want something, huh?"

Erby smiled into Jack's face enjoying the man's playful side.

"I guess. I got 'em. Just don't want to use 'em all up at such a tender age. It makes music, you say?"

"No. It makes sounds. I make music."

Erby wasn't sure he understood the difference but again he chose not to pursue it. Choosing his battles well, was his third best thing, second, discounting girl kissing. Jack

lifted the saxophone from the case and slipped on the mouthpiece. As if a well-practiced routine between them, Erby closed and removed the case to make room for Jack to manipulate the instrument. He positioned it in front of him and licked at the reed in the mouthpiece. Then it happened.

Jack began to blow. It was the mellowest, most beautiful, music Erby thought he had ever heard. He had soon sunk down onto the brick pavement. He sat there cross-legged, his arms supporting him to the rear, fully enthralled by what was unfolding.

When he stopped, Erby had to ask.

“What was that? I never heard it before.”

“Rhapsody in Blue.”

“It was the most beautiful piece I’ve ever heard. How can you do that by just blowing into a fat pipe and pushing buttons?”

Erby stood to again examine the instrument.

“Years of practice. It has always been my passion.”

“Passion?”

“First love, obsession, infatuation.”

“Too many big words, but I think I got the meaning. It’s pretty much what you’ve always lived for.”

“That’s really a better way of putting it than what I said. You’re an intriguing character, Erby, I’ll say that much.”

“After we’re family will you teach me how to make music with the sax?”

“You have to get the family thing out of your head, boy. How could I possibly take care of you? I have no place to live. I have no job. I’m a cripple and always will be. The government insists I’m dead, for gosh sakes. Nobody in their right mind would let me be responsible for a kid.”

“I would and that’s really all that counts. I got ways of making money and I’m used to taking care of my parent.”

“Well, I’m not used to being taken care of by anybody and I don’t intend to let a little snotty nosed, ragamuffin, begin doing it now.”

“You’re being unreasonable, you know. You need a little help. I love to help. Almost a year ago, now, mom put in for a first-floor apartment. She has trouble climbing the stairs and there ain’t no elevator. It should be comin’ through for us

any day.”

“Isn’t any elevator.”

“Right, there ain’t no elevator.”

“I mean the correct way to have said it was, ‘there isn’t any,’ not, ‘there ain’t no’.”

“You sound like a teacher.”

“You sound like maybe you haven’t learned everything there is to learn in school after all.”

Erby spread a protracted grin and shrugged, sheepishly.

“What?” Jack asked.

As soon as he asked the question he kicked himself. The boy had a way of sinking his tentacles into every minute crack before Jack realized what was happening.

“That sounded an awful lot like love to me, Jack. I’ll be so happy when I can start calling you dad instead of Jack.”

“We have to stop this right now, Kid.”

“Erby. You should have said, Erby.”

Jack frowned. Erby explained.

“Well if you can correct my talkin’ I figure I should have the right to correct yours.”

“I’ll tell you what, E r b y; I will be at your place tomorrow morning at ten but only so I can get things straightened out with your mother.”

“Her name is Virginia. I figured knowing that should make it easier to get conversation started. I don’t know your last name.”

“That’s right. You don’t.”

“Mine is Roberts, Erby Roberts.”

“You’re kidding me. That’s mine as well.”

Erby smiled believing it was a sign that the proposed merger had been foreordained. He explained further.

“Herbert MacAloney Roberts, to be complete about it. Mom’s maiden name got stuck in there on the birth certificate. I figure it had to be a typo but I can live with it. I tell folks my middle name is Mack.”

“I can see why you prefer Erby. I’ll tell you a secret I don’t usually share with others. My first is actually Johnathalia, a combination of my father and mother’s first names.”

“Pardon me but that is really awful, Jack.”

“I’m sure they thought it was a wonderful gift, giving me something from each of them that way.”

“That reminds me. One of the first things we’re going to have to do after you become my dad it is to have that birds and bees talk. I’ve picked up pieces here and there but all it’s done is leave me confused and nauseated. You do know about the birds and the bees, don’t you?”

“Yes. I know. But you should ask your mother.”

“I’ve tried. She always says she’s too tired and goes to bed. If the talk is that exhausting I figure I probably need to undergo it with a strong, sturdy, man.”

“I can see the advantages of that, I guess. Maybe a counselor at school, then?”

“I doubt if Mr. Mostly – we call him Mr. Ghostly – knows much about it. Anyway, he’s mostly just there to yell at kids like me.”

Jack let the attempt at humor slide.

“Like you?”

“Not showing up for school, asking questions the teachers don’t want to answer – or can’t, changing the assignments so I’m at least spending my time doing something useful, singing out when I’m happy, trying to check out books that are above the fourth-grade reading list in the library. Things like that.”

“You do like to be in control of things, don’t you?”

“Not so much a matter of like. I’ve just always had to be. Grownups generally seem pretty ineffective when it comes to relating well with a smart kid. I wouldn’t be here talking with you if I hadn’t took over things at home long ago. If you want to survive and get ahead, you have to do it yourself and not depend on other people. I find most people are pretty lazy when it comes to helping out others – even those whose job it is. I’m not complaining, mind you, I’m just glad I discovered it way back while I was still a little kid.”

“Help me get this sax back into its case and stow it on the rear of my . . . rig,” Jack said shifting topics.

“You really need to find a place to clean up and get ready to meet my mother tomorrow. You’ll feel better.”

“You’re probably right.”

“There’s a tub and shower in the basement of my building. Used to be the Super’s place. I can fix a couple of planks to get you in and out. It’s only two steps. Can you get yourself in and out of a tub?”

“I had lots of practice back when I was in the hospital. My arms have become pretty strong.”

He flexed one. Erby felt it.

“Wow! I’ll say strong. I’ll need to get soap and towels from my place. First, though, let’s get you down into that basement.”

“I bet you’d do this even if I wasn’t on your list of potential dads, wouldn’t you?”

Erby nodded.

“Evenin’ things out.”

“I don’t understand the term.”

“It’s a Erby original I guess. It’s just about being a good person. Sometimes I sneak into Sunday morning services at the Church on the corner. Once there was a speaker who said that it isn’t healthy to go through life thinking we should get paid back for all the good deeds we do because there have been thousands of people who have done them for us, thousands that we will never even know so we can’t pay them back or even thank them. Like the guys who laid the bricks for us right here in this very alley and the folks who paid for my school to be built, and who pay my teachers, and the scientists who discover new medicines and stuff, and the guys who write the books I like to read and the songs I like to hear and sing. Since I can’t repay them, I figure I can do good things for others, just like others did for me. Evenin’ things out, you see?”

Jack had soon navigated the low-angle, makeshift, ramp, which Erby had constructed over the two steps down into the lower level of his building. The lad was soon back with soap, washcloth, and towel.

“So how we do this, Jack?”

“Well, first we get me out of these stinking clothes. Then I pull myself up and into the tub. After I’m clean we reverse the process.”

“Two things,” Erby said readjusting his hat. “I’m not so sure I should be seeing a naked man who is not my dad and

second you need clean clothes. I know where I can get some, so while you do your wash-up thing, I'll go get them. You got sizes?"

"Average everything but shirt. Make it extra-large. Thank you."

"And you can do this, get undressed and into the tub by yourself because I suppose I could just look the other way if you need my help?"

"I can handle those things. Don't worry."

Jack was bathed. New clothes were procured and presented at arm's length with eyes closed, except for a single, quick, information gathering, peek. That seemed legitimate considering it did contribute to his education. Erby collected the dirty duds and put them in the sack with the wet towel and washcloth.

"I'll wash them up for you. We have a washer and dryer. Feel better?"

"Yes. Actually, I do. Much better, in fact. Thank you."

"You're welcome but you really don't have to thank those who love you. We know how you're feelin'."

With Erby pushing from the front, Jack backed his chair up the ramp and into the alley behind the building.

"Why'd you back out?"

"My arms are stronger pulling than they are pushing."

Pretty smart, then. Did I help?"

"Yes. A lot."

Jack hesitated and then nodded a single, emphatic, nod at Erby.

"What was that all about?" the boy asked.

"My way of acknowledging you without saying thanks, since, as you pointed out, it isn't really needed."

Erby grinned and returned his best imitation of Jack's nod, his hat falling down over his eyes in the process. They laughed together for the first time.

"I knew it wouldn't take long for you come to love me the way I love you."

"Who said that I . . ."

Jack stopped in mid-sentence. He reached out and ruffled the boys almost combed hair as he privately confronted the unfamiliar, disquieting, feelings, which were suddenly

flickering within him.

"I have to go make some money now," Jack said.

"I thought you didn't have a job."

"I don't. I play the sax on street corners and folks who enjoy it toss money into my open case."

"Cool! Can I come and watch?"

"May I."

"You just said you were."

"I mean you should have said, may I, not, can I."

"Oh, yeah. That permission or ability thing. I get the idea you want me to speak correct English?"

"Life will go far easier for you if you do."

"So, you want me to have a good life. See how much you care about me?"

"Yes! Okay! I care about you! But that doesn't mean I have any intention of becoming a relative."

"So, may I . . . come along?"

"I can't stop you, you know."

"Would you if you could?"

Jack looked into Erby's face for a long, sober, moment. Then, with a hitch of his head and breaking smile, they were off down the alley toward the street.

"We really do need to give your rig a bath. It seems to look worse now that you look so good. Probably need to get you a razor too, unless you're into beards and I sincerely doubt if a beard does much for a square face like yours."

"Have you suddenly become my mother?"

"Probably. I tend to do that. All my friends accuse me of it. I just want things to go good for the people I know."

"And you know best . . . what's right for them better than they do, I mean?"

"It sure seems that way. Wears me out sometimes. I was right about you – getting cleaned up and feeling better because of it – wasn't I?"

"I'll have to concede that one. Yes. You were right."

"So, which street corner?"

"Forty-fourth and Adams. Near the theaters. People who appreciate real music pass by there."

"That's quite a way from here."

"If it's too strenuous you can stay here."

“If you’ll define strenuous I’ll answer your question.”

“Effort filled. Physically difficult. Exhausting.”

“You can’t be serious. I have the stamina of a gazelle.”

“You even know what a gazelle is?”

“Yes. Looked it up after Officer Maloney said that about me. I prefer it to, Tornado. Classier, I think. Implies endurance without destruction. I’m pretty much the nonviolent sort.”

Jack laughed out loud and picked up the pace. Erby jogged alongside, holding his hat in place with one hand while he pointed with the other, keeping up a running commentary on the sights, sounds, and smells that came their way.

Jack suddenly realized he was looking forward to the meeting with Erby’s mother. He was intrigued by how this nine-year-old, irregularly polished, gemstone, had come together during his early years.

* * *

Jack was waiting on the sidewalk in front of Erby’s building well before the appointed time. He had assembled his instrument and was playing hymn after hymn – low, reverently. His case remained closed. Sunday songs were intended to be free. Still, passers by stooped to lay bills and coins on top of it. Jack was so absorbed in the music that he didn’t notice.

Promptly at ten o’clock Erby and his mother appeared. He had brought a folding lawn chair downstairs for her to sit in. With things arranged, the boy waited more or less patiently for Rock of Ages to end. He walked over and put his arm around Jack’s shoulders.

“My mom is here.”

He took the saxophone and quickly stowed it in the case the way Jack had showed him the day before. Jack turned his chair and approached Erby’s mother.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Virginia. I’m Jack but I have the idea you already know that and probably way too much more.”

Erby stood back noticing two things. Jack’s hair was combed and his mother was wearing lipstick and blush. He didn’t understand why such things mattered but he had observed they were clearly important to folks thirteen and

over.

“Your music is beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

“Music is his passion,” Erby said, jumping in, feeling a bit left out of the conversation – the conversation that had consisted of but four sentences up to that moment.

“Your son is an interesting combination of straight talk, enthusiasm, and single minded stubbornness,” Jack went on.

“The term, hard-headed, has often come up in his presence,” Virginia said smiling and pulling her son close. “He has a big heart and endless patience.”

“Perhaps what I’ve been seeing as a dogged strategy to pester me could be characterized as endless patience.”

They shared a smile and a short chuckle. Erby decided things were getting off to a good start so he took a step into the background.

“Your son seems to think he can just come out here on the street and eenie-meenie-minie-moe himself a father. I hope you can help him understand that’s not the way the system works.”

“I understand. I’ve been getting the other ends of those conversations. I tell him he has to be careful and, I must admit, in your case at least, it seems he has.”

Jack looked away, feeling a wash of embarrassment. It had forced a turn in the conversation he hadn’t wanted to hear. He tried to build some distance.

“You really don’t know anything about me.”

“Herbert’s a fine judge of character. That’s usually enough for me.”

“I better be on my way. This isn’t going where I figured it would.”

“Something wrong with me?” Virginia said, vamping playfully, some alluring calculation obvious in her manner.

“Oh. No. I didn’t mean to imply that. You are fine. Well spoken, bright, clearly kind hearted, very pretty, and you’ve raised one heck of a kid here.”

It was Virginia’s turn to blush. Erby beamed. She’d zung just at the right time to zing. Jack, on the other hand, had let his gentle sincerity dig him in deeper. He tried again.

“It’s just that I am the last person in this city – the world

– who is equipped to care for a child. I have no income. I know nothing about kids. I’m crippled for life. I sleep in alleys and at times eat out of dumpsters.”

“We just got word that our new apartment opened up. First floor. That’s one of its windows right there. You can sleep in Erby’s room. He prefers the couch anyway.”

“That should go over real great with Social Services, having a man living in your place.”

“See!” Erby said enthusiastically, having missed the true point. “It just gets better and better.”

“I was being sarcastic, Erby. Social Services frowns on unmarried men and women living together.”

“So, get married.”

It seemed like a complete and simple solution to a nine-year-old.

“Only couples who are in love, marry,” Jack said.

“Not a problem, then. My mom is the most loveable lady in the city and you’re a very easy to love sort. I knew I loved you that very first day you ran me off.”

Jack chuckled and shook his head at the fully unpredicted conclusion to the boy’s comment. Virginia immediately joined him. Erby, having no idea what was going on chimed in with great enthusiasm. From his standpoint, it was a love fest. From Virginia’s it suddenly presented possibilities. Loveable Jack was beginning to feel trapped.

Virginia had a suggestion.

“The maintenance men are moving our things downstairs this afternoon. I’m sure the new place will still be a mess but why don’t you come for dinner about seven. In the meantime, you can think about things. I just hate for you to throw my Erby out in your wash of self-pity.”

“I can see where the Pest gets his unrelenting, forthright, honesty. And why shouldn’t I pity myself? Nobody else will. I lost the use of my body fighting to maintain freedom in the World. A snafu at the Defense Department has convinced them I died in the hospital overseas so they cut off my pension. I showed up with my ID and dog tags and they threatened legal action if I didn’t stay away. I can’t afford a lawyer. Legal aid won’t take such cases against the federal government. Anyway, they say, their records show I’m

receiving twenty-six hundred dollars a month in disability payments. I don't even have twenty-six dollars to my name."

Jack turned and hurried off swinging into the first alley he came to.

"I better go get him," Erby said.

"No. He needs some space. First, I need you to help us get moved. Then I need you to go to the store so we can fix that meal we promised."

"You really think he'll come back tonight?"

"We promised him dinner and we will have it ready. We don't back down on our word, you and me. Remember?"

Erby smiled and helped her stand. She had been without her oxygen way too long. Slowly, they made their way up the stairs. Erby dragged the chair along behind – thump, thump, thump; twenty-eight thumps to their landing.

* * *

The move was relatively easy; furniture taken from one room upstairs was transferred to the corresponding room down stairs; clothing was moved from closet to closet; dishes were carried from kitchen to kitchen. Virtually no packing or unpacking had been necessary. The only casualty had been a grotesque, purple, vase – a gift from a great aunt. The look between them was unmistakable – 'good riddance'.

By three o'clock it was complete. Erby had checked out the fire escape and determined that the jump from it to the ground was well within his capabilities. By three thirty he was back from the grocery. By four the pot roast was in the oven.

Erby cleared out the top two dresser drawers in his room—just in case Jack decided to take his mother up on her offer. He measured the doors to make sure his wheelchair would fit. He was pretty sure it would. He studied the bathroom and determined a new mirror and set of shelves, both positioned lower, would be necessary.

"How much do you suppose Jake gets in donations when he plays?" his mother asked as at last Erby joined her on the couch to rest.

"Yesterday he played for about an hour and a half and I calculated he earned about a dollar a minute."

"Not bad. Very good, in fact."

"He says he don't dare carry much cash because he's

afraid he'll get rolled if it's known – I think that's like getting mugged but not really hurt bad. So, he don't play that much with his case open."

"I'd think he could afford a room somewhere"

"Technically, he's unemployed so nobody will rent to him. He said he's looked and looked. His life seems pretty unfair right now. No job. No lawyer. No pension. No room. No family. No happiness. No respect."

"Do you know about his family?"

"He won't talk about it, but then up to today he wouldn't talk about nothin'."

"Anything. He wouldn't talk about anything."

Erby smiled.

"What?"

"Jack's always correctin' my talkin', too. Sometimes I make mistakes just so we'll have something to chat about."

"You rascal!"

"Been called worse. I need to do some laundry for him. Figure if he has clean duds in the top dresser drawer he might decide to stay."

"I wouldn't count on that. He seemed pretty adamant about his position on it."

Erby left to put in the load of wash and to contemplate the possible meanings of the word, 'adamant'. He then excused himself saying he'd be back in a little while. To him, a little while usually meant however long it took to get bored with whatever he could find to do away from home. On that occasion, however it meant twenty minutes and involved no boredom. He was talking to his mother before the hall door closed behind him.

"I got Jack a room over with old Mr. Winters. He's all alone and has a spare bedroom. He can use the extra income. We settled on seventy-five a week including kitchen privileges."

"You can't go around making arrangements for other people like that."

"Yes, I can. I told you. I just did."

"I mean it's not your place; you have no authority."

"I know they will get along great. And it's almost across the hall from here. With his own place, he won't have to worry

about gettin' rolled so he can make lots of money. Then he can hire the lawyer he needs. Do you need a lawyer to adopt a kid?"

"Yes."

"I'll make sure he saves some back for that."

"Herbert, you've let your imagination get way out of control on this thing. I'm taking steps through the agency to see that you are going to be very well taken care of. That's my job, not yours! You will continue to receive social security until you're nineteen. There are some other sources of income also. I have that all taken care of for you."

"You don't want Jack to have me?"

"That's not what I said. Your plan just isn't going to work. He says he doesn't want you, son. You can't make him do this against his will."

"Deep down inside he really does want to do this; he just doesn't realize it yet. He's too caught up in feeling sorry for himself and being blue all the time and feeling he's useless. I know he loves me. I can see it in his eyes and hear it in his voice when he's correctin' me. He wouldn't be wastin' time correctin' me if he didn't care about me."

"He may not even come back here this evening. He seemed pretty upset when he left. I'm just so afraid you're setting yourself up for a huge hurt."

"Thanks for fixing everything up for me, like you said. I'm going to miss you terribly, you know."

Erby put his head against her shoulder and they sobbed together for a long time.

* * *

Jack's life changed rapidly during the next few weeks. He enjoyed the pot roast. He took the room across the hall. Erby arranged for him to play his music three nights a week at the coffee house in the church basement. It was a place for college kids so the tips weren't big but it was safe, inside, and regular and the patrons were close to Jack's age.

He was soon asked to join a band. It wasn't really his kind of music but he took it as he continued to look for something more to his liking. A church member was on the community concert board and arranged for him to do a solo, add-on, concert. It was a huge success. Things began

looking up. He hired a lawyer. After an unimaginable and expensive battle with the bureaucracy, his pension came through.

He could have afforded to move into an apartment of his own but he preferred being there with Mr. Winters. Jack spent most evenings at Erby's apartment. The three of them—sometimes four when Mr. Winters was feeling up to it—played cards and table games, and did jigsaw puzzles. Erby noticed glances between his mom and Jack.

"So, what are we going to do about the family thing?" Erby asked Jack one morning when they were eating breakfast alone together. "Mom is getting so weak and so sick. She don't . . . er . . . doesn't hardly walk anymore and she wears her oxygen all the time. I overheard her telling her friend, Darla, that she didn't expect to see August. That's not far off. I'm pretty sure I'm getting scared about it."

"It's a reasonable thing to be scared about."

"Were you ever scared?"

"I was really scared when I got shot, I'll tell you that. I just figured it meant I was about to die."

"I'm glad you didn't, even if I didn't know you, I mean."

"What did you think of the home Miss Parsons took you to visit yesterday?"

"They seemed like nice strangers. Way too neat for my way of liking."

"You know why your mother insisted that you make the visit?"

"Because nobody who knows me wants me."

"That's not right and you know it. It is a temporary place for you to live while you wait for some parents to come along that want to adopt you."

"I looked it up," Erby said, a sense of dejection in his voice. "The chances of a nine-year boy old getting adopted is almost none at all. It only gets worse the older kids get. When one set of foster parents gets sick of you they pass you on to another set. I've seen it on Law and Order."

He sighed.

"Why won't they let me live with you?"

"We've plowed that ground, Erby. I'm single, too young, handicapped, and my history as a street person seems

to automatically place me in every agency's mentally unstable category.

"Doesn't love count for anything in all this?"

"Not enough, for sure. I'll come and visit you know. We can do stuff like we do now."

Erby raised his eyebrows, not doubting Jack's good intentions but knowing first hand that most of his mother's old friends, who had promised to drop by often, eventually stopped coming. He felt the most desperate sort of alone that it was possible to feel. It started in his heart and spread throughout his young being.

"Will you answer me a question just yes or no?" He asked Jack all quite solemnly.

"I will if such an answer will not be misleading."

Erby paused to think about that proviso, then nodded and proceeded to offer the question.

"Have you done everything you can to get me?"

Jack's own initial pause only lengthened. The furrows on his forehead deepened. He bit at his lower lip. The honest answer would tarnish his image and be hurtful to the boy. It would misrepresent his true feelings. The dishonest answer would draw a line of separation he was afraid could never be overcome. Still, he went with the honest answer.

"No."

Erby had questions but wouldn't ask them.

* * *

Virginia refused to spend her final days in a hospital. Erby was never far from her side. When she lost her ability to speak, she wrote out her thoughts for him. When she lost her ability to move the pencil Erby did all the talking.

During her last few days there was a flurry of activity in the apartment. Erby didn't understand but figured it probably had to do with him. Miss Parsons was there several times speaking in private with her. Jack also spent time with her, sometimes alone and sometimes with another man—a lawyer, Erby figured.

* * *

What can be said about funerals? After the service and after a long, tearful, hug, Erby released himself from Jack and got into the car with Bill and Beth, his new foster parents.

There would be a final custody hearing the next morning in family court.

Jack had promised to be there. He wasn't.

Erby sat at a table with his foster mother. He thought it was a most disagreeable room with high dark ceilings, huge wooden tables, uncomfortable straight back chairs, and a judge's seat so high Erby wondered if it might be reserved for God himself. Unless God was a middle-aged woman with thick, dark rimmed, half-lens, glasses the seat was intended for somebody else.

There ensued a conversation, of a type, among a half dozen adults. He knew Miss Parsons, although he didn't trust or like her. She seemed to be playing the central role in it all. Erby felt sure nothing good could come from that.

The judge had lots of questions. Erby felt fully left out of the process. He repeatedly looked around for Jack. It was unlike him to just not show up. Erby gave him the benefit of the doubt and waited. He'd come for pot roast. Surely he'd come for him.

Most everyone there was a stranger. None of them had taken time to introduce himself to the boy. No one had even really told him the purpose of the gathering. He had surmised, however. Sitting quietly was not one of his best things. He thought better than to sing. He heard the term, 'the boy', thrown around a lot and really wanted to stand up on the table and let them all know the boy had a name, but, again, he didn't.

From time to time his foster mother would pat his leg and whisper that it shouldn't be much longer. Apparently, she had endured such gatherings before. Eventually, everybody stopped talking and the judge addressed the group; more specifically she singled out Erby.

"Herbert Roberts."

His foster mother nudged him to stand. He'd seen the criminals having to do it on TV and suddenly wondered if he was on trial.

"If it's all the same to you, Judge, Ma'am, I'm more comfortable being called Erby."

"What-y?"

"Erby. E-R-B-Y."

"Okay then, Erby, the purpose of this meeting is to formalize your permanent custodial disposition."

"I have no idea what you just said if that's important to you."

The judge's solemn, tightly drawn, expression relaxed, allowing the hint of a kindly smile to break at the edges of her mouth.

"It means deciding who is going to get the grand privilege of taking care of you—raising you."

"Thank you. No offense, Ma'am, but if you'd have told me that a half hour ago I would have been saved a good deal of uneasiness."

"A good point. I assumed Miss Parsons had done that."

She pulled her glasses to the end of her nose and glared at Miss Parsons. As she turned back toward Erby he raised his hand. She broke a short lived, full face, smile and nodded in his direction, cocking her head, clearly ready to listen.

"I was just wondering if I get any say in all this since it is me you were all talking about giving away to somebody."

"You may have one minute in which to state your thoughts, but that does not mean it will sway the decision of this court."

"I want Jack Roberts to be my dad. We get along very well together. He helps me and I help him. I know my mom wanted me to be with him. The reasons Miss Parsons won't allow it make no sense to me. Jack is the kindest, gentlest, levelheaded, most helpful man I've ever known. I guess what I'm trying to say is that it seems to me I should be with a person I love and one who I know loves me. No offense against this lady here beside me, but she doesn't love me and although I don't dislike her, I don't love her. . . . I suppose that's my one minute. Thanks."

"The court understands your feelings but does not believe what you suggest would be in your best interests."

"Do you even know Jack, Ma'am? Have you ever spent any time with him? If you haven't you can't say that."

"I allowed you to have your say, Herbert, so now please sit down and don't interrupt me again."

Erby crossed his arms, slid down into his chair, and put on the pout of all pouts. Tears began making single, circuitous, streams down each cheek.

The judge continued.

"Permanent custody of Herbert Roberts is hereby given to the Department of Social Services until he reaches the age of eighteen unless and until he may be adopted according to the laws of this state."

She rapped her gavel. Nothing had ever sounded so final in Erby's young life.

There was a commotion at the back door. Everyone turned to look. It was Jack, wearing a tie, rolling down the aisle. Two of the men that had been in the apartment earlier in the week hurried along behind him.

"If it please the court may we approach the bench in the matter of Custody for Herbert Roberts?" the taller of the men said.

"The matter has been ruled on."

"This is the boy's legal father, Jack Roberts," the man then announced.

"Approach. You have documentation?"

"Complete, your Honor. Jack and his mother were married several days ago. We were late, just now, because we were next door completing the adoption papers as requested and agreed to by the boy's mother."

Through the exchange Erby had heard but one phrase, 'the boy's legal father, Jack Roberts'. The judge took some time looking through the folder of sheets and documents. Eventually she slipped her glasses down to the end of her nose – as seemed to be her habit just before she said something important. She folded her hands, smiled, and spoke directly to Erby.

"Well, young man, it seems that you have just set the record for the shortest amount of time any youngster has ever spent in the protective custody of this state."

She looked at her watch.

"Seven minutes the way I time it. Congratulations. Go give your father a big hug and have a wonderful life together. And, by the way, Erby, I have to agree with you that a child should be with those who love him. Sometimes we grownups

just aren't smart enough to know how to put it into the equation."

"I'll get right to work on it for you. I'm well known for solving difficult problems."

"I'm quite sure you are. I believe we've just witnessed some of your finest work!"

He turned toward Jack, who spoke to him.

"Ready to go home, son?"

"Ready to go home, dad."

They turned and started toward the door. Not unexpectedly, Erby had things to say.

As soon as you're feeling strong enough we need to have that birds and bees talk, and then there's the stone for mom's grave – I want it to be white granite, and then we gotta get me out of Miss Plumb's room for next year – I'm pretty sure I have Principal Brown convinced it's best for all concerned, and then this weekend you can teach me how to play the sax, and then you'll have to tell me what an equation is, and then. . . ."

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**STORY SEVEN:
The Ultimate Do-Over
(St Peter's all business!)
A short story – or perhaps an endless allegory.
by Tom Gnagey**

At The Outset

It wasn't the first question Jake had figured St. Peter would be asking him. In fact, it wasn't even on his long list of possibles. His life hadn't been faultless but he always believed that compared with those around him he had pulled it off in a pretty acceptable fashion. Figuring that at least half the departed souls would make it into heaven Jake felt his chances for an easy entry were far above average. Most days he had been an easy to live with sort, but that was exactly what posed the problem – that most days' thing.

It began shortly after his arrival at the big gate – in truth it was pearly although, save for its sizable keyhole, its exact purpose suddenly became less than clear, souls not being limited in movement by physical barriers. Since (the Old Testament notwithstanding) he had not figured god for one given to ostentatious displays he was puzzled by its grandeur. His moment of pondering was soon refocused.

St. Peter was a serious – some might say stern – being, always busy and not given to small talk. I would offer you some minimal description of him but human languages don't contain words that can be used to accurately portray the true essence of a heavenly being. The dimensions of size and weight and bulk are fully irrelevant as are things like features,

colors, and pigeonholing one at some point along the 'scruffy to immaculate' or 'dumb to bright' continuums. The closest I can come is for you to envision the emotion evoked by a male incarnation of that exceedingly stern old maid school teacher with the large dark rimmed glasses, her hair painfully twisted into a bun on the top of her over-sized head, and a frown-creased face fully incapable of launching a smile. None of that really precluded compassion but Like I said, attempts at descriptions leave much in doubt.

I'm Chroniclus by the way. I'm the keeper of personal histories. Pete's the only one who ever refers to them – well other than the Probies – souls that aren't rejected outright but have to justify their entrance – Probationaries, I suppose is the completely accurate term. That's the situation in which Jake finds himself. Pete always asks the same 'biggie' to each new arrival. I'll replay Jake's first encounter so you may listen in on his initial interchange with our meticulously exacting Gate Keeper. Understand that the translation from Ethereal into English may be less than fully accurate. He always sets it up with a brief postulate.

"Anybody can be a kind, compassionate, helpful and charitable person when things are going well in his or her life. Such times in no way present a fair test of one's true sense of integrity and basic goodness. Relate for me three times when you acted toward others with kindness, compassion, helpfulness and charity during periods that were among the worst and most stressful for you, personally."

As was said, it's not the question most folks contemplate. They figure that during obviously stressful times they should be cut a bit of slack. That's not the way it works. For Probies that are otherwise spic and span – ethereal speak for nearly perfect – they are granted a one shot do-over. Pete scans my logs, selects from three unacceptable interchanges that occurred during the Probies bad times and sends the person back to make them right. All three must be turned around. Failure at any point means . . . well, you can imagine that it becomes an extended and 'heated' ordeal – a 'prickly' situation – a 'glowing' accounting for one's life – that 'H' of an upshot, so frequently recommended back and forth in man's vernacular.

Don't get me wrong. I'm always pulling for successful do-overs even though they require me to rewrite extensive portions of thousands of logs – that thing about one good deed launching ten good deeds and so on and so on, which improves the course of umpteen lives and more than occasionally entire social orders. Each successful do-over provides a definite upside for humanity though a bit of organizational turmoil for me. Oh, well, I have all the time in the . . . you get the idea.

Back to Jake. He had to admit that he couldn't document a single event that demonstrated the point St. Peter made in his question. He was given his assignment with dispatch.

"Here are three events – interchanges – you had with others during their times of need and your times of suffering. In each instance, you failed to live up to your positive human potential. Go back and fix things. You will have 48 hours for each. Fail at any one and Heaven must be denied. Proceed thoughtfully but with haste. I will take no questions. Next!

Do-Over Number One: The Prom Queen

It had been a fascinating, exhilarating, moment as Jake tumbled through eternity onto the hayloft behind the house in which his former self had early on taken a room. It sat at the edge of Springfield, the small town in which he had grown up. He was seventeen again. It was late afternoon of the day he buried his parents, recently killed in a house fire. The Bakers were allowing him to work for room and board. He didn't feel like working. He didn't feel like eating. He didn't feel like living. Life and everything about it stunk! The loneliness of the moment was all consuming. The uncertainty of the future was overwhelming.

Jake had long before given up envisioning himself as that seventeen-year-old and yet there he was encapsulated inside his former sturdy, agile, young body. Jake the younger had been relegated to some sort of limbo – a nonparticipant except for the loan of that body.

For just a moment he let himself luxuriate in the situation – a youthful physique with all of its good looks and

energetic potential plus the wisdom acquired through almost 70 years of living. What he could have accomplished in life, he thought, had that been the combination during those many years before.

In his memory, Jake had misplaced the troublesome impulsive tendencies, which had plagued him during childhood and adolescence. He had mislaid those continual also-rans at the track meets and on the tennis court. He had buried the coy come-ons that preceded well-plotted rejections from the often cruel, cheerleader/majorette set. How could life at that period of innocence have been anything but wonderful – fit, smart, handsome, seventeen? He took note of his parent's passing and allowed for a period of legitimate sadness regarding it. It was, however, a mystery to him as to what misstep he may have taken – the misstep St. Peter had dredged up and which was playing such a central role in his current eternal predicament.

Billy Baker, the eight-year-old member of the household, peeked his head up above the top of the loft ladder, searching the stacks of bales with his eyes. Not far away, Jake lay on his back, staring into the seemingly peaceful blackness above the rafters.

“Ma says you better come in and eat something – even if you don't feel like it. She says it ain't good for you to brood up here all by yourself. Our family cares about you. Please let us help.”

Jake turned his head in the boy's direction and managed a quick, faintly drawn, smile. He knew the message was accurate in every way but he wasn't ready for what it offered. He could already tell that it was going to be difficult – perhaps impossible – to maintain old friendships let alone build new ones. At that moment, the frightening, long term, risk of more, soul wrenching losses seemed to far outweigh any benefits that might accrue from the fleeting, tenuous, relationships of his teen years.

Eventually he made his way into the house. Mrs. and Mr. Baker were still at the supper table talking over coffee. What do you say to a young man in such a situation?

“I fixed pot roast with new potatoes and baby carrots,” she began. “Or there's pie and ice cream if that would be

more to your liking.”

“We’re going to begin painting the barn in the morning. I like to get started by seven. Breakfast at six-thirty,” came Mr. Baker’s best offering.

Hearing the conversation, Billy returned and stood at Jake’s side.

“I’m awfully sorry about your mom and dad dying on you. It must make you feel very sad.”

Leave it to the child to make the obvious legitimate.

“Thanks, kid. I’ll make it.”

He looked back and forth between the adults.

“I really do appreciate what you’re doing for me. I know I haven’t been very good about letting you know that. Pot roast sounds fine if it isn’t too much trouble – then maybe pie and ice cream.”

The positive overtures had rekindled his appetite.

“I’ll have ice cream with you,” Billy said. “Call me when you’re ready.”

The length and width of the exchanges seemed bizarre. Jake was quite certain the conversation had been a perfect duplicate of the one they’d had all those years before. The words flowed as if on automatic pilot. He sensed each word several seconds before it was dispatched out into the real world. Conversation seemed to be taking place within a time delay echo chamber. It was unnerving but perhaps that was the single edge he had been given – to see and hear the deed just moments before it would occur. If true, his opportunity to set things right would only be afforded during that split-second delay before whatever it was, actually occurred. He would have to remain ever vigilant because at some point those ill-chosen – ill-fated – words would appear. It was going to present a monumental challenge. He was glad the quick mind of his youth was to be available – at least for this first do-over.

He wondered if, when it arose, he would even recognize the exchange in question. More than that, he worried that he wouldn’t catch it in time to change it. Clearly such constant, diligent, forethought was going to cramp the free-flowing style that had been his at seventeen. Perhaps toward that end, the growing depression he was sensing might work in his favor. It should shield him from both his impulsive

ways and his desires to chatter on and pursue relationships, while freeing him to focus.

He would need to remain alert and focused. After all, this represented one third of the biggest event in his entire . . . existence. Jake realized he wouldn't encounter the problem under consideration if he continued to avoid others so he excused himself and went for a walk. He was on a 48-hour time-line and needed to get to it – or, more likely, let it get to him.

In truth, his mood was sinking fast.

'Why did this have to happen to me? I loved my parents. Why couldn't it have happened to Sam or Carolyn – they both hate their parents?'

He immediately recognized it had been a terrible thing to wish on them so he tried to shed the thought and move on.

Ahead, coming toward him on the narrow sidewalk, was a classmate – a raving beauty who he hated with a passion. She was a snob: an egocentric, heartless, know-it-all, snob. Her parents were rich and she broadcast that in every possible way – clothes, hair, jewelry, car, and her pack of equally stuck-up friends. She had won Queen of everything except in those instances where Princess was the best offered. That, too, was hers, of course.

Jake contemplated sticking to the middle of the sidewalk, forcing her into the grass. Since everyone kowtowed to her, he felt it was about time she got her comeuppance and he was feeling up to that if not much else. He centered himself and set a determined pace.

A few yards from the contemplated confrontation he noticed she was sobbing. His first reaction was one of joy – no, jubilation. Finally, Miss Perfect's life must have hit a speed bump. What could he say that would rub salt into her wound? Perhaps he finally had the chance to make her day every bit as bad as his own.

"Hey, Jane. Looks like you're having a really bad mascara day – black streaks dribbling down your cheeks – and hair – been in tornado?"

It wasn't Shakespeare but pretty good for a vengeful teenager.

Then, an odd occurrence: The world before him

disappeared, replaced by a collage, mostly still snapshots picturing Jane. He followed their course with his eyes. She was there on the sidewalk. She was on the stage at the fair. The tiara was placed on another girl. Tears. She was having harsh words with Buff, her longstanding, all-state quarterback, boyfriend. He broke up with her in animated anger. That couldn't be. Everybody knew they'd get married, have one point six blond and blue eyed kids, and teach them to peddle their hurtful, prime grade, snobbery to a whole new generation. There sat Jane in her bedroom. She took pills. The funeral procession was long and slow. Her mother just sat in her rocker after that. Her father closed his business and they moved into an apartment never to welcome old friends. Buff quit school and took a string of construction jobs, turning down scholarships and never encountering what should have been a long and successful athletic career.

The collage faded. The moment returned. It was Jake and Jane about to meet on the sidewalk.

“Jane? Is something wrong? How can I help?”

Jake opened his arms. She hesitated and searched his face, clearly puzzled. The young man's wonderful smile was genuine and convincing. She had failed to notice that before. She allowed herself the safety and reassurance of his embrace. She sobbed quietly. Eventually, they walked together. She told of her humiliation and of Buff's reaction. She confided her despair and confusion – that she couldn't envision life without the boy she was growing to love. He was the only really important thing in her life.

Again, time ceased. Again, a massive collage appeared in Jake's mind. Jane in Jake's arms. The walk. Dropping her at her front porch. Jake's later confrontation of Buff.

“I'm disappointed in you, man. You know you love her – her not her list of contest conquests. Her not her beauty. Her, not her money or status or friends. Your love is more mature than any of those petty things. I've seen it in your eyes when the two of you meet in the hall at school and when you stare at her across study hall. Get your behind over to her place and work things out – by that I mean grow up and think about the wonders of a lifetime with her at your side.”

Buff stood speechless. He lowered the fist that had been raised early on. Jake squeezed his shoulder, turned, and left.

The rest of the collage told a wonderful story of love and accomplishment and mutual support. Of children, popular and well liked. Of foster children whose lives the couple turned around. Of lives well lived – of good deeds multiplied, rippling across the face and heart of humanity.

Jake felt unbelievably refreshed. His spirit had been reborn. With no forewarning, he was plucked from that splendid young being and again twirled and twisted, swirling through eternity. He figured Do-Over Number One had surely been acceptable.

Do-Over Number Two

He found himself inhabiting a suit – dark blue with light blue shirt and red tie – somewhere between formal and colorful. He felt older and wiser – thirty-five-ish. Those were all accurate assessments. He was in a restaurant with his wife who he had met there after work. It was her birthday. Jake had arranged a cake appropriately decorated just for the occasion. He had been late but she wasn't upset or surprised. His work often made it impossible to know when his day would finally end. They ordered and chatted over coffee. The meal arrived before the salad. Jake had wanted the evening to be perfect. He had harsh words for the waitress.

“How difficult would it be to remember that the salad comes first, with the meal delayed an appropriate amount of time so the salad can be enjoyed? What's your problem, woman. You'd think you'd never waited tables before. I've a mind to speak with the manager and get you fired.”

His voice had been loud and the exchange had caught the attention of others at nearby tables. The waitress left in tears and moments later exited the restaurant through the side door, her manager waving a finger after her. He made his way to their table and apologized, saying the dessert would be on the house.

For a second time the huge collage appeared as time itself stopped. Jake studied it. He saw himself an hour earlier

in traffic backed up for blocks. In his attempt to extricate himself from the problem he was ticketed by a policeman for improper backing. His agitation increased and by the time he arrived at the restaurant his nerves were tightly drawn. He had let all that explode against the waitress.

The scene changed. It was the waitress – a mother of a very sick child, as it turned out – sitting by her daughter’s hospital bedside, arranging her hair and easing the stress of the several tubes entering and exiting her nose and mouth and wrist. She kept glancing at her watch and at last, when the girl fell asleep, the woman quickly gathered her coat and bag and left for work. Her eyes filled with tears knowing that she should be by her daughter’s side but also knowing she had to go to work or lose the trifle of an income she earned to support them. The little girl awoke terribly frightened. She pulled the tubes from her body and slid to floor. She made her way to the back stairs in search of her mother where she fell to the bottom sustaining permanent brain damage, never again able to speak or walk.

The collage disappeared. Time returned to the moment the meal had arrived. Jake winked across the table at his wife. They understood that missing a salad was a relatively minor detail in the broader scheme of life. They noticed the waitress’s red eyes and moist cheeks.

“Is there anything we can do to help? You seem to be distressed,” Jake said.

“No,” she answered tentatively. Then, “It’s my daughter. She’s in the hospital with pneumonia and I just had to leave her to come to work. I feel so guilty, you know, but I didn’t have a choice. Oh, my. I forgot your salad. I’m so sorry. I just don’t have my wits about me lately. I’ll go get it for you.”

“No need. The dinner looks like it will be more than enough. I’ll tell you what we would like, however.”

Jake reached across the table and took his wife’s hand in his.

The waitress took out her pad and readied her pen to extend the order.

“We have no children but everybody says we’re really good with them. How about letting us go sit with your

daughter until you get off. In fact, let us stay the night while you get some rest – I'm sure you must need it. If you're needed well see that you're called."

The arrangement was concluded.

The collage returned. There were a half dozen more such nights arranged before Julie was well enough to return to her normal routine. Through the ensuing years, they enjoyed regular outings with the young lady and eventually attended her high school graduation. They had been wonder-filled additions to each other's lives. Her mother had found her true love – a fine father for Julie – and their lives moved forward mostly in the manner of the storybook tales.

The collage closed and the world went blank again. And again, Jake found his essence being catapulted through time and space, darkness and light, cold and hot.

Do-Over Number Three

The movie had been good but not great. The sidewalk outside the theater was moist from a light, evening, shower. Jake and his wife stood waiting at a crosswalk for the light to change. They were approached by a boy in his early teens, weaving his way down the sidewalk.

"So, Dude. You and your slut lookin' for a room? Ya got good taste. I go for the sluts with firmer boobs myself but I suppose an old guy like you can't do no better. I'll come along and warm her up for you – so you can save yourself for . . ."

At that Jake administered a right cross to the boy's cheek and a left to his mid-section which – much to Jake's surprise – doubled him over and sent him to the pavement on his knees. A police car jerked to a stop across the walk-way and two burley cops were immediately on the scene, clubs at the ready.

"The old guy with the slut just went off on me for no reason at all."

The police ignored the remark and turned to Jake.

"You two okay? I've often wanted to bloody this punk's face myself. He gets drunk and loses it – going off on whoever's handy. Got a big mouth that just gets bigger and fouler the more he drinks. You want to press charges?"

“You bet I do. Kids like him need to be put away so the streets are safe for the likes of us good folks.”

Blackness. The collage:

The boy had a hearing in juvenile court and was placed in a ‘rehab’ center until such time as he was deemed safe for society. During the next four years, he was in and out of correctional institutions, dropped out of school, and, at eighteen, killed a liquor store owner in a robbery. His admiring younger brother followed in his footsteps and their second generation, welfare supported, single, mother entered an institution for the mentally disturbed where she lived out her days.

The collage disappeared. Jake and his wife exited the theater and drew the collars of their jackets tight against the cool, damp, evening air. They paused for the light to change and were approached by a boy, perhaps fifteen, whose staggered gait and slurred speech clearly told the story of his intoxication.

“So, Dude. You and you’re slut lookin’ for a room? Ya got good taste. I go for the sluts with firmer boobs myself but I suppose an old guy like you can’t do no better. I’ll come along and warm her up for you – so you can save yourself for . . .”

“I do believe you are pickled, as we said when I was your age,” Jake began. “I would hope a young man your age would have a life filled with wonderful things to do instead. How about letting us take you back to your place so you won’t get yourself into trouble tonight?”

Before he could answer through his puzzled face the policemen arrived.

“This punk bothering you?” one of them asked. “We get complaints about him half a dozen times a week. You sign a complaint and we’ll gladly run him downtown.”

“This lad?” Jake asked as if surprised. “No. He’s fine. In fact, he’s coming with us this evening. Thanks for your interest, though. You’re clearly on the ball out here.”

The policemen left, looking every bit as puzzled as the boy. Jake and his wife draped the young man’s arms over their shoulders and escorted him to their car, depositing him in the back seat. At their home, Jake helped him shower away the grime and stench of alcohol and tobacco and synched him

into one of his robes while his clothes washed. His wife had made coffee and warmed up the casserole and fixings from earlier. The boy had few words but presented no resistance to any of the doings or suggestions. He drank. He ate. He fell asleep sitting up at the table.

The next day Jake and his wife arranged for him to enter a rehabilitation center. Three months later he had finished the program, returned to school, and with a minimum of financial help from Jake and a part time job Jake's wife arranged, the boy graduated to a trade school program in computer something-or-other and went on to live a happy, productive, and helpful life. Jake felt wonderful. He had to wonder why he had reacted so badly on the first occasion.

The collage changed its display. Earlier in that week, Jake learned he had incurable cancer. He had been given six months, tops. He felt so guilty that he wouldn't be around to continue to protect and care for his wife. Apparently, the confrontation dramatized those feelings of helplessness and he lost control – selfishly letting his situation take precedence over anyone else's needs or problems. Over time, his initial vengeful reaction did nothing to ease his personal pain and problem. Upon reflection, it only made him feel worse – providing one more reason for him to feel guilty and helpless. In a more rational frame of mind he understood that to gloss it over by saying the young punk deserved whatever he got was clearly baseless and just hardhearted. He knew nothing of the lad's situation or background. Rather than using the final several months of his life to do one final socially positive act, he had chosen to direct vengeance where he had no real knowledge that vengeance needed to have been directed. He died bitter at himself, at a society that allowed bad things to happen, and at a god that was so obviously uncaring and heartless about the welfare of 'his children'.

The Final Judgment

The collage disappeared. As if having been sucked through some huge, brilliantly lit, convoluted, vacuum hose, Jake soon found himself – or his wiser essence – back at the big gates. St. Peter appeared to have been waiting and was

perhaps a bit put off at the amount of time Jake had spent attending to his tasks. Without so much as what Jake thought should at least have been a, “Job well done”, or a, “I was sure you could do it”, St Peter launched into his fully serious inquiry.

“So, what did you learn, Jake?” he asked.

‘Learned,’ Jake wondered? He hadn’t been dispatched with directions to learn anything.

That quandary passed quickly and he needed only a moment for the answer to appear. The response seemed plainly obviously.

“Live every moment as though it is your defining do-over – not because it may secure for you heaven for all eternity, but because it holds the inevitable potential for touching, enhancing, and enriching the lives of an ever-expanding multitude of human beings.”

St Peter nodded and extended an oversized, golden key toward Jake. Jake hesitated, noticeably. Glancing back and forth he matched it in size with the keyhole in the gate. He was suddenly disappointed about heavenly assumptions and became stubbornly reluctant about accepting St Peter’s offering. If there had been a second lesson for Jake it was that good works should be their own reward. How in Heaven’s Name could St. Peter have missed that?

Oddly, he thought, the key gradually faded from sight. For the first time, St Peter’s face warmed and it directed an unbelievably wonderful smile deep into Jake’s soul. He took Jake by his hand, and personally escorted him through those magnificent, pearly, heavenly gates. (Those magnificent, never actually locked, Pearly Heavenly Gates.)

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**STORY EIGHT:
Old Men: a conversation
Tom Gnagey**

[Sitting room, Witherspoon Place]

“You’re the new guy.”

“Very little that’s new about me—80 years ago, maybe but not now. I’m Joel, by the way.”

“So, you’re the new OLD guy then. Heard you were coming. I’m Harry. I got you beat in the age department.”

“Beat. That’s an interesting concept at our ages. It implies best. In a place like this I would think best would mean younger—so I assume you are less than 80.”

“I like how you think. I guess you have me beat then. Just had my 85th. How does it feel to be the kid?”

“I imagine there must be younger folks here—younger than I am, I mean.”

“A few. Most folks don’t speak their age until they reach 90—then suddenly they think being the oldest gives them some sort of status. Glad to have you among us, by the way. As assisted living places go this one is really pretty nice. I’ll show you the ropes later. What room you have?”

“102.”

“I’m 110, down the hall on the right from your place. Family?”

“By blood at least. My kids are really ticked off at me, I think.”

“How so?”

“We have a conflict in philosophy and expectations. They sent me here to die and I came here to live. When they

ask, “How you feeling?” they are really hoping to hear, “I think I’m on my last legs.” That would put a smile in their hearts.”

“What do you tell them?”

“Fit as a fiddle and a good deal sharper and saner than Nero—he was nuts you know, the emperor who burned down his city.”

“Sorry that things are that way between you and your kids.”

“Wasn’t that way until I needed this wheel chair. They took that as meaning I was suddenly old, which they equate with helpless and soon to die. It’s an offshoot of this throwaway culture they grew up in, I think. Things get old or scarred and they just get tossed. It’s a bit harder to toss old fathers, I suppose, so they decided to put me out of sight in here.”

“They probably did you a favor, then. We all love and appreciate each other here—well, all except Miss Highfalutin’ Agnes Fitzgerald. She somehow claims the right to establish a caste system and plop us each into whatever spot she deems appropriate. I, for example, have carefully wormed my way into her untouchable group. It’s where I’d head for if I were you. She lets us alone for the most part and being left alone by Agnes Fitzgerald is high on everybody’s wish list around here.”

“How will I recognize her?”

“At lunch, this noon, she’ll be the one—nose in the air—everybody boos at when she enters the dining hall. You can contrast that with the man we all clap for—Lee Atherton; he just turned 103 and is as sharp as a tack. He’s the most loveable person you’ll ever meet.”

“Seems like the rest of you have established your own caste system.”

“You have a way of spoiling things, you know that, Joel.”

“How about you and your family, Harry?”

“Who can tell? My kids are all about work and grumbling about the economy and how it is has singled them out to ruin their lives. I’m all about laughing a lot and enjoying the pleasures and gifts of the moment. Not sure how we grew apart like that. I feel bad for them—pursuing stuff and money

to the exclusion of fun and appreciation of the life they have to live. We agreed that we'd all be better off if I moved out. Lots less tension, now. A sad way to improve things, but . . ."

"Speaking of improved things, tell me about Mrs. Atkins. I saw her earlier and asked a nurse for her name. She seems really nice."

"Her name is Wilma and she is nice. Widowed and available."

"Available for what?"

"You've been out of circulation for quite a while I assume."

"My circulation is so bad my sox wear wool stockings."

"Not that kind of circulation."

"I knew what you meant. It's just been so long—me and a lady."

"Who said she's a lady and why would you want one?"

"Your use of words is more specific than mine. Woman, then. Single, female, octogenarian."

"So, you do remember about females!"

"Soft and well-perfumed, as I recall."

"Oh yes! Soft, well perfumed and a great addition to a man's bed."

"You mean how they keep your feet warm?"

"Never heard it called that before but each to his own."

"You are a dirty old man, you know that, Harry."

"Promise me that when I stop being one you'll move me directly out to Shady Rest Cemetery. Chances are I will have been dead for some time."

"Why haven't you engaged Wilma in a relationship? Or do you just talk the talk and not walk the walk?"

"Oh, I've tried but she has a Z-402 walker and my old X-101 just won't keep up. Now you, in your snazzy, new, wheelchair there, could catch her before she rounded the first corner."

"Can't you afford an upgrade, Harry?"

"Could but you know what they say."

"What do they say?"

"Speed kills."

"But what a way to go!"

"The turn our conversation has taken is wearing me

out, Jake. How about you?”

“Seems to be unexpectedly reigniting some of my long dormant, basic needs.”

“Me, too. Worked me up into the need for a nap.”

“Nap?”

“Such female-related images used to call for cold showers. Now a nap does just fine. Can’t remember for sure what that cold water did for me. Seems like it would have just been so uncomfortable—hard on me. Oh. Now, I remember. Yes. Those were the days my friend.”

“I’m sure those days aren’t all past, my friend. It’s been one of the best surprises old age has held for me so far. So much of what I was afraid I’d lose, I didn’t.”

“But then there are those unexpected loses.”

“Like?”

“The total loss of hair around my ankles where my sox have waged their relentless, life-long, war to rid my skin of all primal growths.”

“Yes, there is that. And the memory stuff.”

“I have the solution for that one.”

“Really?”

“A pocket pad and pencil. It does have two drawbacks. I keep forgetting to put it in my pocket in the morning and my handwriting is so shaky that once my notes get cold I can’t figure out what I’ve written in it. Besides that, it’s one great solution.”

“Solution to . . .?”

“A sense of humor. I like that. We are going to be great friends.”

“In whatever time I may have for you away from the ladies.”

“There you go again. Glad you’ve entered my life.”

“So, about those ropes you said you’d show me.”

“Lesson one. The old people here tend to be straight forward blunt—ask and say exactly what’s on their mind. It’s not rude; its honesty, like little kids before they become infected with that insidious social acceptability filter. I’ve determined its onset is related to pubic hair. Once it sprouts, honesty in social matters goes out the window. Stays that way through life until the hair turns grey. That seems to

render it ineffective. If I had my way we'd insist on bleaching the pubic color out of every young person in the land. I think we'd have a much more honest and dependable, society. Nobody would ever have to guess about what somebody else really meant. Way too much time and energy has to be spent on decoding meaning and intention. Just think what a difference we could make if all that time was put to good causes—volunteering with needy kids and seniors, for example.”

“This a lesson or a foray into social philosophy?”

“Guilty. Philosophy professor for nearly fifty years. I usually don't let that out of the bag.”

“Sounds like a form of deceit—pubic hair driven I assume.”

“Still a few coal black strands hidden here and there I guess. You have a professional past?”

“Owned a small grocery store. It was my father's, before me. Provided a good life I think. Not much I'd change about it.”

“No offense but your vocabulary seems a cut above what I'd expect from that background.”

“Probably comes from having to read all the big words in those insidious warning labels that now grace most products. I have determined that if one only ate products that carried no warning labels one would shrivel into nothingness in less than a month. Even bottled water now warns us to drink it before a given date to avoid consuming dangerous chemicals that might be leached into the liquid from the plastic container. Where have we gone wrong?”

“Don't get me started.”

“Actually, I'd like to hear your ideas.”

“Sorry. Causes immediate acid reflux. There's another one. I don't recall there even was such a condition back in the good old days—back before things like cholesterol and limited sodium intake were invented.”

“They really were good days, weren't they?”

“Darn right. Comfortable simplicity trumps harried complexity any day of the week.”

“Hour of the day, actually.”

“Could take it down to nanoseconds, I suppose.”

“Time. We’ve both seen a lot of it, haven’t we, Harry?”

“We have. It’s an age-old dilemma, I suppose.”

“What is?”

“The quality vs quantity of life issue.”

“Say more!”

“Do I live life the way I can really enjoy it or do I abide by all the longevity rules, giving up much of that enjoyment in order to live a few more years.”

“Be happy for a few years or miserable for a lot of years?”

“That’s it in a nutshell.”

“How has the old gentleman, Lee, managed that?”

“He seems to have learned to enjoy many of the things that are said to be ‘good’ for us—he still likes to walk his mile every day, for example. I have noticed, however, that he avoids broccoli, kale, and Brussel sprouts and craves everything deep fried or breaded.”

“What does he attribute his long life to?”

“It’s comical, really. He attributes it to simply having been able to wake up every morning for the past 103 years! He also lauds his genes—comes from a family of long livers.”

“Like my Uncle George. His liver was 20 inches long.”

“Do you never stop?”

“I thought you liked to laugh.”

“I do. There was no complaint implied.”

“I’m intrigued by complaints. I’ve seen them shift in myself over the years.”

“How?”

“Take music, for example.”

“Real music or its current day incarnation?”

“See. That’s what I mean. I never used to complain about music. These days I do. My grandson plays his loud and long. It completely absorbs his attention.”

“What genre? Rap, Hip Hop?”

“Noise.”

“Ah! I believe I know that genre well. Probably what my parents thought about Elvis and the Beatles.”

“And Little Richard?”

“Oh, definitely—Little Richard. What did we see in him do you suppose?”

“The decibels and the vibration, I guess. Exactly what I’m complaining about now.”

“And the absurdity.”

“Yes. Probably that.”

“I still appreciate absurdity—like your ‘liver line’ a few moments ago. One of my favorites is from Jack Benny, I think. ‘If it looks like a duck, waddles like a duck, and squawks like a duck it’s probably Groucho Marx’.”

“I hadn’t heard that one. It is funny.”

“It may have been a figment of my mind—like something I thought Benny should have said. Over time sources fade, have you noticed that?”

“Oh, my, yes! Especially in religion. I’m appalled at what my children tell me I told them about such things. ‘Surely, I didn’t’, I say to myself. Who knows if it is the kids or I who forgot? Either way I’ve learned to neither deny nor defend such things. I figure by the time they are my age they will probably have misinterpreted their current versions of the memory all over again.”

“Makes one question the whole concept of recording history, doesn’t it?”

“It does. Reading the history books that you and I grew up with one would have to assume there had only ever been one black man—George Washington Carver.”

“And Dred Scott, remember. Can’t recall what that was all about but I do remember the name and his race.”

“I won a race once, Harry. Independence Day. All thirteen of my town’s ten-year-old boys ran from in front of Dave’s Meat Market up the street to Doc Adams’ office and back. I got a tiny American Flag and an all-day sucker. I shared it with my friends of course so it didn’t come close to lasting the day.”

“And I’ll bet the other boys all congratulated you on your win, didn’t they?”

“Every last one.”

“Don’t see much of that anymore. Everybody seems to hate those that are more competent than they are. Folks cheat in order to prove they’re better than somebody else and they don’t even seem to see the backasswards logic in it.”

“You mean that if you have to cheat you are by

definition not more competent at anything but cheating.”

“Right! It’s the illusion rather than the actuality of being better that counts.”

“Like it’s no longer just knowing inside yourself that you are the best that’s important. It’s all in what you can make other people believe regardless of the truth.”

“Competition, Jake. Competition may have been the backbone of our economy but it has definitely been the downfall of our society.”

“Winning at any cost, you mean?”

“That’s what it’s turned into. Began all quite positively as producing the best product or service for the least amount of money. That seems like healthy competition in most ways. When businesses were small and homegrown we could each factor into that the likeability of the businessperson and fudge the value a bit one way or another. If Dave—with his big family— had to charge a little more than Dan but Dave was kind and funny and dependable we’d be willing to pay his price over single, doom and gloom, Dan who was cheaper.”

“So, you’re pointing out that the success of the cutthroat aspect of competition is partly the consumer’s fault for no longer taking such personal things into consideration.”

“Maybe. Mostly, I think, it’s because almost nothing is just home owned anymore. Every business is part of a chain or owned by or controlled by some super business. The whole personal thing is gone. The bottom line has come to be based solely on financial aspects instead of positive social and personal values.”

“A culture with the availability of inexpensive goods at the expense of mutually helpful values.”

“Right. It’s a crime against nature, I think.”

“Somewhere along the way honesty has certainly taken a pummeling, hasn’t it?”

“Wining, especially financially, has become far more important than being honest.”

“It’s hard to understand.”

“You said it—at least in part, Joel. The throw away culture we’ve developed. Life seems to now be based on having stuff—lots and lots of stuff—and on replacing that stuff when it gets broken or when it goes out of style, and any item

based on technology seems to go out of style within six months. That trend requires money—lots and lots of money. People now seem so willing to lie and cheat, even when it hurts others, in order to get that money so they can get and replace that stuff.”

“Sounds like unabashed selfishness, doesn’t it?”

“I often wonder what’s happened to altruism—being able to put other peoples’ needs at least on a par with our own, if not occasionally above our own. That’s the secret to a positive, mutually helpful, comfortable, and safe society, I think. Our present-day society has reverted to the level of the three-year-old—if I want it I take it. Me and my pleasures are all that are important in this life. If the other guy gets hurt in the process, it’s his problem not mine.”

“Ouch! That’s pretty severe, isn’t it?”

“Prove to me that I’m wrong. I’d really like for you to be able to do that.”

“I probably can’t. I do know pockets of society where altruism still reigns but probably not really in big business any more. I agree. Money, not people or their welfare, is mostly what’s important in business.”

“I’m getting depressed.”

“A funny word—depressed.”

“Funny?”

“Yeah. Look at it. De means a lessening of and pressed means put upon or burdened. Depressed therefore should mean a lessening of burdens. That could be interpreted as being freed to be happy.”

“A spin doctor as well, are you?”

“I suppose. Try to find the sunny side of the street whenever I can?”

“Proving that no saying is universally applicable.”

“What?”

“The sunny side of the street on the hottest day of summer?”

“I see what you mean. I guess one has to keep the good intention of the saying attached when it’s offered.”

“I apologize for overlooking that. You’re right, of course.”

“You are very open-minded—fair-minded might be

more accurate, Harry.”

“As are you, Joel. I wonder how we came by that trait and how we maintained it down through the years.”

“In my case I think it was my parents. Everybody was welcome in our store. I grew up eager to learn new things from and about new people. I appreciated the differences, I guess.”

“For me it came more gradually and later in life—my college years. I found that a dozen brilliant men could each write a book on the same topic and come up with a dozen different conclusions. It made me appreciate human thought and the individuals who took time to really think through the great mysteries and problems of our day. It forced me to recognize the tentativeness of any so-called truth—truth by Thomas, truth by Adams, truth by James, and so on. That, I think is a prerequisite for open-mindedness.”

“I think we came to the same realization through different routes.”

“I remember back in the late fifties when there was the great ecumenical movement within the churches here in rural America. Many of the smaller denominations investigated joining together in order to better serve their congregations and movements. We had a meeting in our church in which representatives from a dozen smaller churches – denominations – were in attendance. One woman stood up and praised the ecumenical concept saying she thought it would be just wonderful if everybody in the community would come join her Baptist church. Even as a teenager I figured she had missed the point.”

“That’s really funny, if you can laugh at ignorance.”

“People who claim to know the truth scare me, I’ll tell you that. It makes them think they are empowered to do terrible things to the rest of us who are not yet enlightened—radical religious and political groups have the most potential to destroy us, I think. By definition they are narrow-minded and proud of it. Rather than consider contrary points of view they prefer to destroy those that hold different ideas or ways of behaving.”

“A lot of that going on now both within and outside of Christianity. Nobody’s really safe from attack I guess. How is

it in here?”

“Strictly a WASP environment—White Anglo Saxon Protestant. I’m the only odd ball.”

“Catholic? Jew?”

“Agnostic. Probably atheist, actually, but I always leave room for new information that might change my mind. And you, if I may ask?”

“A long time Methodist. Born, bred, and raised a never questioning Methodist. Sounds like you and I may have room for some very interesting discussions.”

“The first person here that has characterized my position that way. Thank you. I’m not here to convert anybody; just here to be allowed to benignly pursue my own beliefs.”

“Have you been ostracized because of it?”

“No. Not at all—not face to face, at least. Some are clearly bothered because they see me as a genuinely nice, helpful, compassionate, person and people of my persuasion shouldn’t—from what they’ve been taught—be any of those things. Such traits are reserved just for Christians. I guess I’ve become the silent force for philosophic re-evaluation.”

“And that pleases you no end, doesn’t it?”

“You bet your boots it does! My nickname wasn’t ‘Thorny’ for no good reason.”

“Changing to a more practical topic: I came off without my toiletries. Can I borrow a few things until my grandson brings mine by tomorrow?”

“Of course. What’s mine is yours. May be one problem, though. Last time I went to the store I had to get shampoo because they were out of realpoo.”

“So long as you have some of that stuff that’s used to improve the aroma of the picnic pest?”

“You mean the de-oder ant of course.”

“You’re pretty sharp for an old guy.”

“I have a secret about that. All these years I’ve managed to remain 18 inside my head.”

“Must say your disguise is great, Harry.”

“Should be. I’ve been working to perfect it for over 85 years. By the time I’m 90, I suspect very few will be able to discern my secret.”

“And, asked the young interviewer, how have you maintained that youthful mindset?”

“Glad you asked. I just continued to behave like a teenager: never stand when I can sit; never stay awake in boredom when I can sleep; never walk when I can ride; never volunteer when I can stay uninvolved; never stop eating until the plate is forcefully removed; and always take a best scenario, proactive, approach with any females who come into view and replay all fantasy-related images over and over again whether they are actual or merely flights of my imagination.”

“Sounds like a teen guy for sure but I can’t imagine that it truly describes you. You’ve got to do better than that.”

“Honestly, my mental self-image just stopped moving on well before I became twenty. I have no better explanation. How about you?”

“Seldom stopped to think about it I guess. I resent it when my family treats me like a child, I do know that. Most of my life I’ve imagined myself close to my actual age, I guess.”

“I suggest you give 18 a try again. It’s a great age. Minimal responsibility, lots of girls, financial help from home, a place to sleep, free food, wonderful as yet unanswered questions to pursue, a strong attractive body, new mental and physical skills to use and practice, a life to plan, goals to set, problems to solve and all within the safe haven of a loving family.”

“I wonder how many eighteen year olds realize how great things are at that moment in life.”

“Virtually none is my bet. That’s the joy of still being eighteen at eighty-five. Now, I can and do appreciate it.”

“Your position is absurd, you know.”

“I told you I loved the absurd.”

“So you did. Now you’ve proved it.”

“You think I’m certifiable?”

“I think you’re the most intriguing human being I’ve ever encountered. An interesting mix of the thoughtful, serious, student and the playful child. I can tell life is going to be interesting here.”

“Speaking of the absurd, what if this conversation had been transcribed and widely circulated for others to assess,

use if they can, and enjoy if they will?”
“Now THAT would be absurd!”

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STORY NINE:
The Johnny Appleseed of Smiles
An autobiographical glimpse
by Tom Gnagey

(A true-life odyssey of personal discovery by a five-year-old boy, suddenly possessed with magical personal powers!)

When I was five years old, I discovered something truly remarkable about myself. I possessed absolutely awesome magical powers! It's true!! By merely smiling at Grumpy old Mr. Graves, I could transform his mean looking, perennially scary face, into a happy, grinning, pleasure center.

It gets even better! When I would sidle up beside him and begin talking, grumpy old Mr. Graves would speak back to me, and, I observed, in a most pleasant tone and manner.

Well, every kid in town knew that grumpy old Mr. Graves had never smiled in his entire long, long, life, and that he only spoke when absolutely necessary - like when ordering things in stores and such. So, you can understand how I, and all of my friends, were fully convinced that I possessed magnificent magical powers, never before known in the entire history of man. I fantasized about the possibility that I had, in reality, come from another planet - Grinton, perhaps - having been sent to Earth to save mankind.

Buddy, the one, nay-saying, disbeliever in the group, bet me my powers weren't strong enough to get a smile out of Miss Terry (Miss Terry the Terrible, as she was known). She

had taught 8th grade math since time began - or so the story went. A rare, breath-holding hush fell over that gathering of my devoted, fellow, pre-school followers, as, chin up, I fearlessly accepted Buddy's challenge.

It was widely accepted among the younger set in those parts, that Miss Terry's cheeks had been formed without the necessary muscles required to pull them into a smile. It was also common knowledge that her heart had been formed from a lump of blackest coal, thereby explaining why she possessed no feelings of kindness, whatsoever!

I had my job cut out for me - no doubt about that!

Push came to shove one cold February morning at precisely seven thirty-five, as Miss Terry predictably left her home for the walk to school. With four witnesses hiding in the shrubs that lined the sidewalk, I met her at her gate. I opened it for her saying, "Good morning, Miss Terry," in as cheery a voice and with as smiley a face as I could muster, considering the significant distraction of my chest busting, run-away, thumping heart.

"Well, Good morning to you, Master Tommy and thank you so much for opening the gate. You're becoming quite the young gentleman."

There was a smile on her face. Perhaps just a hint, but I had seen a smile. Both corners of her mouth turned up and that certainly qualified as a smile, even if it had lasted only a second. I sure hoped that at least one of the other guys had been close enough to verify it!

Apparently, my young compatriots were less well hidden than they should have been, for as she passed each one, she nodded her head, again smiled that fleeting smile, and - by name - bade them each, "Good morning."

From that day forward, I proudly carried the nickname, "Ol' M-1," (the Magic One).

That night it came to me, that not only had I caused her to smile and be pleasant to me, I had also, passed on the urge for her to pleasantly greet others she would meet that day! The overwhelming feeling of absolute power surged throughout my young being.

In the weeks following the discovery of my awesome, new found powers, I contemplated, all quite seriously, how I

should use them. I considered several marvelous secret identities ("Smileman," and "The Grinning Guy"), complete with cape, cowl and coral tights, but, seeing as my friends already knew about my powers, I decided there would really be no way to keep secret, even such a fine alter ego.

My own hero, at five (and in some ways, even today, I suppose), was Johnny Appleseed. His unselfish seeding of the Midwestern United States with fruit to feed a generation that he would never even know, had made a tremendous impact on me. In my home, an altruistic approach to living was the cornerstone of our value system, also, and had been thoughtfully imparted to me even by that early age.

I remember - as if it were yesterday - that April morning when I awoke at daybreak, sat up straight in my bed and said out loud: "I'll become the Johnny Appleseed of Smiles."

I scrambled into my pin striped coveralls (as I called them), sped down stairs, and stopped off in Mom and Pop's bedroom only long enough to solemnly take my mother's hand in mine and make this earnest request: "From now on, Mom, please call me Johnny."

Then, off I put to begin my mission in life, and may I just add, it has been a grand and rewarding mission (even - alas - without the snazzy, corral, tights!).

By age six I noticed that my friends would often get the same pleasant looks and cheery conversation from those at whom they would flash a smile. Rather than being in any way disheartened by their parallel success, I just figured that somehow, I had been able to mystically impart some small portion of my magic to them. What a powerfully helpful guy I was becoming! I knew my parents were proud of me for it, even though, for some unexplainable reason, they opted to continue calling me Tommy.

As a child, I didn't, of course, understand the psychological principles behind my 'powers,' though I did pretty accurately comprehend the sociological impact. Treat people - even total strangers - with kindness and respect, and most will immediately be affected in two major, positive ways:

First, they will relax and acquire a reassuring sense of personal safety and trust as they are reminded that there truly are friendly and comfortable people out there in their World.

Second, except for the most shy or vilest of the lot, they tend to pass on that pleasant, reassuring, experience - that Positive Social Encounter - to at least the next several people they, themselves, meet.

This ripple effect is unbelievable. At seven I had calculated that if I performed my magic on just two people early each morning, and each of them did the same with only two others and so on down the line - repeated just nine more times - that by nine A.M., over one thousand folks would have been "smilized" (as I had come to call the process). Considering that there were only 704 people in my little town, (well, 706 if you read the sign on the north end of town) that meant that quite a few got a double dose, which seemed all quite fitting, considering the generalized early morning grumpiness I had encountered on the west side of town. I always tried to smilize Mr. Miller, the rural mailman, before he began his five A.M. route. That way, I assumed, he could smilize the entire surrounding country-side.

Presently, I noticed a new aspect to this whole smilizing thing: My mere presence (even without a smile on my face or a cheery greeting from my mouth) brought out smiles and happy conversation from most all of those I'd meet. The grown-ups would all grin in my direction, chat with me a while, and pat me on my head. Wow! That seemed to prove it, all right. I could even smile telepathically!! What a revelation!

Now, you may not care to understand anymore about smilizing than I did at age six, and that's fine. Just smile your way through the byways of your life, offer pleasant greetings to those you meet, and manage a simple friendly nod to those who are beyond earshot. You will become a major and important player in smilizing the faces and warming the hearts of all America (and beyond!). (You see, I've recently discovered that I can now transfer my magical powers to others by merely writing things for them to read. Will wonders never cease!!!)

If, however, you care to pursue the philosophical, sociological, and psychological aspects of the process, read on.

The basic social / psychological fact of the matter is this: A World or neighborhood or household, populated by

unhappy, discontent, suspicious or angry people, is an uncomfortable, if not an outright frightening and hurtful place in which to live. When populated by happy, helpful, content, trusting, and caring people, life can be grand.

The basic philosophic premise is this: Whether motivated by an altruistic desire to improve the lot of all mankind, or merely by the more self-centered desire to live a comfortable life, un-hassled by angry, maladjusted people, and to be freed from the significant dollar costs stemming from mental illness, crime and such, helping the people of the World to become happier and better adjusted, greatly eases and improves your own, and everyone else's, state of affairs. Not to do so, inevitability hurts everyone, including you, and just may eventually cause the destruction of the human species.

The basic method is this - the Positive Social Encounter: People who practice P.S.E., both socially and in business, thought-fully attempt to make each encounter with another person, a positive, comfortable, self-esteem providing, experience. We want that other person to leave us feeling good about us, him, and the nature of the population in general. This builds a sense of trust, belonging, acceptance, importance, and ultimately, allows a secure and caring relationship within the family of man. People who feel that way are quite likely to become positive, contributing, pleasant, easy to get along with folks! What a grand World that will be!!

No one dares be too busy for this simple, gentle activity. How much extra time does it take to smile or nod or say, "Good morning," as you pass someone on the sidewalk or in the hall? None, of course. It's not an undertaking that can be fully successful when practiced by only a few - though every practitioner helps. So, let us make it a point to smile, nod, chat, listen, support, please and thank you, our ways through each encounter, every day. Mankind will be glad you did. You will be glad you did. There is no finer, spirit cleansing, feeling than to lie in bed at night knowing that because of your own positive efforts during the day just past, the World is a better, happier, place than you had found it that morning.

Recently, and partly due, I suppose to the fact my hair

is now gray and my walk has slowed a bit, I have discovered an interesting twist to the whole smiling process. For most of my life, when someone in a car and I on foot, would approach an intersection simultaneously, even though I had the right of way, I would smile, wave, and motion the car to go ahead of me. Most drivers smiled back and I assume they got my message that there truly were some nice guys left in their World (at worst, I had given them no reason to be angered by being slowed on their way to some place important to them).

These days, I often assert my right and move out into the intersection, but as I get to the mid-way point, I always turn and wave at the driver, mouthing a big, "Thank you." My theory is this: Before, when I merely motioned them on, they realized that I was a good guy. Now, from my, 'thank you,' to them, they not only know I'm a good guy, but by letting me go first, they also understand that THEY are a good guy. And how will folks who see themselves as good guys act toward others they are about to meet? Perhaps all these years I have been missing the very best aspect of this smiling process. I'm pleased I finally slowed down enough to discover it! We must each believe we're a good guy!

End note: The old brain - that part of our brain that we humans share with the lower animals - allows us to become selfishly angry and vengeful in order to survive in the kill or be killed world of the wolves, sharks and tigers. The new brain, possessed only by us humans, allows us to easily skip right over those primitive angry and revenge reactions, and, instead, act as the calm, rational, logical, helpful, caring, beings, only we humans, in all of the known universe, can be. To do less, renounces and abandons our humanity, and lowers us to the level of I believe that along with this magnificent, fleeting, privilege to be this human being that we are, comes the responsibility to utilize those absolutely unique, higher plane powers that have been passed on to us, alone.

If you are prone to exhibit those lower-animal responses of anger, rage, and revenge, take time and learn how to use the new - the exclusively human - part of your brain instead. There are a wide variety of counselors, psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists, clergymen and other professionals available to assist you. Chances are that

it is not your fault for having been taught to respond with that automatic, self-centered, old-brain-anger, but now it's time to grow up and replace those primitive patterns with the more positive, helpful, growth-producing, human-like traits.

Your approach to living can be that of a careful problem solver: calm, happy, comfortable, rational, caring and rewarding. It need not focus on those self-defeating, unproductive, angry, vengeful feelings, or on the personal unfairness often read into certain situations. Every smile brings you one step closer.

My wish for you is an actively positive approach to living your life, so that you, and those around you, can all experience the comfortable, helpful, happy, fruitful life that is the most precious birthright of every human being.

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**STORY TEN:
I HAVE A YOUNG FRIEND . . .
by Tom Gnagey
(Written back in 2007)**

I have a young friend. His name is Jason. We met in a Laundromat. I opened a dryer and there he was – well, not spinning to a stop inside; he was underfoot, cleaning out the lint from beneath the unit I always used. He was fourteen. I was sixty-three. He is now nineteen. I'm fifty-seven. Young people have a way of reigniting my youth – or is that indigestion? He loves hot food and foolishly I indulge right along beside him. He has pizza. I have salad. He has hot wings. I have skinless, baked, chicken. He has chilly. I have tomato soup. Like I said, I indulge right along beside him. I'm awake all night with fire in my tummy. He, I'm told, sleeps like a baby.

We've never run a foot race but I just think I might have been able to take him at his age. I figure in eighteen years – when we're both 39 – I'll challenge him – my front porch to the swing set at Walker Park. Come to think of it I'm not even sure if thirty-nine-year-old men can still run, can they?

Early on in our relationship, Jason had an English assignment in which he was to describe an acquaintance. He chose me. (I assume he had others! Perhaps he thought I was the only one physically incapable of retaliation!) [Shortened and paraphrased just a bit.]

“He's an elderly man, quite young for his age. He's fat but moves thin. He's tall but his roundness makes him seem shorter. He keeps Tums lined up across the top of his alarm

clock like firemen awaiting their bell and boots. He clears his throat a lot – not sure why. At first I thought it was to get my attention – so I would prepare to listen to his words. Now, I've decided it's more to get his own attention so he doesn't forget what's on his mind or, perhaps, to keep himself from nodding off as I ramble on about techno things his generation just doesn't seem to get. He has this thing he does. He seldom comes right out and offers unsolicited advice to me but he often makes a statement and then runs off at the mouth about some totally unrelated topic so I tend to forget what he had said in the first place. Later on, though, when I'm in need of making an important decision, these great answers bubble up to me from somewhere deep inside my mind. The odd part is they always sound like Grampa speaking – it's what I call him – and I suspect they contain the essence of those hit and run things that he zings at me from time to time. It is an interesting strategy since I understand that guys my age tend to reject all advice out of hand. You'd think he just might have been my age once. Most old guys I know don't remember how it really was."

What a kid. What a kid, indeed! A number of years ago, Jason and I mutually adopted one another – in spirit if in not in law. It just happened. It makes me – his grandfather – seven years younger than his father. (The marvels of modern fertility clinics!) But, you ain't heard nothin' yet!

Let me back up a step. Jason and his sister were adopted by their grandparents. Since Jason is, thereby, his grandfather's son, that makes him his sister's uncle and her, his niece, and him her nephew. The 'brothers' with whom he grew up – his grandparent's sons – are in reality his uncles and since he is his uncles' brother, that makes Jason his own uncle, I believe.

Now, if Jason is my grandson, his father has to be my son. So, Jason's grandfather will also be both Jason's father and Jason's childrens' great grandfather not to mention my uncle's great nephew.

It makes his family tree more like a quivering bramble bush, I suppose. And here I sit with only a few lonely branches on mine. Perhaps if I pat the spot on the limb beside me, Jason will come and keep me company. What am

I saying? He's already here!

We've learned a lot from each other. For example: that fifty-years difference in ages really doesn't matter. (Me having entered my second childhood may have helped!); that vast differences in philosophical beliefs need not post any obstacles to mutual love and admiration. (When friendship comes first, tolerance and acceptance follow blindly, in the best sense of the word.); That even huge gulfs between knowledge and interests cannot interfere with a relationship when folks focus on the human element. (Rather than on toys, or competition, or passions, or fleeting pursuits.); That being different in a thousand ways can never intrude on the most basic of all human potentials – to love. (If we can so easily accept differences between us and our loved ones, can we – must we – not accept differences between us and most others as well?)

I once asked Jason how he thought it was that we had come to become such good friends. His ready response troubled me at first but as I have considered it since, I believe it to be profound. He said: "We've grown to become such good friends because we don't want to kill each other."

What he was saying was that at the outset we had an unspoken agreement: each of us had the right to our own life so long as we didn't threaten the others right to his life. It was from that basic expectation of peace between us that all these other wonder-filled things could then take seed, blossom, and bloom. Would the world not be a different place today if all humans lived by Jason's basic expectation – the peace principle? Just think of the world we would be experiencing if all humans awoke each morning telling themselves, "I don't want to kill anybody today. I don't wish anybody dead, or harmed, or mistreated, or sick, or hungry, or neglected," and on and no down the obvious list.

I sit here writing at this computer with my four, earned, university degrees, and yet – it seems – my greatest teacher has been an unkempt, unrefined, lad, I literally stumbled upon by chance in the most unlikely of places. With him around, my spirit continues to grow ever younger. I eagerly anticipate the exciting revelations still to come our ways during these next thirty-nine years together – at which time Jason will turn fifty-

seven and I, of course, will celebrate my nineteenth birthday!

Math was never my forte. Please don't burst my happy bubble!

STORY TWELVE:
The Collision of Pop and the Bastard
Based on a true experience - more or less -
Condensed in duration and intensity.
By Tom Gnagey

Marcus was twelve but that was not why he was so angry. Marcus was black but that was not why he was so angry. Marcus had lived with his grandmother since he arrived on this Earth, but that was not why he was so angry. Truth be known, Marcus had no idea why he was so angry but Marcus knew he seethed with unquenched anger that boiled deep inside on a raging sea of blinding hate, and that the only relief he experienced came while he was inflicting pain or instilling fear. It was his sole source of power, and power was his sole source of personal worth. Marcus was 'Hurt'. In The Flats, Hurt was Marcus.

The Flats was a small area at the edge of the old section of the city. It wasn't a slum or ghetto nor was it middle class. The Flats was The Flats – a multi-hued area where folks worked for a living and mixed without enduring incident due to tint or mien or circumstances or accent.

At the edge of The Flats, in the buffer zone between it and the folks with nice cars and diplomas and money for extras, lived an old man, Harry by name and face; his once closely trimmed dark beard and carefully styled hair had faded to white and were longer and less well cared for than back in the days when such things mattered to him. He had long ago shed his need for stuff and riches and prestige and power. As his mature years crept upon him, he was often astonished at

how he had ever allowed such things to take hold of him and seem so fully attractive and important and necessary. Had he not understood about the predictable and perhaps necessary shallowness of youth, he would have been bothered that he had let himself succumb to society's most insidious deceptions.

Harry led a simple life and Harry loved his simple life. He had occupied the same three, basement, rooms in the ancient, towering, Bergman Hotel for two decades. The hotel had been an elegant place back in his days of impeccable grooming, pricy cars, and prestigious employment as a writer at Wilson's – the best advertising firm with the best clients and the best commissions in the city. He, his bride, and a month's income, had honeymooned there in the special suite with the heart-shaped bed on the 14th floor.

Harry was white and saw that as fully irrelevant. Harry was 72 and he was fine with that. Harry's wife had died far too young and he soothed his sometimes sadness with his ever-available, precious collage of unfading, happy memories. Harry not only tolerated and accepted his elder years with its several limiting aspects but he reveled in it. The morning he was first unable to reach the top shelf of his kitchen cabinet his response had been, "How interesting!" When he found he could no longer bend down to tie his shoes he uttered, "Time for Velcro." When his joints began signaling their resistance to simple exertion he smiled, "A wonderful excuse to luxuriate longer and more often in the bathtub."

Marcus flailed at the life and self he hated in the only ways he knew, every day sinking further into a deeper and more inescapable mire, which he helplessly understood threatened his very existence. Harry loved the life that continued to emerge for him, eagerly embracing the good and comfortable and finding inspired ways of accommodating the less-good. Each was determined to conquer life's adversities, and to survive and adjust to his needs and circumstances. Each was fully – powerfully – committed to his take on life and how it should be lived. Could The Flats possibly survive their impending encounter – the confrontation of Marcus and Harry – the collision of right and right – truth and truth?

* * *

It was the most forceful command that a lad with a changing voice could muster. It met Harry in the darkened alley as the old man made his way home that night.

“Gimme your money!”

Harry stopped and turned to see the form of a disheveled, slightly-built, young man silhouetted against the blue-toned light of the street beyond. He took three determined steps toward the boy who stopped, clearly taken aback by the old man’s unexpected tactic.

“I don’t think I will, son.”

“I’m not your son, old man. If you want to know the truth I’m a son of a bitch – you know what that really means?”

“I do. It appears you believe that has made life difficult for you and perhaps you even use it as an excuse for despicable behavior such as this.”

“I take care of myself okay. No despicable about it. Now, gimme your money.”

He held out his open palm and countered Harry’s three steps with one of his own as if it were a done deal.

“Again, I say, I don’t think I will.”

“You got no choice. I’m young and strong and you’re old and weak.”

“You know that for sure do you – that I’m old and weak? Maybe I’m a veteran Karate instructor on my way home from teaching a class of national champions. Maybe I’m a retired DI from the Marines where I spent thirty years teaching young men a dozen different ways to kill with their bare hands. Perhaps I have a gun here in this pocket into which I just slipped my left hand. It wouldn’t be prudent for an old man to walk these streets at night unprotected in some way, now, would it?”

The comments were met with a long moment of silence, then:

“Or you could be bluffing and got none a that.”

“A possibility, I suppose. And you are willing – at this moment – to bet your very life that’s true? That was a question that requires your immediate answer, son.”

More silence. Some fidgeting. The old man was unable to see the boy’s face in the deep shadows of the building. He took one more step toward the lad and held out

his hand as if for a shake. There they stood, no more than four feet apart, in a darkness engulfed standoff.

“What’s that about?”

“My hand? Usually an extended hand is an offer to shake.”

“Why? You must be crazy.”

“I’ve been called worse. The epithet I like best is eccentric.”

“And you don’t talk like real people – Despicable? Prudent? Epithet? Eccentric? You some kind of egghead or somethin’?”

Harry noted with interest that the boy had been able to remember those words – well, mostly. He replied.

“You talk like you don’t have any idea what’s really going on – Old? Weak? Egghead? Not even knowing about shaking hands?”

“I know about shaking hands.”

“Good. Then at least you can prove that to me.”

Harry extended his hand for a second time.

“I don’t gotta prove nothin’ to you, pops.”

“Pops. I like that. That’s what you can call me. Can I know what you want to be called?”

“Bastard!”

“Were your hurling that at me as an insult or was that the answer to my question – what you want me to call you?”

“Both, if that’s how you want it?”

“If by that you’re actually giving me a choice, I would really prefer neither. Don’t you have a name – let me rephrase that since of course you have a name. Won’t you tell me your name?”

“Just go with what you already said.”

Harry had to think – replaying the conversation.

“Oh, you mean, son?”

The boy nodded, although it was nearly imperceptible.

“That is excellent! I was never blessed with a son, you know – well, of course you don’t know but you will after we get to know each other better.”

“You are the strangest old coot I’ve ever met.”

“I believe that I do prefer ‘Pops’ to ‘old coot’ – again if I have any say in the matter. How about we get that shake

taken care of, now?”

The boy moved his arms from where they had been hanging at his sides, to what he felt was a more macho, hands on hips, position. It seemed like progress to Harry who closed the gap to a reasonable handshaking distance. The boy took his hand and squeezed it with as much force as his young, strong, muscles could produce.

“I see. It appears that you enjoy hurting people. My old hands are no match for your strong, young, ones. You surprise me with your great strength.”

The boy eased off, went through with the plainly unpracticed shake, and let go, dropping his arms back to his sides.

“Here’s an idea, son . . .”

Harry hesitated just a moment to see the reaction to that ‘name’ – silence with, perhaps, the slightest straightening of his young, narrow, shoulders.

“. . . It’s almost nine. Every night at nine I fix myself a cup of cocoa – hot chocolate.”

“I know cocoa. I’m not dumb.”

“I had no intention of implying that. My proposal is this. You come back to my rooms with me and we can both have cocoa at my kitchen table while we talk and learn about each other.”

“What makes you think I want to learn about you – old coot?”

“Like you said, you’re not dumb. To have become as smart as you seem to be, you surely understand how important it is to learn all the new things you can.”

It had been a set up and that didn’t evade the boy’s notice but he was intrigued by the old guy. He was different from anybody he’d ever met. Perhaps there might be something useful to learn – the way un-dumb folks go about things.

“Maybe. I can still defend myself if you try anything.”

“I think you meant to say if I try anything untoward.”

“No I didn’t. What’s untoward?”

“Troublesome or improper.”

“Okay then. No untoward stuff and I might tag along, but just ‘cause you seem to have your heart set on it.”

Harry turned and pointed down the alley.

“Third door on the left. It’s unmarked.”

Harry stepped off. The boy followed a bit behind and off to Harry’s right. At the door, Harry stopped and reached above the door frame, retrieving a key, unlocking the latch, then returning the key to its former resting place.

“You’re dumb as well as crazy and eccentric, Pops.”

Harry half-turned toward him as he pushed the door open and motioned the boy inside. The boy stood his ground.

“And why is that – that you characterize me as dumb?”

“You just showed me where you keep the key. All I need to do is sit up there on the fire escape, wait for you to leave, let myself inside, and rob the place.”

“Yes. I suppose you could do that. I tend to trust my friends, however.”

“I ain’t your friend and I ain’t never gonna be your friend. There ain’t really no such things as friends. Everybody hurts you all the same.”

“And when people hurt you I suppose you hurt back.”

“Damn right! Maybe you ain’t so dumb after all. You see how it is.”

“I am so sorry that’s how things seem to you.”

“Cut out the crap. Nobody’s never been sorry for me about nothin’.”

Harry put his hand on the boy’s shoulder and gently urged him inside. He went without resistance, lingering, perhaps, for the slightest moment over the unexpected tenderness of the old man’s touch.

Harry always left a table lamp on when he knew he would be returning after dark. He switched on the overhead light. The boy looked around – making no secret of his interest.

“Nothin’ much in here worth stealin’,” he said.

Whether that was merely an honest appraisal or a slip from thought into word, was not obvious.

It was the living room – a couch, a recliner, a TV, books in several bookcases, a blue and white braided rug, and pictures on the colorfully papered walls. The kitchen was behind that and the bedroom still further back. Harry moved to the kitchen and flipped on the light. He didn’t wait for the

boy to follow, noticing he had been drawn to the books. A few minutes later the youngster entered the kitchen.

“I guess you are a egghead. I never heard a none a them books.”

“A wonder-filled chance to make some fascinating new friends, then.”

“What?”

“The characters in those books. They are some of my best friends.”

The boy twirled his finger beside his head. Harry smiled and nodded. The boy shook his head. Rugs, books, pictures, a kitchen table draped in a tablecloth – he had entered a world quite foreign to him. He imagined there were even sheets and pillowcases and dressers. And the old man! The longer he was with him the more he tended to reserve judgment, but at that point it was a tossup between crazy and careless – mildly crazy or very careless.

“You like marshmallows in your cocoa?” Harry asked.

“I guess so.”

Clearly cocoa was not a staple in his life.

“How about toast? I sometimes fix hot buttered toast to dip in my cocoa. How about you?”

The boy shrugged. Again, it seemed to be foreign territory.

“How about you fix some for us. The bread is in that cabinet and you see the toaster on the counter.”

At first the boy hesitated but then took up the challenge and soon had two slices browning against the red-glowing wires. He went about the task methodically and seemed fascinated by the entire process. There was nothing routine for him about making toast.

“Butter in the fridge – behind the flap in the door.”

Again, the boy followed the suggestion. In a surprise move he spoke.

“Knife in this drawer?” he asked, pointing.

Harry pointed to another as he stirred the simmering concoction on the stove.

“I like a little vanilla in mine,” Harry said. “That okay with you?”

“Sure. Seems dumb though – mixing vanilla and

chocolate together. How ya supposed to taste either one?"

Harry smiled but chose not to respond as he tore off two sheets of paper towels and handed them to the boy.

"We will use these in place of plates tonight. Cups are up there."

Soon the toast was buttered and delivered to the table on the makeshift plates and placed with some care beside the two cups. Harry poured the hot drinks and sat a small bowl of mini marshmallows on the table. He pulled out a chair and took a seat. The boy followed his lead. Harry cut his toast in half and handed the knife to the boy who did the same.

The dipping began. The sipping began. The nibbling began.

"I love this stuff," Harry said nodding his head. "Doc says it's not really good for me, especially with real butter on white bread, but I've lived this long so guess it hasn't hurt me all that much."

"It's good, Pops," the boy managed, mimicking Harry's head movements and apparently surprised by his own comment.

"My name is actually Harry if that's of any concern to you."

"I'm Marcus if that's of any concern to you."

It had been delivered with the slightest hint of a smile rising from one corner of his mouth."

"You married?" Harry asked.

The unexpected absurdity provoked an unguarded, full out, chuckle and wonderfully genuine grin.

"Workin' on my third wife right now."

Aha! Harry thought. A sense of humor buried there inside a rather good mind. Marcus continued.

"I guess you're not married."

"Was once. She died a long time ago. Never remarried – unlike you."

Another set of smiles – serious smiles, exchanged directly between the two faces, eye to eye, person to person, acknowledging that the contest was joined.

"There's at least one more cup if you're interested," Harry said tending to his own dipping and nibbling. "Help yourself when you're ready."

Marcus finished in one extended swallowing as if to make sure he got more. He took his cup to the stove and in the process spilled some onto the burner. He put down the cup and pan and stepped back.

"I do that all the time, Marcus. You can use paper towels to clean it up. Be careful not to burn yourself. Best to get it up before it dries, you know."

Marcus blotted and wiped and then stood as if waiting for Harry's approval. Without taking anything more than a cursory look, Harry nodded.

"Thanks. As good as you are with toast and paper towels I can't imagine why two wives left you. I'd think you'd be quite the catch."

That time the boy's smile was contained by a seriously quizzical look – furrowed brow, raised lower lip, and an ever so slightly cocked head.

"You didn't yell. Ain't you mad at me?"

"Goodness no. I learned long ago that we humans mess up sometimes; I certainly do. I've never found that yelling at anybody ever fixed anything. And, when you just expect that folks will normally goof up sometimes there's no reason to even give such things a second thought. You know what I'll bet?"

"What?"

Harry certainly had the boy's attention. He leaned toward the boy and spoke in a hushed, confidential, tone.

"I'll just bet that even though you spilled some cocoa this evening, the sun will still come up in the morning and our old planet will keep on spinning throughout the day."

That got a smile and a thoughtful nod as Marcus was introduced to a brand-new concept – Pop's hierarchy of the truly significant.

"There's plenty left,' the boy noted holding out the pot as if to offer proof. "I'll split it with you."

"How considerate. Yes. That would be nice."

Harry would not have turned down that offer under any circumstance.

"You better pour, you know?" Marcus said stepping back from the stove.

"Nonsense. How is a guy supposed to get better at

pouring if he doesn't keep trying to pour?"

"I don't get you, Harry Pop."

"Is that anything like a Tootsie Pop?"

"Sort of, but hairy – yuk!"

Another chuckle and clearly more bewilderment. Marcus poured. The cocoa went directly into the cups without so much as one stray drip. The boy sat and piddled with his drink. Harry spoke.

"So, Marcus, what do you do for a living?"

Smiles.

"I'm in sixth grade. I guess for a living I rob old men."

"I'm still in danger, then, am I."

"Probably, if you want me to be honest about it. I could get five bucks for the toaster and twenty for the microwave. I'm sure there's more stuff I could move. Maybe some jewelry in your bedroom. That's where I usually find it."

"Sounds like I should keep that key in my pocket."

"If you're smart, but I can get in here without it in fifteen seconds flat. I'll prove it to you if you want me to."

"I'll take your word for it. So far I have no reason not to trust your word."

"I was trying to rob you, for God's sake. How can you say that?"

"Oh that's right you said you were going to but then you didn't. Maybe I shouldn't trust what you say."

"You know what I mean."

"And I hope you know what I mean – until you actually prove to me that I can't trust you I'm going to trust you. That's how I have always lived my life. I've been burned a few times but in all the other thousands and thousands of cases I haven't. I've found that most people are fully trustworthy."

"Not me. I never trust nobody. Everybody's out there just waitin' to screw you."

"So that, I suppose, makes it okay for you to do it to them – even first, maybe – because you know they are all just waiting to get you?"

"Right!"

"So just how is it that I am going to try to get you?"

"That's a whole different thing."

"It can't be if everybody is out to screw you and that's

the lame excuse you use to justify your malevolent acts toward them.”

“Justify? Malevo . . . whatever?”

“Justify, to give good reason for, or in your case, to use as your excuse. Malevo whatever – mal ev o lent, wicked or mean hearted.”

Harry printed the word on a piece of paper towel and slid it across the table. Marcus picked it up, glanced at it, and, after folding it with more care than Harry would have expected, put it in his pocket.

“If you’re finished, let’s do up these dishes,” Harry suggested mostly just to see the young man’s reaction.

The old man went about the process of gathering up the cups and placing them in the sink along with the silverware and aluminum pot. He ran hot water, added detergent, and began the process. Marcus remained at the table. As the first cup hit the drain board, Harry tossed a dish towel toward the surprised young man. With no real reluctance, he stood and walked to the cabinet, picking up the cup and giving it the thorough drying typical from a boy his age – three seconds flat. He leaned back against the counter, arms folded, clearly awaiting the old man’s next offering.

“Will your folks be worried, you being out this late?”

“Ain’t late. Nobody’s never worried about me. It’s just me and gram. She’s asleep by seven. Goes to work at four in the morning. She’s the morning cook at the diner over on 42nd.”

“I’ll have to save up my pennies and give her cooking a try some morning.”

Marcus didn’t respond but his head was clearly at work.

When the dishes were finished, Harry opened a cabinet door and removed a key from a cup hook. He turned toward Marcus.

“Here’s a spare key to the front door. If you are going to burglarize my home, I’d rather you wouldn’t damage the lock. Finding the money to get it fixed would work a genuine hardship on my budget.”

Marcus hesitated so Harry placed it on the counter.

“It’s past my bedtime and even though I am genuinely enjoying this time together with my new friend, I really must

get to bed. I hope you don't find me rude."

Marcus shrugged his shoulders, furrowed his brow, and took a breath preparing to respond but he could find none. The old man intrigued him. That didn't mean he trusted him. That didn't mean he'd ever drink cocoa with him again. That didn't mean he wouldn't come back and strip the place clean of every saleable piece in sight. It just meant that the old man intrigued him.

With some drama attached to the move, he picked up the key and put it in his pocket. He waited a long moment for some response signaling the offer had been a sham. It didn't come. Without another word – no 'thank you', no 'it's been interesting', no 'see you later' – Marcus showed himself out. Harry smiled and chuckled as he heard the tell-tale, 'click, click', signifying the door was being locked upon exit. Perhaps it was to protect the old man. More likely, it was to see if it really worked.

A week passed and their paths did not cross again. On two occasions, when Harry returned from walks, he found the door unlocked. Both times as he entered, he wondered if he would find an empty apartment or perhaps come upon a cartoon-watching lad occupying his recliner and eating his chips. He found neither. He came to suspect that hidden somewhere nearby, the lad was watching for his reaction.

Then one afternoon as he entered the alley on the last leg of his return trip from the market, he spotted the boy sitting on the cobbled, alley surface beside his door. Harry waited until upon him to speak.

"Good afternoon. Good to see you again. Wife number three finally kick you out so you came to live with me?"

It drew a smile and Marcus got to his feet.

"No. Me and my old lady's doin' fine. I can give you details if you want."

Details of an eleven-year old's cavorting with his 'old lady' was the last thing about which Harry wanted to hear.

"I'll pass. Will I need my key today?"

"No. It's open. I'm guarding the place, though. I always guard it when it's open – not always from down here."

Down here. It implied some sort of aerial observation post – a roof perhaps like the one across the alley. The lad

became more and more interesting to the old man, as apparently had he to the lad.

Marcus turned the knob and pushed the door open.

“Thank you, son. How about hefting one of these bags as well?”

The transfer was made without comment. Marcus followed him inside, closing and locking the door, before moving to the kitchen. Harry began the task of putting things away. Marcus took items from the sacks and handed them to him. It became an effective arrangement.

“Thank you. That’s that. Is there something I can do for you or is this just a social call?”

Not waiting for a response, Harry walked back into the living room.

“I need to sit and rest my old legs. They still get me wherever I want to go; I just have to give them better care than I used to.”

He took a seat in his recliner – the only place he really ever sat in the room. With so few visitors he sometimes wondered why he even kept the couch – some needy person could surely make better use of it. Still, it remained. Harry liked visitors and, perhaps, its presence provided hope that seating might again someday be needed.

“I was just passing by,” Marcus managed, standing in the kitchen doorway.

“I’m glad you were. Been thinking about you.”

“What about me?”

“Oh, things like how school is going, hoping your grandmother is well, wondering how you have been spending your time – things like that.”

As if it required a response the boy offered one.

“School sucks, gram’s okay, I been beating the crap out a fifth graders and robbin’ old men.”

“Glad your gram is doing well.”

“I said school sucks and I’m beatin’ the crap out a fifth graders and robbin’ old men.”

“Yes. I heard. My hearing is still pretty adequate when the background noise is low like it is in here.”

“You not gonna yell at me?”

“What makes you think I’d do that?”

“Can I sit?”

“Of course. What a poor host I have been. You never have to ask that when you’re here.”

“I really ain’t been beatin’ or robbin’ nobody.”

“Then your purpose must have been to get a rise out of me.”

“I suppose.”

“Why in the world would my response be important to you when you refused my offer of friendship?”

“I never done that.”

“I just figured you actually meant all that stuff you said about how you never let anybody be your friend.”

“You ain’t anybody. I mean you’re different. I’ve done some research.”

“Ah! Good for you. Basing things on facts and not on opinion. I respect that in a person.”

“You want to know what I found out?”

“I must say you’ve whetted my appetite.”

“Whetted?”

“Aroused.”

The boy nodded and Harry suspected carefully filed the word away for future reference.

“You’re a writer – you write books – lots a these in here are books you writ ... wrote ... writed.”

“A good job of research. I have writ, wrote, writed, lots of books. Many for young people your age.”

“I know. I been readin’ ‘em – when you ain’t here.”

“Really. What do you think of those you’ve read?”

“Didn’t you hear me? I’ve been in here while you was out.”

“When I found the door unlocked, I figured as much.”

“I didn’t take nothin’. I could a took the old pocket watch and the wedding ring in your dresser, but I didn’t.”

“I’m certainly glad you didn’t. It was my grandfather’s watch and the wedding band is one of a kind. Both are very precious to me. I’m sure that wasn’t really trespassing – just part of your research into the nature of an eccentric old coot.”

Marcus grinned. He could have offered an, “I’m sorry,” but Marcus didn’t offer, “I’m sorrays.” He did offer a correction.

“Eccentric old, Pop.”

Harry smiled, nodded, and assumed some progress in their friendship – well, relationship. Marcus continued talking, slipping a book off the shelf behind the couch and holding it up, cover toward Harry.

“I liked Chipper*. If I’d a been there I’d a killed his dad. The old people were pretty cool.”

And so was written the first review by Marcus . . . Somebody.

“I think you was the old teacher guy.”

“What makes you think that?”

“He’s patient just like you. Do you ever put yourself into your stories?”

“It’s hard to keep oneself out of a story. You ever write stories?”

“Had to sometimes in school last year. Got F’s. Teacher said he liked my stories but I failed because I don’t get all the commas and colons and run-ons and stuff.”

Harry winced. What a terrible reflection on the educational system, when a lad’s entire creative endeavor is overshadowed by his difficulty fitting it into some arbitrary, formal, structure, fully foreign to his lifelong culture. He managed a smile, anyway.

“I’d like to read your stories if you still have them and would let me see them.”

“I got ‘em. I liked ‘em. I don’t trash stuff I like.”

It had been caefully rendered through an extended look into Harry’s face and by clear design carried several messages. He had more.

“You do with ‘em like the spilled cocoa?”

Without doubt it had been a question of some importance – if esoteric in the nature of its simile.

“Not sure what you mean, son.”

“Ignore the mistakes and stick with what’s important.”

“That’s how I go about my life. I tried to make that clear to you earlier – oh, perhaps I did. I see. I’ll not put you down for anything you’ve written, if that’s your concern.”

“Seein’ the important stuff more than spills and run-ons and like that, huh?”

“Oh, yes. More than any such trivial stuff.”

Marcus hesitated and looked into Harry’s face waiting

expectantly.

“Trivial means the unimportant little stuff.”

The boy nodded.

“How did you learn to write so good?”

“I kept after it and every time some error or problem was pointed out to me I tried to learn some important lesson from it.”

“That’s a good plan, I think. I wish Maynard would get that?”

“I don’t understand.”

“I keep beatin’ the crap out a him but he don’t learn. He keeps comin’ back for more.”

It wasn’t exactly what Harry had intended but one takes what one can get.

“Maybe there’s a lesson in there somewhere for you.”

“I don’t get your point.”

“Maybe if you learned why he kept coming back you’d be closer to solving the problem between you.”

He raised his eyebrows and nodded without commitment.

Marcus turned on the couch, one leg under him, so he faced the old man straight on. Harry figured there was about to be an important moment.

“You’re probably not gonna believe this, Pop, but I ain’t never had nobody to talk to like this.”

“Then I’m truly honored to be a part of it.”

“You really mean that, don’t you?”

“Do I really need to answer that?”

Marcus shrugged and looked a bit uncomfortable before responding.

“No. Not if you’re really like you say you are.”

“I guess you’ll have to prove that for yourself – become completely satisfied about it, I mean.”

Marcus nodded and spent some time inside his own head. Harry sat quietly enjoying the moment and the renewed vigor he felt returning to his legs and feet.

“I told gram about you. She said I should stay away from you.”

“That puts us in a bit of a pickle, then, doesn’t it?”

“I got a plan.”

“I’m always up to listening to plans.”

“I got twenty bucks. I’m going to give it to you so you can go eat at the diner and let gram get to know you. Once she knows you she’ll change her mind. Maybe you two will even hit it off.”

If that implied the suggestion of a possible romantic relationship it needed to be nipped in the bud.

“I will be pleased to meet her but strictly as your gram. It will go no further than that.”

“Cause she’s black, huh?”

“No. It has nothing to do with her – black, white, green, or purple. I’m an old guy not looking to reinvest myself in any kind of a commitment to another person.”

“That include me?”

“Oh, no, son. That’s not at all what I meant. Romance. That’s what I meant.”

“I guess you’re safe then ‘cause me and Amy is all the romance I need right now.”

Harry chuckled. Marcus joined him but had to ask.

“What’s so funny?”

“I love your plain old, straight forward, cut to the chase, honesty. It helps me keep things in perspective.”

“You’re welcome, then.”

That was as close to a socially correct interchange – tied up in manners and all – the two of them had experienced. It warmed Harry’s heart though he made no comment. Something about the, “Your welcome,” emerging before a, “thank you,” tickled the old man and again he smiled.

During the months that passed, Marcus often entered Harry’s place to read and write. He grew to appreciate having Pop around so usually came when he knew the old man would be home. Harry enjoyed the boy’s stories though often winced at the subject matter and vengeful solutions they proposed. It made him wonder what chance that clearly bright young man really had in life. During homework, Harry discovered that most of what he had learned about science and the universe had been wrong but eagerly worked to fix that. In his rush to write during those previous thirty years, he had forgotten how fascinating it was to read and study and learn new things. His mind felt young. His body presented another story.

Having an energetic youngster in his life was both invigorating and exhausting. He would never give up the first in deference to the second, but facts were facts. He napped more often when alone. He learned to stay awake and alert well past nine o'clock. Initially he tried to curb his tendency to worry about the boy – at school, at home, in the neighborhood. Eventually it came to him how that just went with the territory when you cared about another person.

Marcus entered, dropped his backpack by the couch and began talking. It had become their after-school routine.

"You was . . . er were . . . right about Maynard. Did I tell you that?"

Harry hadn't recalled stating a right or wrong type of opinion on the Maynard matter but listened as Marcus continued.

"I asked around. Seems his dad makes him keep coming back at me. Told him it was bein' a coward not to keep facin' me til he beat me. Hell – oops! – Heck, that ain't never gonna happen so now I just tell him to get lost and don't waste no punches in his direction."

"Good for you! Sounds like you found just the right approach."

"Yeah, I did. Your idea helped. You know what I've been thinkin'?"

"Son, I never have any idea whatsoever what's going on in that wonderful head of yours."

Grin!

"Remember when I told you I was just a bastard?"

"I do."

"Well, I've decided that as bastards go, I'm becoming just about the best bastard I've ever heard of."

"Good for you!"

It seemed a hollow three-word response to such a life-changing revelation, but it was the best the man of many words could muster, and he choked, even on them.

Marcus knelt by his backpack and unzipped a pocket. From the look on his face Harry knew he was up to something special. He removed several sheets of paper that had been stapled together along the left margin – like a book. He handed it up to Harry who was sitting in his recliner.

“I got a B- on that last story, Pop. The new teacher gives two grades – one for how good the story is and one for the grammar and spelling and stuff. See here. I got an A+ on the story and a D+ on the stuff. She averaged it out to a B-. I can’t believe it.”

“A ‘B-’ is indeed a fine grade,” Harry said offering his genuine support.

“Not that. The D+. It’s the first time in my life I didn’t get a F on stuff. I think we are a good team in this writin’ thing, don’t you?”

“I do, indeed – a good team. I’ve always known you had it in you and that when the day arrived that you decided to really get down to work, you’d do well.”

“I’ve knowed that ever since that first night – how that is what you thought about me, I mean. You remember that first night, Pop?”

“You mean that night when you almost robbed me, threatened to beat me up, and let me know in no uncertain terms that you never wanted to be my friend – that first night?”

Still kneeling on the floor, Marcus managed a quick smile. He sat back on his legs and looked up into Pop’s face. Their eyes met and fixed on each other. Fully unexpectedly for both of them, tears appeared on their cheeks.

“Thanks, you know,” said the still disheveled, slightly built, young man with the changing voice and determined spirit.

“Thank you, you know,” said the very patient, eccentric, white bearded, old man – his belief in the underlying positive nature of man and the resiliency of the human spirit, fully renewed.

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**STORY TWILVE:
Dr. Mindstien's Unintended Human Disconnect
Tom Gnagey**

[Before you begin reading below, close your eyes and visualize the word, "POSSIBILLITY." Keep it in focus for five seconds. You now possess the 'magical' skill needed to proceed. Enjoy!]

I AM DR. MINDSTIEN, A MATHEMATICIAN. I AM A HERMIT, PLAIN AND SIMPLE. I DISLIKE MOST PEOPLE NOT BECAUSE THEY ARE INNATELY UNLIKABLE BUT BECAUSE I'VE NEVER REQUIRED THEM AS A PART OF MY TIGHTLY FOCUSED LIFE. MOST PEOPLE ARE BY NATURE IMPRECISE BEINGS AND ARE IRRESPONSIBLY SATISFIED BEING THAT WAY. PEOPLE DEPEND ON LANGUAGE AND IN SO DOING FOOL THEMSELVES INTO BELIEVING THEY ARE THEREIN TAKING OR SHOWING A TRUE MEASURE OF EXISTENCE. THEY GO TO GREAT ENDS TO CONFIGURE LANGUAGE AND ITS REPRESENTATIONS IN DECEIVINGLY SPECIFIC AND UNREASONABLY CONVOLUTED WAYS – CASE, TENSE, AGREEMENT. TAKE THE WRITTEN FORM – SENTENCES, PHRASES, PARAGRAPHS, UPPER CASE, LOWER CASE, ITALICIZED, UNDERLINED, LARGE FONT, SMALL FONT, FANCY FONT, PLAIN FONT AND THE WHOLE MYRIAD OF PERIODS, COMMAS, COLONS, AND SUCH, EACH ASPECT DANGEROUSLY IRRESPONSIBLE AND PRETENCIOUS.

MATH3MATICS PROVID3S THE ONLY FULLY ACCURAT3 M3ASUR3 AND R3PR3S3NTATION OF TH3 UNIVERS3 – FROM TH3 TINI3ST SP3CK TO TH3 3NTIR3TY OF TH3 COSMOS. IT HAS B33N MY LIF3'S SIN6ULAR OBJ3CTIV3 TO M3R63 LAN6UA63 AND MATH3MATICS – TO 3MBU3 LAN6UA63 WITH TH3 PR3CISION OF MATH3MATICS IS A MOR3 ACCURAT3 D3SCRIPTION OF TH3 3ND3AVOR.

R3C3NTLY, I HAV3 B36UN 3XP3R13NC1N6 A M3NTAL ANOMALY THAT S33MS TO R3PR3S3NT SOM3 M1S1NT3RPR3TAT1ON BY MY M1ND ABOUT WHAT I M3AN BY ALL THAT. I F16HT TO R3D1R3CT TH3 TR3ND BUT F3AR I AM LO51N6 TH3 5TRU66L3. I DO WR1T3 3V3RYDAY TO R3CORD MY THOU6HT5, QUANDAR135, QU35T1ON5 AND CONCLU51ON5, BUT IT IS ALWAYS AN UN5AT15FY1N6 AND 1N3XACT PROC355. IT IS TH3 FORMULA, TH3 AX1OM, TH3 LO61CAL – TH3 5TR1N6 OF 3V3NT5 THAT L3AD5 TO TH3 3QUAL 516N AND THAT WH1CH IS TH3R3FOR3 FORMULAT3D JU5T B3YOND IT – THAT IS TRULY M3AN1N6FUL – ONLY TRULY M3AN1N6FUL.

I C4LL3D 4 FORM3R COLL36U3 Y35T3RD4Y HOP1N6 5H3 COULD H3LP M3 LOC4T3 4N OB5CUR3 R3F3R3NC3 TH4T I M15PL4C3D. 5H3 533M3D TO B3 UN4BL3 TO COMPR3H3ND MY QU35T1ON. “WH47”, 5H3 K3PT R3P34T1N6. 4T F1R5T I F16UR3D IT W45 4 PR4NK 4LTHOU6H 5H3 KNOW5 I'M NOT R3C3PT1V3 TO PR4NK5. TO FURTH3R CH3CK ON TH3 4PP4R3NT PR0BL3M W1TH 4 L355 3RUD1T3 54MPL3, I TH3N C4LL3D OFF1C3 D3P0T 4ND 45K3D 1F TH3Y H4D W1ND0W5 53V3N 1N 5TOCK. 4641N I H34RD, “WH47?”

I HUN6 U9 FULLY C0NFU53D. I R37URN3D 70 MY N0735. 7H3Y W3R3 47 ONC3 4 M34N1N6L355 JUM8L3 OF L3773R5 4ND NUM3R4L5 4ND Y37 4F73R 4 M0M3N7 W3R3 FULLY C0M9R3H3ND1BL3. WH47 W45 H4993N1N6? MY M1ND W45 M3R61N6 5YM80L5 FROM M47H3M471C5 4ND

WR1773N L4N6U463.

1 HURR1DLY 537 U9 4 7357. 1 WR073 1N
M47H3M471C4L 5YM80L5 70 533 1F 7H3 9R08L3M H4D
CR0553D 1N 7H3 07H3R D1R3C710N – L4N6U463 70
M47H3M471C5.

2 + 2 = 4 92 = 81 F45C1N471N6! 7H3R3 W3R3 N0
5UB5717U710N5. 7H3 M47H3M471C4L 5YM80L5
49934R3D 70 R3M41N UN70UCH3D – UN7R4N5F0RM3D.
9R00F 0F 7H31R C0N574N7 4ND 7RU3 R34L17Y,
93RH495?

1 C4N 533 7H3 9073N714L 9R08L3M. 1F MY M1ND
D1R3C75 M3 70 U71L123 7H3 D3V3L091N6
M47H3M471C4L C0D3 WH3N WR171N6 0R 5934K1N6, 1
W1LL 3FF3C71V3LY B3 CU7 0FF FR0M HUM4N
COMMUN1C4710N. 1N73R3571N6 7H47 1 H4V3 4LW4Y5
B33N UNCOMF0R748L3 COMMUN1C471N6 V14 L4N6U463.
NOW 1 574ND 70 L053 MY C491C17Y 70 C0MUN3 W17H
MY F3LL0W M4N. H45 17, 93RH495, B33N MY
UNC0N5C10U5 D351R3 4LL 4L0N6? HMMM? 7H3
3V0LV1N6 L4N6U463 0F MY M1ND 15 3FF3C71V3LY
53V3R1N6 M3 FR0M HUM4N 1N73R4C710N. WHO COULD
H4V3 KN0WN 7H47 5UCH 4N 1M9R3C153 FUNC710N 45
L4N6U463 COULD L34D 70 MY 150L4710N? 4ND 3V3N
M0R3, WHO COULD H4V3 KN0WN 1 WOULD F33L
54DD3N3D 47 7H47 9R0593C7? 1 W0ND3R 1F 17 15 700
L473 70 R3C0N51D3R – R3D1R3C7 – MY 9R10R17135 4ND
9R3D1L3C710N5?

Wishes prove to be powerful directives within the
subconscious mind. Recklessly conceived wishes are often
diligently orchestrating a person's downfall long before he is
aware of it.

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**STORY FORTEEN:
The Old Bag
Tom Gnagey**

Her name was Millie. It was not short for Millicent. It was not short for Mildred. It was just plain Millie. As a young girl she had wished that it had been short for something more glamorous.

Millie had been known to wish for things that couldn't be. Her parents warned her about it. Her late husband had chided her about it. Her septuagenarian lady friends made fun of her. Still, she looked upon it as her defining characteristic and she wasn't about to give it up. Realized or not, those wishes kept her mind tuned toward what was important in life.

As she grew older her wishes turned from self-centered things like handsome male companions and a fancy big house to more humane, compassionate, concerns – improved health for her friends, happiness for crippled children, money for the poor, and jobs for the unemployed. Truth be known, she had probably been less traumatized by not getting those earlier things than by not getting the more recent things. Millie was a good person.

But all of that is only tangentially related to this account.

Right after it occurred, Millie believed it had been a dream, but as time passed, too many astounding things happened for it to have been just some sleep induced fantasy. It had been her seventy-fifth birthday at about nine-thirty at night. Her friends had surprised her with a 'bring in' party – cake, ice cream, paper hats and presents. Millie liked being the center of attention – having been the middle child in a family of nine had seldom allowed that. The party was

wonderful but it tired her and she was soon to bed after the others left.

One of her gifts was a handbag. It was old fashioned in design and had clearly been used, but to her way of thinking it was beautiful – hand sewn from pieces of suede in shades of pink, burgundy, and brown. It reminded her of one her grandmother had back when she was a little girl, although that had been too long ago to remember details. It was a good match to several of her ‘leave the apartment’ outfits. It had the traditional handle of years gone by – not slung so unladylike from a shoulder strap. It was a bit large to her liking but she could get used to that. It was her favorite gift – above the box of hankies, the jar lid gripper pad, the pink blouse, the broach, the writing paper set, and the comb and mirror – lovely as they all were. She couldn’t remember who gave it to her so she began matching “FROM” cards with the givers she could remember. In the end, there were seven gifts. There had been only six friends and she was certain each had handed her but one package. Where could the seventh – the old bag – have come from?

The next morning, she awoke to the memory of the bag as an unaccounted for gift. She donned her robe and made her way into the living room where she had left the gifts on the coffee table. They were there – all seven of them. She called Bernice, her long time closest friend and asked if she remembered who had given her the bag. Bernice had no recollection of a bag. She enumerated the other six, guest by guest. She called Patricia with the same result. Rather than appear daft to her other friends she stopped calling. She made coffee and cinnamon toast and was soon sitting on the couch nibbling and sipping basking in the array of lovely gifts.

She opened the bag. Inside was a single gold coin – large and thick, shiny and heavy. Surely it was worth a hundred times that of the bag. Was that a part of the gift? Millie was not wealthy but she lived very comfortably – social security, her late husband’s retirement, interest from a generously funded savings program. None of her friends would have given her something of great monetary value.

She got dressed and walked the four blocks to Henry’s Jewelry. Henry had been her husband’s closest friend. She

showed him the coin. He examined it. He weighed it. He did other things Millie didn't understand. In the end his value estimate astounded her. Between seven and eight thousand dollars. She couldn't decide whether to take the money or keep the coin. Henry made a suggestion. He would give her seventy-five-hundred dollars cash and keep the coin in his safe for sixty days during which time she could reclaim it if she wanted to. She didn't want to be responsible for the safe keeping of such a valuable coin but the cash she could deposit in her account. She took the deal.

She soon approached her apartment building and noticed Tommy Burk – seven and on crutches – making his way with a small suitcase toward the alley. She called to him and he stopped long enough for her to walk to him. It seemed he had overheard his mother and father talking about his medical bills. They didn't have the money for the final operation he needed – seventy-five hundred dollars. So he was running away so they wouldn't have to worry about the money any more. Millie talked him into going home for just one more day and then if he still wanted to leave she would help him. He hugged her long and tight. She picked up his bag and they went inside.

Her newfound 'wealth' was soon in an envelope and clandestinely taped to the Burk's door. The next day Tommy sought her out and related what had happened. He thanked her for her offer of help in his running away plan, but he would be staying the course there with his mom and dad now that they had come into some money.

Hmm! They needed seventy-five hundred dollars and the old bag had provided it – ahead of time. Hmm, again!

Fully mystified, Millie began reflecting. She recalled hearing Mrs. Burk mention the medical bills and how worried she was about them. Millie also remembered wishing she had enough money to pay the bills herself. Oh, My! More than ever, Millie wanted to know just how that bag had come into her possession. According to her friends it hadn't been there when they left in the evening. It was there in the morning, but Millie had come to know about it somewhere in between those times because she expected to see it there that morning. It had not been a dream. What had it been?

One memory spawned another. She was taken back to her seventh birthday. It was a sleep over. She and her several friends played a game in which they each had to reveal a wish about their future. They wrote them down on slips of paper, placed them in a tobacco can, and buried it in the back yard. At some time in the future they promised to gather, unearth the can, and see whose wishes had come true. It had been a lame activity and Millie doubted if any of them had ever thought about it again.

Millie, however, remembered her wish. Long forgotten it came back as clear as the night it had been made. She had wished that when she turned seventh-five she would possess magical powers with which she would be able to do wonderful things for needy people. Why so late in life? She determined, in her seven-year-old mind, that the wisest person she knew was her seventy-five-year-old grandmother, so she figured by then she – Millie – would also be wise enough to dispense her magic with the care such power would require.

Millie had turned seventy-five. Millie appeared to have acquired magical powers – well, with the help of her old bag. She wondered if it were a one-time thing. She couldn't explain once. She certainly wouldn't be able to explain more than once. She wanted to write it off as some category of coincidence but the magical, wishful, childlike part that lived on within her was not ready to accept that.

The rest of her day was rather inefficient. Her thoughts were repeatedly garnered by replays of the magical wish. She would begin a project and then abandon it. She really wanted to discuss it all with Bernice – at seven her BFF – but Bernice was given to getting frightened – really frightened – by all things unexplainable. She was the only girl at the sleepover who refused to offer a wish.

Millie took a sleeping pill that night, sure she would just toss and turn without it. Either because of the pill or because she had mentally exhausted herself thinking, Millie slept very well.

The week passed without additional incidents of the Tommy Burk kind. She had been very careful to keep the, “I wish . . .” phrase from slipping out. On Wednesday of the second week, as she prepared to leave for the market, she

came upon Jenny, the newlywed in the apartment building. She was sitting on a bench in the side yard sobbing. Millie approached her.

It seemed that she had misplaced her wedding ring. Not only was the loss devastating to her but she was just certain her husband would become angry and fly into a rage. Millie sat down beside her and put her arm around the girl's shoulders feeling great compassion. "I wish I could help," she said before she realized another wish had slipped across her lips.

Millie knew it immediately. It came to her in a flash. There was no doubt. There was, in fact, so much of no doubt that she began speaking even before she slipped her hand into the old bag; even before her fingers felt its new contents; even before she removed the ring from the bag.

"Could this possibly be what you lost?"

The girl's face lit up. She took it from Millie's open palm and held it close to her chest. Millie wondered how she would explain it. 'I hope she doesn't ask,' Millie said to herself. The girl didn't ask.

Again, almost two weeks passed. Millie regularly did shopping for old Mrs. Garrison who lived across the street. On that Wednesday when she went to pick up the grocery list it was clear that the old lady had been crying. Without much prompting the story came out. Her oldest great granddaughter was getting married and wanted her to be there to help her dress – a tradition of honor in the family. Mrs. Garrison could not afford the airfare.

Again, Millie felt the presence but thought better of presenting an on-the-spot fix. She took the list, did the shopping and returned to Mrs. Garrison's apartment, helping put things into the cupboards. She then left, looking into the bag for the first time. Two roundtrip tickets to Atlanta. Why two? Millie wondered. It became clear immediately. Such an old person would need a younger traveling companion, savvy in the ways of flight. Mrs. Garrison had a niece. It was arranged. The tickets were sent through the mail. There was no more delighted old lady in the city – well, it was clear that Millie ran a very close second.

The next week the tables of life seemed to turn. It was

Millie's annual physical check-up. The doctor had bad news. It was a rare disease. There was no cure and she knew of no place where research was being done. She gave Millie a few months to live.

Millie decided to just go about her life for as long as she could. She consciously stepped up her wishing for folks and virtually every day was able to brighten someone's life in some wonderful way.

"I hate that I am dying. I so want to be able to continue helping people in need."

On day thirty, after receiving her diagnosis, she opened her old bag to take out her coin purse. Beside it lay an envelope. The return address read: Dr. J M Rahid, MD, 34267 East 42nd Street in a nearby city. Under the name, it suggested that the doctor headed a research project, which studied Millie's disease. Inside was an application to become part of the research project. An enclosed sheet summarized the rapid recent advances in treatment. Millie made the arrangements and followed the prescribed course of treatment.

On the morning of the sixtieth day her new doctor called. Her condition, all quite remarkably he said, was in remission and most likely would never return.

There are just two more things remaining to be related.

When Millie awoke the next morning her old bag was nowhere to be found.

As she crossed the intersection at Maple and 32nd she was approached by a tall stately – if aged – woman who nodded and smiled pausing just a moment before she continued on her way. There was an immediate connection – knowing, heartwarming, forever. She was carrying the Old Bag. Had it been sixty-five years earlier, Millie would have sworn the woman was her grandmother.

**STORY FOURTEEN:
Jake and the Milkman
Tom Gnagey**

It was 1948. Jake was eight. He was by any measure a cute and appealing, if, perhaps, not consistently trustworthy, little ragamuffin. He lived with his mother who worked nights dancing at a gentlemen's club. As a baby, he had been taken away from her for lack of proper care. He had been back with her since just before his third birthday. Jake did poorly in school perhaps because of his lack of sleep and inadequate nutrition. His street smarts were off the charts reinforcing the idea that his history of inadequate school achievement was due to something other than intelligence. He was a lad of few words.

Some months before, he had taken to appropriating quarts of milk after the delivery man had set them on the porches during his early morning rounds. He was careful never to take the milk from the same porch two days in a row. The milkman suspected what was going on and in order to placate his customers he called Jake over to his truck one morning and offered him a deal.

“You meet me here every morning at this time and I'll give you the two quarts of milk you have been stealing from my customers. They get very unhappy with me when they find themselves shorted.”

Jake agreed without admitting to the inferred nefarious act. The arrangement continued for several months. The customers were happy. The milkman was happy. Jake was happy (well, that had to be inferred from his continuing

pleasant disposition because, as stated, Jake was lad of few words).

At the beginning of the third month, in a rare attempt at initiating communication, Jake told the milkman he would need three quarts a day from then on. The milkman begrudgingly agreed adding, "But that's as far as it goes. Three quarts! You ask for more and I'll call the juvy cops. You understand?"

Jake understood the clearly stated amendment to their arrangement, but gave no indication of agreement. He began showing up with a doubled brown paper bag into which the milkman carefully placed the bottles. Three quarts of milk was a heavy load for a scrawny eight-year-old.

Things continued that way for another three months.

"I'll need four bottles from now on," Jake announced one morning. "If you won't give 'em to me I can always go back to takin' the extra one, I s'pose. Nobody can never say they ever seen me takin' none so the Juvys don't scare me, ya see."

That effectively set up a dilemma for the milkman.

"I'll have to think on it. I'll give you my decision in the morning."

The next day Jake arrived same time, same place.

"Ten of my customers called saying they were missing milk yesterday. You think you can blackmail me into giving you that extra quart, don't you?"

"Whatever do you mean, Sir?"

It had been accompanied by the lad's natural, angelic, grin and trademark shrug.

His demand was met, but only to provide the milkman time to stall and contemplate his next step. He considered having the police follow the boy but so long as he was getting what he wanted there would be nothing for them to observe. The lad was smart – he'd give him that much.

The next morning the milkman doubled back after their 'appointment' to see what Jake did. He assumed he would head for his house, a block north of their rendezvous point. Initially, Jake was nowhere to be seen. Then it happened. A block further south, the milkman spied Jake climbing out a second-story window at the rear of a large, white, house on Vine Street. The youngster was making his way down a

sturdy trellis that ran foundation to eaves. He had a gunnysack precariously slung over his shoulder. From its bumpy appearance, one could clearly tell it was filled with small objects. The man understood that the boy had robbed the house.

The milkman met Jake as the lad's feet touched the ground. He secured him by the rear of his belt and marched him – gunnysack and all – around to the front door.

“You're makin' a big mistake, Milkman.”

He could have said more, but Jake was a lad of few words.

“It's you who have made the mistake, Jake. And if that 'big mistake' comment was a threat, just let me tell you that I am definitely calling the juvy cops as soon as I can get to a phone.”

Jake shrugged his shoulders.

The milkman pushed the boy up the front steps ahead of him. He knocked loudly. The door opened. An older lady answered. She was holding a baby.

“How may I help you?” She was very pleasant. “I'm not in need of milk delivery if that's why you stopped by.”

“Not here to sell you anything. I caught this boy climbing down the trellis in back. He has a bag filled with things he's stolen from you. May I use your phone to call the police?”

“You may, but I wouldn't. You see, I take care of babies for the child protection agency – more every month it seems. Jake, here, lived with me for nearly two years as a little tyke. On the small allowance I'm given, there just isn't enough money to go around for all their needs. He has become our guardian angel. Every morning he brings us four quarts of milk for the children. He prefers to enter and exit using the trellis so no one will think he's still a welfare kid. I imagine the gunnysack is filled with empty milk bottles. He gets the deposit back down at the IGA and uses the money to buy his lunch.”

[The original title of this story was: Beware of precarious perceptions!]

