



**The Magic Touch
Of Old
Harry Halvorsen
By Tom Gnagey**

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OF
OLD HARRY HALVORSEN**

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A Few Things the Reader Will Want to Know Upfront

Harry had lived. Harry had died. Those who knew him were sad – only a handful really knew him well, so very few had to be sad. He would not have wanted sadness to accompany his passing. They understood that, but still . . . His, had mostly been a private life. Word was that he died of old age, whatever that really meant. He was never sick. He joked that he hoped one morning he would just wake up dead and that would be that. (Those close to him would refer to that as a ‘Harryism’. There were many of them.) In fact, that was how it had happened.

The best estimates of his age came in at the early to mid-eighties. A five-year-old who had loved him dearly, insisted it was closer to 200 – perhaps in *wisdom*, Sara. He had often said that inside his head he never aged beyond eighteen. Those who knew him believed that – as young a spirit as could be found on the block. If being truthful, the ten people who knew him best would contend his sense of humor had ceased to grow at about 10 – maybe 12, on a good day. He delighted in foolishness and absurdities. It was one reason he got on so well with youngsters. Again, those who knew him best would agree he was the wisest man they had ever known.

Harry was just Harry – well, *Pop* to a few. He seldom spoke about himself. He almost never mentioned his University degrees. He just arrived one day, two dozen or so years before, moving his few possessions into in a simple three room apartment hidden away behind a nondescript door in an unremarkable alley that connected the 2100 blocks of 46th and 47th Avenues there in the city. It sat on the border of the struggling downtown to the west and the dying, if not dead, old town to the east. Rusting, metal fire escapes clung precariously to the ancient brick walls, which set the sides of the cement slab and pavement. Six, low rent apartments opened into the alley, each with its Thursday morning trashcan and single bulb light above the door.

About Pop’s door – it was the first thing he transformed about his apartment after arriving. It took three, thick coats of sunshine yellow paint to cover what he called the fully

unpleasant, dark and dreary color with no name that had clung to it for decades. Although pleased with the final look, he took note it made the rest of the alley take on an even dirtier and more dreadful mien. He would eventually take steps to fix that, but it sidetracks the reader from the real story, which, for these purposes, begins at his funeral taking place in the small, store front community room that sat in the middle of the block on 46th, ten doors south of his alley.

* * *

The room was unpretentious in every way – cement floor, block walls, stained and darkened dropped ceiling sporting about a billion tiny holes. There were two dozen, mix and match, chairs set in two rows separated by a narrow aisle. Sometimes they were for singing or Bingo; sometimes for learning; and Sunday mornings for taking in a rollicking sermon. Across the front of the small room was a drooping, drab blue curtain strung from wall to wall on wire, there to hide ductwork, conduit and restroom doors. Atop a folding table between the seats and the curtain sat the pine box in which Harry instructed he was to be cremated. He had joked that he could not complain about it since he had constructed it himself – six pieces of hand sawed, carefully sanded, pine and 36 nails. If he had been able to figure a way that he could drive the final 6 nails into the top, he would have delighted in doing so. (He did have all six started!)

His instructions for the service – each guest had received a copy – had been simple: there should be far more smiles and laughter than tears. Open or closed should be agreed on by a consensus of those in attendance. He left money for a supply of strawberry twisters – his favorite – to be partaken of in great abundance during the service – and balloons – Harry loved balloons – ‘make sure some were yellow’. If it couldn’t be a happy time it shouldn’t be convened.

His belief was that when one died one was dead, *period*, so there was to be no ‘spiritual stuff’ (his words). He also believed one did good works on Earth solely to improve the condition of mankind, *period*, so there was never the suspicion of an ulterior motive with old Harry. A list would be found inside a zip lock bag in his breadbox that specified who should be notified and which of his possessions was to go to

whom. The Salvation Army was the big winner. There had also been a list with instructions sent to the young director of the community center several years before. Harry was not one to leave things to chance.

Ten people arrived that morning. They had to introduce themselves to one another since it would be the first time they had met. Once ten of the chairs had been occupied, the young Director of the Center stood and spoke.

“Harry gave me an envelope several years ago. It contained several items. He asked that I read a few things at the *festivities* – his word not mine – accompanying his death. You each also received a letter from me several months ago with a request in it from him. He prompted me to send them, seeming to have a feeling about what lay in his immediate future. It asked that each of you ten, prepare a story about the time you and Harry spent together. Let me quote here: *I only wish I could be there to hear their perceptions of what transpired between us. Of the many, many dozens of my young visitors, these ten remain extra special, but that is not to be made public. They enriched my life in so many ways.*”

The young man continued.

“I understand there is no chronological order implied by the order in which the stories are to be read.

“My instructions say that Marcus is to be first, *if he has no objections* – and according to *Pop*, he just might.”

More chuckles. More smiles. Each could feel themselves and the others relaxing. They felt less separate from the others, eager to form a bond. They began sharing and enjoying the twisters. Sadness grew into a sense of happy anticipation.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Collision of Pop and the Bastard

Marcus stood and walked to the front carrying a yellow balloon, which he released and watched it make its way to the ceiling. He figured Harry would have allowed at least that much symbolism. He was easily the youngest of the lot – twenty-seven/twenty-eight or so. He chose to stand at the foot of the closed pine box. He wore a blue sweater over a blue checked sport shirt, unbuttoned at the collar. His jeans appeared to be new and his black boots had clearly been attended to with great care.

“I feel certain that Harry, Pop as I knew him, would have approved of my story title: *The Collision of Pop and the Bastard*. There was a Pop. There was a Bastard. And, most certainly, there **was** a collision.”

The others smiled and nodded as they eased themselves into more comfortable positions.

The young man began reading.

* * *

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. Mostly it was a name used by the gangs. 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 generally 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 before 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, early on, 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, first floor, rooms at the rear of 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 on the 14th floor with the heart-shaped bed and the mirror on the ceiling.

Harry was white and saw that as fully irrelevant. Harry was 77 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 frequently in the bathtub."

In comparison, Marcus flailed at the life and the self he hated in the only ways he knew, every day sinking further into 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 and less-comfortable. 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* with *right* – *truth* with *truth*?

* * *

It was the most forceful command that a lad with a changing voice could muster. It met Harry out of the blackness 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 desbicycle about it. Now, gimme your money.”

He held out his open palm and countered Harry's three forward 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 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. There they stood, no more than four feet apart, in a standoff engulfed in darkness.

“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 – Desbiceraple? Prudent? Epi-bla-bla? 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 shakin’ hands.”

“Good. Then at least you can prove *that* to me.”

Harry extended his hand for a second time moving a short step closer.

“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 you 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 as if agreeing to anything represented defeat.

“That is excellent! I no longer have 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 ‘Pop’ or ‘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 defiant, hands on hips, position. It seemed like progress to Harry who closed the gap to a reasonable handshaking distance. Still with some reluctance, the boy took the old man’s 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 – yellow during the day."

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. Pop asked the reasonable question.

"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 set 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 small TV, lots of 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 tin box 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 across from him. 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 as he watched the old man’s reaction out of the top of his eyes.”

“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. It will need to be stirred, first.”

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 hardens and 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 – top drawer, right side, under hankies or sox. Don't know why, but where it always is."

"Sounds like I should keep that key from over the door 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, do you suppose, 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 clearly surprised young man. With no real reluctance, he stood and walked to the cabinet. He picked up the cup and gave 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 47th.”

“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 nothing but confusion. 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 key 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 to speak until he was upon him.

“Good afternoon. Good to see you again. Wife number three finally kick you out so you came to live with me?”

It drew a quick 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 family could surely make better use of it. Still, it remained. Although

his life was hermit-like, Harry didn't object to 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 in saying those things 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 beliefs 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. Stimulated."

The boy nodded and Harry suspected he had 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 sorrrys.” 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 she 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."

The comment had been carefully 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, but I'd like to."

"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 he 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 with some degree of enthusiasm, 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 fact that the, “Your welcome,” emerging in the relationship before a, “thank you,” tickled the old man and again he smiled.

Gram and Harry met. Harry received her approval. Marcus continued to frequent Pop’s apartment.

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 gory 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 some of what he had learned about science and the universe had been wrong and 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. Underneath it all, of course, he understood 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 afterschool 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 what’s going on in that wonderful head of yours.”

Grin!

“Remember when I told you I was just a bastard?”

“I do and rather forcefully as I recall.”

“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*, Harry. 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 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, renewed.

* * *

Marcus removed a three page, stapled along one side, set of papers from an envelope. He held them up to the group. On the front in big red letters had been printed: A+ / D+ / B-. There was a large happy face. He laid it on the coffin and retook his seat.

There were few dry eyes at the conclusion of the story. They all felt closer to Marcus. They spent some time asking him questions about his life. At Pop’s suggestion, he had started working at the café. By the time he was in high school, he was the head cook on nights and weekends. Although it had taken five years he had put himself through the local city college. Two years later he sold his first short story. The editor had wanted to change its title. Marcus told him he wouldn’t put up with such crap and stormed out of the office. The story was published just as submitted. Since then, there had been dozens more published, but Marcus had to admit none was as satisfying as that first one: *The Collision of Pop and the Bastard*.

CHAPTER TWO: Anger Rides a Wheelchair

Presently, the young man who was leading the proceedings stood.

“The next name on this list is, Randolph Redding Rutherford the fourth.”

“Does a person with such a moniker actually exist?”

“For better or for worse, he exists,” came a voice from the back row.

A tall, good looking man at the crossroad between his twenties and thirties – as fare and blond haired as Marcus was dark and black haired – stood with some difficulty and, carrying – more than using – a cane, made his way to the front. He paused and then opted to stand at the other end of the pine box. He ran his hand over it in a reverent manner.

“Henry helped me make my first bird house out of pine like this. I was sixteen. It was for Purple Martins and had six chambers. The back came off so I could clean out the old bedding every fall and get it ready for new families the next spring. I still have it.”

He turned toward the others.

“My story will not be as eloquent as the one Marcus just shared with us, but that’s alright. This will be mine, done the way I can do it. Harry taught me nobody, including me, could ever legitimately expect more from me than that.”

Marcus stood and raised his fist in the air.

“Good goin’ Pop!” he shouted.

Other fists were raised and heads nodded. Smiles blossomed. Randolph followed their lead and raised his cane allowing as much of a smile as he could comfortably muster. Clearly, he was not as naturally playful as Marcus and the others (and somebody had taught him that was, also, alright!).

“As a youngster, I was that horrible rich brat that everybody hated – not because they were bad kids, but because I was virtually intolerable. I guess, like Marcus, I will let my story speak for itself. I call it, *Anger Rides a Wheelchair*.”

* * *

The boy had just turned 16. He was sitting in his fancy,

ten-thousand-dollar motorized wheelchair there across a card table from Harry – four bucks from a thrift store – the table, not Harry. The youngster was wearing two hundred dollar jeans, a hundred-dollar shirt and who knew how expensive the boots were. He folded his arms across his chest and looked at the old man.

“I’m not going to learn anything from your tutoring. I won’t try. I hate everything about the idea and I have told my father about my intentions not to cooperate.”

He removed an envelope from his shirt pocket and handed it over.

“This is the check my father sent you for eight sessions this month – two a week or, in his words. ‘until one of us kills the other’.”

Harry accepted the envelope, removed the check and immediately tore it into eight small pieces, shoving them to one side of the table.

“Why did you do that?”

“You say you refuse to let me try and help you improve yourself. I certainly couldn’t take your father’s money under those conditions. It would be like stealing – taking it under false pretenses.”

The boy’s brow furrowed and he slumped back in the chair. His well-planned and rehearsed opening salvo had been met and destroyed without a fight or even a slightly raised voice.

“I suppose we need to find some way of spending our time together – unless you just want to leave and not come back.”

The young man squirmed. His father could never know. He could find no words.

“What shall I call you?” Harry went on. I see on the information your parents provided that they call you Randolph – not Randy?”

“Never *Randy* at *my* house. Birthday letters from my grandmother are addressed to, Randolph Redding Rutherford the fourth.”

“Perhaps, then, I could just shorten that to, ‘The Fourth’.”

The boy worked to contain an unexpected urge to

smile. He would not buy into the old man's nonsense. His father said humor was the lowest form of social interaction and he didn't permit it within his walls – walls, which, by the way dated back over a century and had been passed down from the first to the second to the third. The fourth was expected to take possession at the proper time. The fourth hated the idea, but none of the thousand times he had voiced that objection had it been out loud.

"I'd take Randy if you don't tell my parents. I let Benson call me that."

"And Benson is your dog, cat, canary?"

"My chauffer."

"Is Benson a first or last name?"

"I have no idea."

"Then how do you address his birthday letter?"

"Are you for real?"

Harry offered his arm across the table.

"What?" Randy asked, clearly puzzled

"Pinch me. Last time I checked I was real, but at my age it's a good idea to go ahead and check every once in a while."

"You're not taking this thing seriously."

"You found me out. I work very hard at not taking things any more seriously than they need to be taken. By the way, what is *'this thing'* you are referring to?"

"This tutoring thing."

"Oh, I thought that didn't exist since – how did you put it, 'I won't try'."

Randy shook his head and backed away from the table just enough to turn and look through the doorway that led into the kitchen.

Harry couldn't be sure if it were a final retreat or just a move to allow reconnoitering. Randy spoke without looking at him.

"What are your qualifications?"

"I never put much stock in qualifications. I always base my assessment on the quality of results a person produces."

"So, what results have you produced?"

"Nearly 100 novels there on those two book shelves for starters."

“What do you mean – you wrote them – all of them?”

Harry nodded. He sensed that he was under surveillance out of the corner of the young man’s eye. The boy’s response proved him right.

“Really! A hundred?”

No response was required as the boy moved himself to the shelves. He took books at random and opened them to the title page and then flipped to its back side. The act was repeated some half dozen times.

“You been writing for thirty years or more the way it looks from copyright dates. Lots of them look like they’ve be reprinted – some several times. Are they all for kids and teens?”

At last a question that might get something started.

“Most. Yes. Kids and young adults like you. I see you know about how books are put together – copyright dates and the code that shows the number of reprints. Not one in 100 book readers know how to read that code.”

“I read a lot – got lots of time alone.”

“Friends?”

Randy whirled around in his chair and moved in toward Harry, leaning in close. His face was red and he snorted his response.

“I don’t need any friends so just let that drop right now.”

“Sad for me, I guess”

“What?”

“I really had banked on the two of us becoming friends. That’s usually the way it works between the young people who come here and me.”

Randy turned his chair away. Humorously, Harry thought, the boy had to turn his head just a bit in order to maintain his clandestine surveillance of the old man. It had become an odd game of chess and Harry would bet the boy was a master at the game.

Harry let the silence go on for some time. Eventually he tried to bring up a neutral topic.

“I’ve been studying that Monster Truck you’re driving.”

He could see the sides of the boy’s cheek pull a smile, never showing it, of course. Harry continued.

“I’m guessing it weighs what, 200 pounds?”

“A hundred and seventy-five with the auxiliary battery,” came Randy’s quick response.

“Is it any good in a street race?”

“It holds its own.”

Randy shook his head again and turned around – the long way to his left, which avoided facing Harry at close range – and returned to his spot across the table.

“I suppose if you wrote all those books you must know something.”

“If not, I’ve fooled thousands of people.”

Randy managed a jerky nod that seemed to indicate he understood, but stopped short of endorsing the statement.

“So, cards?” Harry said offering it all quite open ended.

“What?”

“Cards. Do you play cards? We have to find some way of occupying the time your father seems to insist we spend together.”

“Solitaire.”

The response tore at the old man’s heart, but he put on a smile.

“That’s hardly something we can do together although I remember my grampa and gramma playing what they called double solitaire. I’m afraid I don’t remember the rules.”

“I didn’t come to play cards.”

“Oh, I understand that, but . . .”

Harry shrugged and threw up his hands as if to say, ‘I’m out of suggestions’.

“I guess I can give you a chance to produce.”

“Produce?”

“Yes. Like you said: Production is better than qualifications.”

The old man picked up the paper the boy’s father had prepared for him.

“This sheet tells me what your father thinks you need help with, but I’ve always found the student knows what he needs a whole lot better than anybody else. How do you think about that?”

“I agree. I suppose that’s a good place to start.”

“Where’s a good place to start?”

“At the first thing we seem to have agreed on.”

He allowed a fleeting glance up at the old man and offered a smile without fighting it. It hadn't really included eye contact, but Harry was happy to take any scraps the boy would throw his way.

"I suppose you know I'm brain damaged – a car accident when I was four. It put me in this chair and scrambled my brains."

"What brain functions do you believe have been effected?"

"Mostly writing – the doctors call it *dysgraphia*. I can read words, but I can't arrange letters properly to make them. It is an encoding problem rather than a decoding problem. Taking a test where I have to write out answers is impossible."

"You speak very well so your brain can find and form words – *encode* them for talking."

"That's right."

Randy was impressed that the old guy knew the technical words.

"Are you willing to demonstrate for me on paper what you *can* encode and what presents problems for you?"

"I guess. I don't do this for just anybody. It makes me look like a retarded dork."

"Then I will feel privileged to have the chance to watch you and promise I will never think of you as a retarded dork."

"Here is a good example. Say that I want to print – forget cursive – the sentence, "I slept in a bed there in their room."

"First, I never know which there/their to use."

"How about we solve that problem in ten seconds. That be alright?"

It was a puzzled, hopeful, disbelieving face that looked back across the table.

"First, can you maneuver that contraption here to my right so we can better see what we are doing on the table top?"

The adjustment was done without question or hesitation. It didn't mean the boy was buying into any of it, yet.

"Can you print the two words, their and there, even if you aren't sure which means what?"

With starts and stops and erasures and corrections, Randy managed to print them side by side. Controlling the pencil was not an easy task and he took his time as if wanting to do a good job.

“There,” he said putting down the pencil.

“Do you see the humor in your response?”

“What?”

“You just presented me with two renditions of the words there, accompanied with the message, ‘there’.

A smile blossomed across Randy’s face.

“That was funny, wasn’t it? In my family I haven’t been trained to see humorous things. Could you help me do that?”

“Son, people who know me will tell you there is no way for you to escape that if we spend time together.”

Harry’s comment extended the boys grin. Still, he’d wait and see.

“Okay, start the stop watch – 15 seconds, remember.”

“Oh, I remember. I don’t pretend to believe you, but I remember.”

“Look at the letters in this version. Say them out loud – left to right – this side to that side.”

Randy pointed to each as he spoke.

“T-H-E-I . . .

“Stop. See that ‘I’. ‘I’ refers to you, a person. ‘Their’ – with the ‘I’ – is the one that always has to refer to people. T-h-e-r-e is the other one you use when people aren’t involved. Now, a game. I will say a phrase using one of those words and you point to the properly spelled word. Use the two you printed for us.”

“Okay. I think I can do that. Shoot!”

“*Their* food got cold.”

“This one – t-h-e-i-r, with the I.”

“Now try this. The boys wondered who *their* teacher was going to be.”

“Boys are people so it is this one, again.”

“Here’s a tricky one. The boys found that *there* was fun to be had in doing *their* lessons.”

“I got ya. The first one doesn’t refer to people so its ‘e-r-e’. The second does refer to people so it’s ‘e-i-r’. This is great!”

His enthusiasm got ahead of his willingness to buy into the process so he retreated to a more serious tone and sobered his face. He offered a second problem.

“I got another one – a harder problem, I mean. Lower case b and d. I never know which is which.”

“We may need a whole minute to fix this one. You got that long?”

“Do! I mean, sure, I guess.”

“Watch what I print”

b e d.

“I can read it, ‘bed’.”

“Now, I need you to use your imagination. Can you imagine a straight line connecting the b and the d across the b in front and d in back? Maybe think of it as board lying across them with the e also supporting it from underneath. Got it?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Now, pretend that line is a mattress. What picture pops into mind?”

“A bed. Oh. Okay. I still don’t get it.”

“What sound does a ‘b’ make?”

“Bee or bu.”

“And a d?”

“Dee or du?”

“Right. Now, at which end is the bee sound in that bed?”

“I got it. At the front. That’s great. I just have to think of that mattress picture and I can always figure how to make the bee or the dee from where the letters are in the word.”

“Spell the word, ‘bad’ out loud.”

“B-A-D’

“Now print the word – in lower case.”

It took several moments. He surveyed what he had produced.

“Well look at that. Not *bad*, I’d say.”

The two of them broke into laughter – for Randy, cheek wetting, bending over at the waist, close to hysterical laughter. Harry let it go on longer than was reasonable – the boy was enjoying it, so he did what he could to prolong it. Harry wondered if it might have been his first, full out, emotion driven, laughter.

Harry handed Randy a box of Kleenex.

“Get this, Sir. When Father asks me how it went today, I’m going to say you made me cry. Then I’ll explain, of course.”

Harry doubted it was a good plan, but it was Randy’s plan and he wouldn’t interfere. He expected a note about keeping the lessons a serious matter. It would not be the worst note he had ever received from a parent.

“Do we have time for one more today?” Randy asked.

“I think so. What do you have in mind?”

“We have two one letter words in English. One of them is always upper case and one is always lower case, but my scrambled brain just can’t keep them straight.”

Harry thought for a moment. It was a problem he had never before come across. His face lit up and he leaned in close to Randy who met him lean for lean.

“Now, this is not very elegant and I just imagine your mother would find it disgusting – I do remember how mothers are.”

Randy shrugged impishly – eager for the old guy to get on with it. If it would upset his mother, he was all ears.

“Okay. Just between you and me, okay?”

“Yes, sir – you and me.”

“Think of ‘l’ as if it were ‘eye’.”

He pointed to his face and waited for a nod from the boy.

“l is up here. It will therefore be the tall letter, the high letter, the upper-case letter. Now, there is a word used to describe one’s bottom end, posterior, butt, if you will, and it starts with the letter ‘a’.”

“Oh, I got that before you were done explaining it. And since that’s *lower* on the body than the eye, the ‘a’ will always be *lower case*. You’re okay and your right, my mother would have conniptions. I may just have to tell her.”

Harry had something to add.

“*But*, there is one exception.”

“You said *butt* on purpose; I’m catching on to you, Sir. But, what is the exception?”

“When the a/A comes at the beginning of a sentence.”

“Oh, yeah. I think I would have figured that out by

myself. The lower case 'a' then becomes an upper case 'A'."

"I'm sure you would have."

"I'm really sorry I was such a *dumb-not-eye* at first today."

Harry chuckled on for several moments. Randy was pleased he had made somebody laugh and found himself joining in.

"You, know, Randy, no other person in the universe can possibly know what you mean by that – *dumb-not-eye*. I guess it will just be a special thing between us."

"Like *our* secret. Benson and I have a few secrets, but nobody else."

A car horn sounded out in the alley.

"Speaking of Benson," Randy said.

"Just one last thing before you go. I am not comfortable being referred to as, 'Sir'."

"Father instructed me to call you Mr. whatever your last name is. Not knowing that, I chose, Sir, as an alternative."

"Hmm. If you don't know my last name I guess you can't use that can you? Suppose, 'Harry' would be comfortable?"

"Oh, I shouldn't do that. My Father would have a hissy fit if he knew that."

"I take it a hissy fit is something relatively bad."

"The worst!"

"How about, '*Harry*', here with me, and '*my tutor*' with your parents."

"And you can call me Randy – here. Nobody in the whole wide world has ever called me Randy. I would really like that."

"Randy, it is then, Randy."

"That makes me think. I'm never going to have trouble spelling Randal again – the 'd' at the foot of the 'bed'. This really has been great Sir – Harry. Well, good bye, I guess. If I don't get out there Benson will arrive in his Ninja outfit."

It was hard to believe Randy's natural knack for humor had been suppressed for sixteen years.

"Same time Thursday, Sir Harry?"

"Sounds fine to me. I'll be expecting you to have a list of other things for us to work on. Understand, I can't

guarantee such quick fixes on everything.”

“I suppose you tutor about boy-girl stuff, too, right.”

“That is usually the private domain of parents.”

“Yeah, sure. Truthfully, I can’t imagine how my parents figured out how to make me. I’ll bring two separate lists.”

He left.

“Oh, my!” Harry said as he closed the door. “*What* have I gotten myself into?”

* * *

It was 9:45 Thursday morning. It was *not* the tentative knock that had preceded Randy’s appearance on the Tuesday before. It was a door quivering, thumping from the hammer end of a fist. Harry wanted to believe it was enthusiasm, but in truth it fit more closely with seething anger (or a battering ram). In either event, the boy was fifteen minutes early and Harry had not yet set up the card table. He went to the door, turned the key, and opened it.

“I hate them sons a bitches.”

“And good morning to you as well.”

It garnered a look up into the old man’s face – no hint of appreciation for the attempt at humor. The boy was in a regular, propel it yourself, chair.

“Several things seem to have changed today,” Harry said, closing and relocking the door.

His comment was met with silence – well, silence if you don’t include the hissing sound of the steam streaming from the young man’s nostrils.

“Is there something I need to know?” he asked as he moved to slide the card table out from behind the sofa.

It was then he first noticed the neck brace mostly concealed beneath Randy’s turtle neck. It had seemed an odd choice of clothing for an early summer day.

Silence continued – the kind of silence that fills a room and exerts painful pressure on one’s ear drums.

“They beat me to a pulp.”

“May I know about the ‘*they*’?”

“Kids from school. I hate them.”

“And apparently, they don’t really hold you in high esteem either.”

“I understand your big words.”

“I assumed you would or else I certainly wouldn’t have used them. I’m trying to communicate here. May I further assume your motorized vehicle was damaged in the fray?”

“You may. My Father has mechanics from the manufacturer on the way to work on it.”

“And the incident happened where?”

“Out by my lair.”

“You have most certainly lost me.”

Harry leaned the card table up against the wall and took a seat in his recliner, figuring there was going to be very little pencil and paper work that morning.

“Our house is big enough for ten families. Across the back lawn and across the pool from it is a six-car garage with servants’ quarters upstairs – three efficiency apartments I believe they are called. Benson uses one of them. His is on the south. I use the one on the north as my private get away place. It took some world class finagling to talk my parents into it. Look up overprotective in the dictionary and you will find their pictures in case you’re interested.”

“Surely you have a room in the house.”

“Yeah, but in a house with servants a guy really never has any privacy, so I go out to my lair to watch TV, study, read and other stuff – to be alone. I am only allowed three hours a day out there during the school year. No limits now during summer vacation.”

“And there is an elevator?”

“Yes. Everything except the top of the old oak tree is accessible by way of elevators.”

Harry smothered his chuckle.

“You mentioned, kids from school.”

“They were waiting for me when I left my lair Tuesday night about nine. They worked me over and they destroyed my chair.”

“Any idea what their motivation was?”

“They hate me.”

“Any idea why they hate you?”

“I’m rich. They aren’t.”

“I know a number of rich people and none of them are hated by anybody.”

Randy threw another look at Harry then turned away.

"I may have an off-putting way about me sometimes."

"Off putting enough to get the stuffing beat out of you?"

"It seems that way, doesn't it?"

Harry chose not to answer. Silence. Then . . .

"They have everything. I got nothing. They're just too dumb to know it."

"And I just imagine they believe that they have nothing and you have everything."

"Money, big house, fancy cars, great clothes, you mean?"

"Yes, those kinds of things."

"They don't understand. I'd give it all up if I could walk and run and play ball and dance with girls."

"Do they tease you?"

"It might be called that – taunt comes to mind, first. They call me 'Wheels' and 'Butt Slider'. I assume that came from somebody watching me move around the swimming pool deck. There's a wall around our property, but that only seems to draw the curious for a look inside."

"You do have a marvelous command of the language."

"A marvelous command of the language never helped a guy dance or run."

"You swim, I take it?"

"I move through the water quite well if you can call that swimming. Benson has showed me things. I can move on my stomach, by back and my side."

Harry noticed an uptick in his tone as he talked about it.

"So, Benson is more than just your chauffeur?"

"Yeah. He's my *caretaker*. Isn't that just about the worst title you can think of? It makes it sound like I can't do anything for myself – like I'm old and senile. There is almost nothing I can't do for myself. You know the one thing I want to do most? I want to kick a football. I want to win the big game with a fifty-yard field goal and be carried off the field on the player's shoulders. I want to go to the dance afterward and have all the others form a circle around me and my girl because I'm so good."

He slumped in his chair. His chin quivered as if he were going to cry. He wouldn't of course. His father didn't allow it. Harry got the idea there were lots of tears shed in

that lair and perhaps in bed at night. He would not inquire.

“May I move on from your current situation – the damaged neck and chair and pride.”

“Pride? What do you mean?”

“I’m going to leave that for you to think about later. I want you to answer some personal questions if you will.”

“If they aren’t too personal, okay.”

“Can you move your legs at all?”

Randy looked down at his lap sheepishly and nodded almost imperceptibly.

“What’s that about,” Harry asked, “an *almost* nod?”

“I can do more than I let on. I refuse to do the exercises the physical therapist has for me – they hurt.”

“That would appear to be the stupidest thing I have ever heard, Randy.”

“What?”

“You want to kick a ball and dance with girls and yet you won’t take the steps – pardon my choice of words – that give you the best chance of achieving those things. THAT, my boy, is S-T-U-P-I-D.”

“I thought you’d be on my side. I better go.”

“Avoiding the problem never provides a solution. I assume you know the real reason you refuse to cooperate. It was plain in your plan the moment you first entered this room last Tuesday.”

“I hate you, old man.”

“Well, that’s something I have no control over so I won’t waste time being concerned about it.”

“Jeez! You are the strangest person I have ever known – I’m thinking the strangest person *anybody* has ever known!”

“Thank you, for that.”

“Double Jeez! There you go again. Do I get an explanation?”

“I admit I am different – odd, or as you contend, even strange, perhaps. The last thing I want is to be the same as everybody – or even *anybody* – else. If I were, I wouldn’t have my own identity. So, I choose to do things my way – Oh, I am careful never to intentionally harm or embarrass anybody, but I am me, not you or Benson, or George Washington or one of the Ninja Turtles. I would feel like I had let myself down,

forgone my individual potential, if I tried to be like anybody else. I could never like – love – myself if I did that. I'm on this Earth to be me and if that makes me strange than let it come – I am strange."

Several full minutes of silence followed and that's a long time during a conversation. Tears began rolling down the boy's cheeks. Presently he looked up into Harry's face.

"I'm scared to death, Harry."

"In one of those books on my shelves there's a twelve-year-old boy who is talking about fear with a frightened friend. The boy says, "My dad says it's stupid *not* to be frightened of things that you should be frightened of, just like it's stupid to be frightened of things you shouldn't be frightened of."

"Sounds like a wise father – you, I'm guessing. How do you figure out what requires it and what doesn't?"

"I suppose that's one of the great questions every person has to face for himself. Will you share with me some of the things that frighten you?"

Randy thought for some time. It was further than he wanted to go and yet he felt the need to do it.

"One big thing – I'm afraid I will be wrong – that I'll fail or look stupid. Being right is very important to my father. I know I'm a big disappointment to him – the way I am. He was a great athlete. He's a fine dancer and swimmer. He jogs every morning."

The boy was clearly proud of his father.

"So, how do you react to your fear of being wrong?"

He gave the question a good deal of thought before offering a response.

"I fix things so I don't have to try it – then I can't fail it."

"I noticed that."

"You did? How?"

"What do you think your opening remark to me on Tuesday was all about – that you refused to participate in the tutoring."

"Oh, yeah. Believe it or not I even thought about that on the way home."

"What sort of feeling accompanied the thought?"

"Anger."

"Not the response I was expecting."

“Well, *first* it was anger – because you tricked me into doing things I didn’t want to do, that would leave me – what’s the term, vulnerable, I guess. Then, something like pride, I suppose – that I had tried and succeeded. That all sounds sort of corny, doesn’t it.”

“Hey, You’re talking to the king of corny, here. Don’t poo poo it.”

“Poo poo. You actually said, *poo poo*?”

“I guess that comes from another generation, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, like from the cavemen.”

“Some folks would be put off by a statement – a putdown – like that. Are you telling me to back off?”

“Oh, no. I mean I don’t think so. I guess I am sort of mixed up.”

That had to be the insight of the century, Harry thought, but, again, he would not speak of it.

“I want to be perfect for my father and I can’t be. It’s a no win kind of bind and I live it 24/7 – you know 24/7?”

Harry nodded, feeling some amusement as he considered how far 24/7 really was from poo poo. Harry responded.

“I’d be interested in hearing about all the perfect people you have known. I have never known anyone who was perfect. That would mean never making any errors in any aspect of life – never spilling anything, never dropping anything, never missing a question on a test, always knowing the exactly proper thing to do and say on all occasions, and, of course, the big one, never farting in public.”

Randy offered a look and quick smile. From anybody else in his life that would have been unacceptable, but from Harry it seemed to fit perfectly – trying to insert a bit of joy into an otherwise joyless situation.

Randy offered a sigh – not a run of the mill sigh like the one when he received back a paper with red check marks from a teacher. It was deep like it came from his heels. It was the, *I’ve run out of all useful alternatives sort of sigh*. He understood the difference and offered an attempt at a humorous explanation.

“That was the *Randolph-Sigh*, in case you were

wondering – sometimes referred to as *the end of the world sigh* or *the totally helpless sigh* or the *excuse me while I go jump off a cliff now sigh*.”

“My, my! Heavy stuff. I am certainly happy you can’t jump!”

It provoked another short-lived smile.

“I don’t really hate you like I said. I’m angry at the world – that’s what Benson says.”

“Benson sounds wise.”

“In his way, I suppose. I can’t do anything right. If I’d have just kept my mouth shut when the kids were taunting me the other evening things would never have gotten out of hand like they did, but after I disparaged their parentage by calling them bastards, made their mother’s out to be whores – disease laden, street walking whores to be exact – and referred to the kids as eunuchs with empty ball sacks, I had soon lost control of the situation.”

Harry chuckled out loud letting it continue for several moments.

“I have to ask, had you pre-planned that speech or did it just roll off your tongue?”

“Not planned and certainly ill-advised.”

“But I’ll bet it was just about the most satisfying spiel you ever offered – while it was going on.”

“You can say that again. Since then, I’ve repeated it to myself over and over again. I shouldn’t be proud of it, but I am. I even get a rush just thinking about it.”

“Clearly, it was constructed to make them outrageously angry and you did succeed at that.”

“I did.”

A full out, ear to ear grin emerged and remained for some time.

“All I can do to fight back is to dismantle another person’s self-respect with words and it would seem I have learned how to do that quiet well.”

“You have, but apparently, that is merely an offensive move and provides no defense whatsoever.”

“You got that. I got no defense. I’m basically helpless. Mother keeps pepper spray in my back pack, but that just seems too girly for a guy, you know.”

“So you’d allow yourself to get beaten to a pulp rather than appear feminine.”

“Damn right. It’s the least I can do – It’s all I can do. I thought we plowed that ground already.”

“How many in that group?”

“Six.”

“You offered yourself up to fists from six, angry, teen age boys?”

Randy shrugged.

“Are they a close group – do they have a leader?”

“Together all the time. Not really a gang – they aren’t bad kids. Tommy’s the leader I suppose. He and Hank play on the baseball team. They won the regional this season.”

“Ever talk with any of them individually?”

“My locker was next to Hank’s this past year. We’d talk sometimes between classes. He calls my chair, ‘*The Cruiser*’. I guess I like that. Once he held a door open for me. I hate when people do that, but I don’t think he was really trying to put me down or disgruntle me.”

Harry grew silent. Randy played with his hands in his lap. Silence was not comfortable for the young man. He noticed that he and Harry were different that way. Presently Harry spoke again.

“You fascinate me from your waist down.”

“What?”

He rolled his chair toward the door. Harry laughed a belly shaking laugh.

“I could have stated that in a better way couldn’t I? I apologize for my poor choice of words. I was referring to your legs and the fact they have been moving a lot today – as if that often happens when you’re upset, perhaps.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.”

“Can you move them when you want to or does that only happen automatically?”

Randy remained silent.

“I’m sorry, if that question overstepped some boundary,” Harry said. “Forgive me.”

“No. It’s not that. . . . If I show you something will you promise on the grave of your departed mother you’ll never tell a soul?”

“My. That is a tall order when I don’t have any idea what it’s all about.”

“Only way it’ll happen.”

“Well, I think we are coming to trust each other, so, I will agree to that unless you plan to unleash a tank of pepper spray in my direction.”

Randy offered a quick smile.

“No spray I promise.”

“He crossed his heart as an automatic leftover from his much younger days.”

He rolled to a place beside the door facing a blank wall, set the brake, and undid the seat belt that held him in place. He took a long breath and managed to turn his upper body around so, although more or less still in his chair, he was essentially facing back at it. With great arm and shoulder effort he raised himself up, hands on the arm rests until his body was straight and made a sever angle with the wall. He walked his hands back toward the front of his chair and with a powerful shove moved himself into a standing position against the wall. His face took on the unmistakable look of agony.

“I don’t know whether to clap or cry,” Harry said.

“No tears from you. I handle that all too well by myself.”

Harry deliverer a half dozen claps – that having been his stated alternative.

“I really do not know what to say, Son. It appears to be an amazing feat – well feet, legs, knees, hips – you know.”

“Don’t make me laugh or I’ll be flat on my face. Oh, I may have failed to mention I have never up to this moment, been able to reseat myself, so there may be some bloodshed in my immediate future.”

He saw Harry’s arms tense as if he were preparing to push himself up and out of his chair.

“There will be none of that. You stay where you are. However, if I should knock myself unconscious – as I have done on several occasions – please stick around until I wake up. There are dry jeans in my backpack.”

“Okay,” Harry said not trying to disguise his misgivings. “The floor is all yours – so to speak.”

“I will chuckle about that later.”

Randy turned his torso on his way to facing the wall.

The movement dragged his right leg and foot along with his upper body. The more severely he turned the more his left foot swiveled into place. At several points his body teetered. He regained a stable, upright position. Eventually both feet were more or less pointing back at the baseboard. He kept his weight forward turning his head so his left cheek was smashed flat against the wall.

“The moment of truth. You let happen whatever happens – got that?”

“Got it!”

He reached back with his right arm and hand watching over his shoulder such as he could. Very gently, with this left hand, he pushed himself away from the wall. He bent forward at the waist as he moved backward. His right hand found the arm rest. His bottom found the seat. His back found the back of the chair. He was seated again.

“Well, I’ll be damned. Would you look at that? Must have been the 100th time I’ve tried and the first time it worked. I’ll be double damned.”

He slumped and bent forward, his face in his hands and wept. Harry kept his seat minding to his own tears. He understood the monumental moment he had just shared in the boy’s life. It had been terrifying for both of them. It had been magnificent for both of them although Harry knew he really had no way of grasping its significance in the scheme of the young man’s life.

“That was the most heroic thing I have ever witnessed, Randy. How long have you been working on it?”

“Since the morning of my 13th birthday.

“I thought you didn’t try things at which you were afraid you might fail.”

“Correction: I never let people know I am trying things I’m afraid I might fail at. A big difference.”

“Were you certain you were going to succeed just now?”

“No. Not really. Not at all, I guess, I suppose you will call that progress – me trying something in front of somebody when I’m pretty sure I’m about to fail at it.”

He rolled to within a few feet of Harry’s chair.

“Oh, there is one more thing. Here’s a new check for

your services. I fashioned a memorable story about how it didn't get to you, which will remain my secret."

"The dog ate it."

"Even better than that."

He smiled.

"You're saying the tutoring continues."

"Of course."

He appeared surprised that Harry would have any reason to think otherwise.

"I think I will take your advice and use this wheelchair instead of the fancy one."

"I don't recall giving any such advice."

"Hmm. Well, then. If you needed a wheelchair which one would you choose?"

"You got me. This one of course. Simple, compact, easily manipulated, under your complete control, plus it gives your upper body a great work out all day long. You're really saying you've learned a few things about the old man already. Good for you."

"I know you and I aren't going to be friends forever, but I figure if I get to know you well enough, I'll be able to get your advice later on by just thinking about how you think."

"You are a remarkable young man and I hope someday you will come to realize *that* – I am sure you will."

Randy nodded – sort of and then offered a cryptic phrase or half phrase.

"So, doing stuff even when it scares your pants wet . . ."

"I'm not entirely sure what you mean," Harry came back.

"Most everything scares me. Hardly anything scares you. How do I get from me to you?"

"I see. An interesting observation and question. I think the short answer is coming to see that *trying* is far more important than *succeeding*."

"Say some more."

"When I begin writing a new book I never know if it will work, fall together properly, develop useful, believable characters, and present the message I'm trying to relay in a reasonable and efficient way."

Harry stood.

“Come over to my computer.”

He took a seat at the keyboard and pointed to a folder on the desktop.

“What’s that you’re pointing to?”

“See its name?”

“Yeah, ‘unfinished’.”

“Right. Let me open it. Every file in that folder holds part of a book or story that I haven’t finished because I wasn’t able to make it work the way I wanted it to.”

“All those? There must be dozens. All failures is what you’re saying, but you don’t mope about that. You’re proud that you started each one of them, aren’t you? That you tried, that’s what you’re saying.”

“Randolph. If you are going to get ahead of me I may just take my folder and go home.”

It was worth chuckles.

“But, perceptively, you have made or yourself the point I was trying to make for you.”

“This has been a strange time together, hasn’t it?”

“I suppose I can agree even without having you define what you mean by ‘strange’.”

“Because we are getting to know each other, right?”

“Right. One of my favorite things is getting to know – I mean really know – new people, especially young people. I always learn so much from them.”

“I won’t pretend to understand that, but I’ll think on it.”

“What more could I ask?”

Randy looked at his watch.

“I’ve wasted the tutoring time with other stuff. I’m sorry.”

“I have learned important things today,” Harry said. “How about you?”

“Oh, yes, but not tutoring stuff.”

“Are you sure, and please don’t answer that right now.”

“I promise I’ll bring pages of stuff I’ve written next time and we can go through them word by word and you can show me what I’ve done right and what I’ve done wrong and how to fix it. As I understood you last time, that’s really what this is all about, right? Start with my strengths and weaknesses and go from there.”

“Pretty much.”

“You really do enjoy having me come here, don’t you?”

“I do, indeed.”

“You can’t know how unbelievable that is. I always think of myself as a burden. I can’t remember a single time when I really felt I belonged anyplace. I may not sleep at all tonight thinking about it. I’ll get to work on all those other things right away. I’ll have four days before I see you again. Thanks.”

Harry had no idea what *all those other things* might be, but that was fine. It wasn’t important for him to know.

* * *

The next week settled into more of a routine tutoring arrangement. Randy arrived – always early – with questions or samples prepared. Harry often had topics in mind. They worked well together. Harry was always amused when the boy corrected his (Harry’s) grammar – always politely and just matter of fact the way Harry did for him.

On the third Tuesday, rather than knocking twice and going on inside as had become the boy’s habit, there was the knock but the door did not move. Harry went to open it. There was another boy with Randy. Randy began talking immediately.

“This is my friend, Hank. Since you didn’t know him I figured I should wait for you to answer the door.”

“Hello, Hank. Glad to meet you.”

They shook hands and the boys entered. Harry was intrigued beyond words. He listened. He knew there would be more.

“I’ve told you about Hank, Harry. We’ve been swimming at my place every day. He has a killer swan dive. He went with me to physical therapy on Saturday and the therapist showed him how to help with all the things I’ve been supposed to have been doing at home all these years. His background with the trainer in the locker room makes him a natural.”

Harry had to search for words.

“I understand you’re a baseball player. Congratulations on your regional title.”

He looked surprised that a man of his age would have even known about it.

“Thanks.”

“Hank catches and sometimes plays shortstop.”

“I assume you have a great arm, then.”

“He does. There’s no stealing second when he’s behind the plate.”

“Well, good to have met you Mr. Harry. Randy insisted I come, you know.”

“I’m glad you came along. Hope to see you again.”

Hank offered his hand again and left. Randy closed the door after him. He took a sheet from his shirt pocket and rolled up to the table as if ready to get to work.

“Whoa, there, big fella,” Harry said also taking his place.

“You’re saying an explanation is in order.”

“I’m saying it would be nice to get filled in at least a little.”

“I took your suggestion and called Hank. We talked for a long time. I invited him over to swim. He came.”

“I don’t remember suggesting that.”

Randy grinned.

“Sometimes your suggestions are silent, but I hear them. We came to an understanding about our misunderstanding. There were more apologies than were reasonable. I mentioned my problem about physical therapy.”

“Problem?”

“I may not have mentioned it. Dad charged Benson with doing my exercises with me – moving and stretching routines that hurt like hell. When I cried, Benson cried so I put a stop to that by refusing to continue. I couldn’t have Benson suffering. The second day that Hank came over to swim, he brought it up – physical therapy. One thing led to another. I told him the story about why I stopped. He asked if he could become my helper. I told him he could come along to one session and after seeing what went on he could back out and I’d understand. He went along and he didn’t even blink. It’s not that he isn’t compassionate, but he understands what has to be done. Athletes seem to understand that. It took me a long time – and our talk about it, you and me – before I understood.”

“You and me? Our talk about it?”

“One of our silent conversations, maybe. I’m not sure. Anyway, I can already tell my muscles are loosening up and my joints are beginning to remember how to move and swivel. It’s a half hour of agony seven days a week. I hate it. I mean I *really* hate it. I think that’s good. Nobody should want to walk into a torcher chamber for thirty minutes every single day. Right?”

Harry was surprised by the way that monologue suddenly became a question for him. He managed an answer.

“Right. I admire you both. How nice you made it possible for Hank to come into your life.”

“Hmm. I did that, didn’t I? Hadn’t considered that side of it. Good for me, right? Of course, good for me, no need to answer.”

“I see the neck brace is off.”

Randy just nodded offering no more information about it.

“Today I want us to work our magic on my run-on sentences. Feel up to that?”

“Certainly. A sentence should present one thought or, if more than one, they must necessarily be inseparable thoughts or ideas. Although the word ‘and’ can be quite useful in combining things into lists, it gets us into the worst of dilemmas when it rears its head between sentences containing separate ideas. Got that?”

“Got it.”

“Now here is how we avoid the problem . . .”

Like usual, the time was over too soon. Randy paused by the door on the way out.

“We do therapy from one to one thirty, then swim ‘til three or so. You’re welcome to come and join us – I’ll send Benson for you.”

“I thank you for the invitation, but I’m afraid I’ve never owned a swimming suit.”

“You’ve never been swimming?”

“I didn’t say that. When I was young, pools were called creeks, and swimming was called skinny dipping.”

“Oh, well, I’m sure that wouldn’t bother either Hank or me and I imagine it would give Maggie, the downstairs maid,

quite a thrill.”

“More than likely she would poke her eyes out and run screaming into the night.”

“I love that about you, Harry.”

“My skinny dipping?”

“No. You’re really, really, strange, off the wall, oddball, absurd sense of humor.”

“I am quite certain it has never been described that completely before. You left out demented, however.”

“Do you accept hugs, Harry?”

“Do !!”

He leaned down and they managed a lingering, if awkward, hug.

“Someday, we’ll do that while both of us are standing.”

“I will look forward to that moment, son.”

* * *

Randy continued to go to Harry’s for the remainder of the summer. They saw each other a few times after that but, just like it should have been, Randy got on with his life filled with new people and new activities and Harry filled his life with new youngsters and new novels.

It was going on eight o’clock one evening in late April, two years later. There was a knock on Harry’s door. He saved his work on the computer, removed his glasses, and opened the door. It was Randy bedecked in a tuxedo and carnation alongside a lovely girl in a long, light blue evening dress – *prom dress* he would learn was the proper name. Something was wrong – no, something was *very* right.

Randy was standing with his arm around the girl’s waist.

“We just have a minute, Harry, but I really wanted to stop by on the way to the dance. May we come in?”

“Of course. Please.”

“This is Brianna. She’s more than just my date for the prom.”

“You’re married. How nice.”

Randy turned his head and looked into her face.

“I told you to be ready for anything.”

She smiled and pulled herself closer to Randy. Harry assumed that was a demonstration of affection rather than

fear of the strange old man.

“We’re a couple. That’s like going steady back in your day.”

“Congratulations. We must have fifteen seconds left from that minute you stipulated. Catch me up *to date* – so to speak.”

“I will graduate near the top of my class in two weeks. I will enter the university in the fall – English/History major. I’m one of the few lucky ones who doesn’t have to switch to a field he doesn’t like in order to be able to earn a living. Old Randolph the first benevolently saw to that. We’re double dating tonight with Hank and his girl. I usually walk with a cane, but tonight that’s strictly Plan B. In the near future I intend to be able to give it a proper burial. Get this, I’ve been volunteering at the community center down the street, tutoring Jr. High kids in English. They all want me. I try to make it lots of fun like you did. Can you believe I have, on occasion, even made my Father laugh – out loud. Oh, and the down stairs maid is still waiting for you come swimming or whatever you called it.”

That was worth a long, private, chuckle between them.

“One last thing. I have to fulfill a promise I made to you and to me once. He stepped forward and opened his arms delivering the stand up, hug of all hugs.”

Harry could bring no words so he just nodded and eventually stepped back. The young people left.

They were mostly tears of joy that streamed down the old man’s cheeks. He sat back in his recliner, closed his eyes and let his mind dance among his precious memories. More were still to be made, of course, but it was such a joy for him to spend a moment now and then taking stock of how things were going.

* * *

Randy folded the pages containing the story and slid them into his rear pocket. He held his wooden cane up for everyone to see and then laid it on the top of the coffin. From the white sack, he removed a nail and a hammer. With a half dozen, loving yet determined blows he firmly attached the cane where it lay. He breathed in a long whiff of the pine scent, laden for him with wonderful memories. He spoke, not

really to those gathered behind him.

“Harry, a large part of you will always be with me. I want this part of me to always be with you. Good-bye, dear friend.”

He patted the cane. He patted the box. He returned to his seat.

CHAPTER THREE

The 9-Year-Old Waif with the Size 20 Brain

The Director stood holding his list.

“Next in line is William Anderson. Are you with us, today, William?”

A slender, young man wearing a medium brown sport coat, light brown slacks and a tan dress shirt with blue tie stood up.

“That will probably be me – or is it I. Harry, where are you when a guy needs you?”

He walked with a confident stride to the pine box. Taking his time he loosened his tie, undid the top shirt button, removed his jacket and draped it over the coffin.

“More like it, right, Harry?”

Those gathered there all offered a smile and nods. Those with ties, loosened them.

“This story condenses several years into a few months, but I believe accurately provides the essence of our relationship. It bears the title, he was known to have given me – The 9-Year-Old Waif with the Size 20 Brain.”

* * *

“Another squirming package from judge Filbert, Harry. I’m sure you remember her.”

The comment had come from Pete, a city detective – badge on his belt – who met Harry face to face when he opened his door into the alley.

“Yes. Amanda. Juvenile judge for many years. In fact, I just got off the phone with her. That squirming package under your arm must be young William.”

“Willie,” the youngster screamed kicking his feet in Harry’s direction. “Never, ever call me William. That’s my good fer nothin’ dad.”

The two men traded shrugs.

“I am not used to speaking to a boy’s butt, son. Suppose the detective can put you down without World War Three breaking out?”

“Can’t guarantee it.”

At least he was honest; Harry would give the lad that.

The detective stood the lad in front of him, his hands in

firm grasp of the boy's shoulders.

"I understand you are nine."

"You can understand any damn thing you wanna understand."

"Thank you for your permission. I always like to get off on a positive note with my new friends."

"What?"

Willie looked up at the detective wondering if perhaps *he* just might be a better alternative than the old man in stocking feet with a pencil behind one ear and the top button on his shirt buttoned. Willie noticed things like that.

"I understand from Judge Filbert that you and I are going to have the grand opportunity of getting to know each other."

"You talk funny."

"He looked at the detective again, moving back the entire inch that he was allowed.

"I can see this ain't gonna work, Pete. Might as well take me back to Juvie."

"It will be in your best interest with the Judge – the one who has the power of life and death over you right now – to cooperate," the detective said forcing him a few inches closer to the doorway.

"Life and death? Jeeze! I just wanted a banana; get off my back."

"Next time consider some other way to get one – hitting an old man across the back with a ball bat, taking his wallet, stomping on his glasses and running off with his sack of groceries is not the way to go about getting a banana."

"I got one, didn't I?"

"Yes, and a stay at Juvie, and removal of custody from your mother, and at least a year on probation. Believe me, the best that will come from it is the time you will get to spend here with Harry."

"I think your brain is scrambled, pig. Once you leave here, this old guy doesn't have a chance against me."

"Oh, son! Never, ever believe that. I've seen him take on and tame a member of the Bloody Arrow gang – all by himself."

Willie looked back and forth between the two men as if

weighing the merits of several alternatives.

“Tell ya what. I’ll give ya one hour to show me what ya can do.”

“What I can do, *what?*”

Willie looked back up at the detective, his brow furrowed as if pleading to be rescued from this place of big words and puzzling phrases.

“I just can’t work under these conditions, detective.”

“I suggest you give it a try. Get your book from the back seat of my car. Don’t try to run again or I’ll hang you up by your thumbs this time.”

Willie flashed a grin in the big man’s direction. That seemed out of place. Harry reserved judgment. The boy retrieved the book and ducked inside under Harry’s arm, which was still holding the door.

“This going to be okay, Harry?” Pete asked.

“Oh my yes. I am eager to get to know Willie. You scoot on now. Can you give us 90 minutes?”

“I can, but I’ll check back in fifteen with the EMTs on speed dial.”

Harry raised his eyebrows and cocked his head. Amanda had not painted a pleasant picture, but neither had she suggested a serial killer. The detective left.

Willie had already begun walking the room seeing what was there.

“Lot’s a books. I hate books – just so ya know.”

“Thank you for that heads up. I should probably tell you I love books – just so *you* know.”

“I get your message.”

“The message that I like books?”

“No. That I said *ya* and should a said *you*.”

“My. I hadn’t even realized I had sent that message. I guess I’m even better than I thought I was.”

Willie shook his head as if in disbelief.

“If you are nine does that put you in 4th grade?”

“That sounds like a math problem. I sort of like math problems like that.”

“Good to know, but you didn’t answer my question you understand.”

It got a glance straight into the old man’s face.

“Third – held back in first. Teacher hated me.”

“I’m sorry to hear she hated you. That must have been very uncomfortable for you. I am assuming it was a woman. I guess I should have asked.”

“She was a woman. Women are generally better than men, but men are generally worse than anybody.”

“I can see why you seemed to dislike being with the detective and now me, then.”

“Oh, Pete, is not so bad. Me and him go way back. He wouldn’t really hang me up by my thumbs. That was just his way of reminding me it’s very important to pretend to be on my good behavior.”

Harry smiled to himself.

“What’s the story on all these books? Must be a ton of ‘em.”

“I am an author. I wrote many of them – all those on that middle book shelf.”

He pointed.

Willie moved to it and began studying the spines, turning his head as if actually wanting to read what was printed on them.

“Can’t be all yours. I count five different last names.”

“They are called pen names. Authors often write under names that aren’t really theirs.”

“Ah. Like an alias. Dad used lots of aliases.”

“Sort of the same I guess although I hadn’t really ever thought of them that way. Thank you.”

“Fer what?”

“For helping me see the connection between pen names and aliases.”

“How do you spell *pen names* – one word or two?”

“Usually two.”

He nodded and continued looking around the room.

“I sit in the recliner,” Harry said. “You may sit anywhere else.”

“What if I sit in the recliner?”

“Then I would be disappointed in you.”

“I could if I really wanted to.”

He slid onto the couch, arranging the throw pillows to his satisfaction or at least to demonstrate that he *would* be in

control of *them*.

“What book did you bring?”

“The red one there beside the computer.”

“Is that the answer to the question you really thought I asked?”

It garnered the slightest smile.

“Readin’ book. Hate readin’, like I said.”

“No. You said you hated books.”

“You know what I meant.”

“You mean you often require other people to read your mind? That must get you into a lot of problems.”

Willie fixed his gaze on Harry as the old man eased himself into his recliner – the *red book* in hand.

“You are nearly half way through the school year so I imagine you have read nearly half of the stories in this book. Which one do you suppose most boys your age would like the best?”

It had not been the question the boy was prepared to answer; that answer had been laced with four letter words and references to the old man’s mother.

Harry handed the book across and placed it on the arm of the sofa. Without thinking, Willie bent forward and slid it toward him. He paged through it for several moments.

“Probably this one. It’s about a cop and a police dog that rescue a firefighter from a collapsed buildin’ while it’s still blazin’.”

“That does sound interesting.”

“Not interestin’ – *excitin’* and *dangerous*. Don’t you know nothin’ about boys?”

“Thank you for pointing that out for me. It seems that so far I am learning more from you than you are from me.”

“I’m a pretty good teacher. Some a the kids would even have to admit that. I always have good ideas.”

“I can believe that.”

Willie pointed back to the shelf looking puzzled.

“I can’t figure how you have your books arranged – not alphabetically, not by author – pen name, two words – and not by color or height or thickness. It’s like you just threw ‘em at the shelf and let ‘em stay where they landed.”

“Have you ever heard of copyright dates?”

"I probably have, but it's hard to remember every single thing ya hear, ya know."

"Oh, yes. I do know about that. Will you bring me the small book with the reddish spine at the far end of the shelf?"

Without hesitation, he slid off the couch, secured the book, and handed it to Harry, standing close.

"A bad name for a book, I think," he offered. "*The Murder No One Committed*. If it's a murder somebody had to do it otherwise it couldn't be murder."

"What if I told you it really was murder and nobody *did* commit it?"

"That ain't sayin' no more than that dumb title."

"Doesn't it make you wonder how it might have actually happened?"

"I suppose some guys might fall fer that."

"Anyway, that's not why I asked for the book. Open it to the first page."

"Got that dumb title again and somebody's name – Garrison Flint. I like that name. That one a your pen names?"

"Yes, and it is the first book I wrote after I retired. Turn the page and see when."

"I'm thinkin' that's the date after the C in the circle."

"Correct. That C in the little circle stands for copyright and that means the one who owns the copyright is the one who is in charge of who can print or sell or otherwise distribute the contents of that book."

"Oh. Sort a like a patent only on a book."

"Exactly. Now, if you would go down the row of books you would find . . ."

"Probably that they are arranged according to that copyright date and that would be like the order you wrote 'em in."

"Correct again. You figure things out pretty fast don't you?"

"Yes, I do. Not many people take time to see that about me."

"You're welcome, then."

"What does that mean?"

"Most times when someone pays another person a compliment he says thank you. Then the one who offered it

would say . . .”

“You’re welcome. I get it.”

He got it, but was not moved to offer the thank you. Harry smiled.

“I don’t trust folks that smile when I don’t know why they’re smilin’.”

“I was smiling because I am enjoying getting to know you, Willie.”

“Really? That’s sort a like one a them compliments, right?”

“I suppose so.”

“Thanks, then. Did I do that right?”

“You certainly did.”

“I guess that’s okay, then.”

“Sorry, that comment lost me.”

“The order of your books, according to when you writ ‘em. I can see how that makes sense to you.”

“I’m glad we have come to an understanding about it.”

“You may not be too bad. I guess I’ll stick around and see.”

There was a knock on the door.

“That will be Pete checkin’ in to see if I done ya in yet. Ya know what would be funny would be if I got ya in a head lock and then you called out for him to come in.”

“Let’s go for it!”

“Really?”

The boy was clearly astounded.

“Hurry up. Our window of opportunity is rapidly closing here.”

They took their positions. Harry called for Pete to come in.

He stood at the open door, hands on his hips, taking it all in. Willie couldn’t contain himself and began giggling. He released the old man and moved toward the detective.

“We are spoofing ya – pretend like. It was my idea.”

“Truthfully, I didn’t know whose idea it might have been. It’s something like Harry just might have suggested. You’ll learn about that.”

Willie turned around and looked Harry in the face.

“I’m beginning to get that idea. Have you had lunch

yet, Pete?”

“Yes,” Pete answered not having been prepared for the question.

“You go on and do your cop stuff then. I’m gonna make me and Harry some toast and scrambled eggs. You got eggs and bread, Harry?”

“I sure do and come to think of it I *didn’t* have lunch.”

He winked at the detective.

“Be ready at two fifteen,” Pete said, “otherwise the ride back to Juvie will be in handcuffs.”

Willie pushed the man out the door, closed it and locked it.

“You should keep that door locked, even durin’ the day. There is some unscrupulous characters that roam these alleys.”

It seemed to escape him that he was one of those unscrupulous characters and that it was *because* he was, that he was there. Harry was impressed by his vocabulary.

Willie walked into the kitchen and searched for the skillet and bread.

“Skillet in the bottom drawer, there. Bread in the bread box, there. Eggs in the . . . “

“Refrigerator. I know. I make the best eggs in the world. Do you have cream and butter.”

“There’s milk and butter, but no cream.”

“We’ll need to put that on our shopping list. Take a seat at the table. I can’t stand having people underfoot while I’m cookin’.”

Ten minutes later, and half a dozen Large, Grade A eggs later, lunch was served.

“You can butter your own toast. I’ve found that’s a matter of personal choice. Me, I like lots. Ma, hardly any.”

He took the place across from Harry and waited, clearly wanting to get the old man’s reaction, and what a reaction he got. At the first taste, it was head rolling, lip smacking, and uming of the highest caliber.

“Told ya.”

Harry put away about two and Willie the remaining four.

“I suppose you do dishes,” the boys asked.

“I do. Again, you are very perceptive. Wash or dry?”

“What?”

“Dishes. I do them right after every meal. You want to wash them or dry them?”

“Don’t *want* ta do neither if you’re lookin’ fer a honest answer.”

“Let me rephrase it then, ‘Which *will* you do?’”

“Ma says I’m a splasher. I better dry lessin’ you got one great mop.”

A few minutes later, with the water gurgling down the drain and the wash rag and towel hung on the hooks, they returned to the living room.

“I won’t charge you fer the cookin’, Harry.”

“Good, then I won’t charge you for the bread and eggs.”

“Oh, yeah. I never thought of it that way.”

“If we are going to read in your book it might be good if we sat beside each other on the couch. Will that be alright?”

“Okay. But any funny stuff and I’m out a here.”

Harry winced; what kind of a life had the youngster had to endure?

“I assure you there will never, ever, be any of that from me. Do you understand?”

“I hear your words.”

Still, he put the smallest of the several throw pillows between them.

“You ain’t gonna care if I miss some words, are you?”

It was more of a statement than a question but, still, Harry answered.

“No, I will not.”

It seemed to have agreed with the boy’s very important conclusion based on a minimum of data.

“How about this?” Harry said. “I won’t even try to supply a word until you point at me. That way you’ll have all the time you want to try it on your own.”

Willie nodded thoughtfully and threw the strange old man a quick glance.

“That is a fine way to do it. Nobody never done it like that before.”

He thumbed through the book to the story that seemed to be next on deck.

“Can I ask you a question?” he said looking up at Harry.

“You may always ask me any question if you will grant me the right not to answer if I think anything about it is inappropriate.”

“And me like that to you, too?”

Harry was pretty sure he understood.

“Absolutely.”

“Here it is. Do writers know about sounding words out? My teachers never took time to teach me about that. I hear kids doing it sometimes.”

“Writers do know about that, and I’ll bet we can take care of it in short order.”

“I know what you are.”

“Oh.”

“Well, it’s either a optimist or a pessimist – I get them mixed up. I mean the one who thinks things will be alright.”

“That would be *optimist* and I guess in general I do fall into that category. One thing though, I believe it takes more than just *thinking* things will turn out well – a person has to plan the steps needed to make it happen and then work to make those steps really occur.”

“I got it: be optimistic, plan out the steps and then take them. I never had nobody to talk to about important things before. I hope you don’t disappoint me, too.”

Harry supposed there was at least some tiny trace of optimism in that statement. It had been seven little words that planted a youngster’s future squarely on his shoulders. His shoulders were old. He hoped they would be up to it. To his thinking the saddest word had been, *too*, meaning the land believed everybody else in his whole world for the past nine plus years had failed him. There are times in one’s life when you crosses a significant line before you realize it; a line from which it is impossible to step back.

* * *

The judge had talked Harry into five days a week for the first month. It was far more than he usually took on. Clearly the judge thought she knew something nobody else did. Had he not just finished the first draft of his latest book, he would have thought twice, but with the creative aspect well organized and the characters defined, it was a matter of rewriting and rewriting and rewriting until it flowed easily for

the potential reader. He could put that off a bit. He was on no time schedule. Well, he probably was, but that was in the hands of the forces of the universe so he never let himself be concerned about it.

One o'clock arrived. Willie arrived.

"He hasn't stopped talking since I picked him up," Pete said, "so, if you will please let him know I may be a half hour late on the other end today – got court. That be alright?"

"That will be fine."

Harry closed the door.

"Why does Pete have to go to court?"

"Probably to testify against a bad guy."

"Like me, huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm in Juvie – that means I'm a bad guy, right."

"You don't ask easy questions, Willie."

"And I'm thinkin' that you think that's good."

"Remarkable!"

"What?"

"Trust me on that one. Someday I will explain. Here's how I believe about bad people. You may decide to think differently. Okay?"

Willey nodded and lay back on the couch positioning his head up on pillows so he could see Harry as he spoke from his recliner.

"Some people really do seem to be bad like something is permanently wrong with the way their brains are put together – they just can't be good. That's not really very many people. Then there are those who for one reason or another use poor judgment and keep ending up doing bad things. And third are people who have not had adequate training in how *not* to be bad – or turned around, have not had adequate training in how to be good. Do you sort of understand those divisions?"

"Some can't help it, some should know better, and some haven't had a chance. I got it. Go on."

Harry was amazed and he was beginning to understand that would continue to be a fascinating part of his ride with this young man.

"Okay. Clearly, there is nothing wrong with your brain."

Your records show that's what the school believes, that's what Pete believes and that's what Judge Filbert believes. It is certainly what I believe so let's cross off that first possibility. You with me on that?"

"Yeah. I could a told ya that if ya'd a just asked. I always figured I had a pretty good brain."

Harry thought to himself that saying Willie had a *pretty good brain* was like saying Michael Jordan had been a *so-so basketball player*, but he moved on.

"You are a thoughtful person. You tend to think ahead. You learn from both your successes and your missteps. You try to improve yourself. That takes you out of the middle category."

"So it leaves me in the bad influence group. The cops and the social workers are always tryin' to blame my ma when I get into trouble. It ain't her that's refusin' to do my school work and stealin' and beatin' up old men and fightin' with other kids. That's me so just leave her out of it or you'll be sorry!"

The response had worked him into a sit up straight, clinched fist, emotional high.

"Or what? I'll be sorry!"

Willie relaxed and scooted back further on the couch.

"I shouldn't have said that. Sometimes, on the way to my tongue, my head uses the wrong path. I seem to have a whole bunch of those bad paths stored up. Maybe we can find a way to get rid of them, huh?"

"It sounds to me like you have already started – understanding what you just described is probably 90% of the struggle."

"I thought you were going to say 90% of the *problem*. I like the way you said it, instead. It is not knowing how to win *THAT struggle* that keeps causing me the *problems*. Do you understand? Does that make sense?"

"It makes perfect sense. I think tomorrow we will let you help me solve some of my problems – struggles – Okay?"

"You are just joking, right?"

"Partly. What I am really saying is I think you are a remarkable young man and I consider it a privilege to have you in my life, Willie."

His smile soured immediately. His lower lip protruded

and quivered. He turned over, buried his face in a pillow and sobbed somewhat violently. It had come on all quite unexpectedly. It wasn't the first tears youngsters had shed there, but Willie's came from the depths of his soul.

Harry stood and walked to the couch. He leaned down and spoke softly, close to the boy's ear careful not to touch him.

"May I sit here beside you on the couch?"

Willie scooted himself to his right, closer to the back, making room. It hadn't been out and out permission, but Harry took it as the next best thing. He sat and went on.

"I remember when I was about your age and things had made me very upset or sad that it really helped when one of my parents would sit close and rub my back. May I rub your back?"

Again, the clarity of the permission was marginal. In that case, a shrug of his shoulders. The fact he held the top of the shrug for some time, made it feel right for the old man. Very gently he laid his open palm in the small of the boy's back looking for any signal he should stop. Seeing and feeling none, he began moving it slowly in a circular motion, gradually extending it up and down and side to side. He could feel and see Willie relaxing. The sobbing continued. The rubbing continued. Words seemed out of place.

Harry had sensed the day before when Willie had put him in the headlock to spoof Pete, that he was a touch deprived child. His initial grab had been almost painful, but he immediately backed off and allowed a deliberate gentleness to take over. He was reluctant to bring that episode to an end. The current one could continue for as long as he liked.

Over the next ten minutes the sobbing subsided; his breathing slowed and became regular and shallow. Willie was asleep. Harry unfolded an afghan over his slender body and returned to his chair. During the next thirty minutes as the youngster slept, Harry's mind entertained a whole host of wonders about his young charge.. He was sleeping in safety. Harry had not before considered there might be no truly safe place in his world. There were steps that needed to be taken. He would look into several possibilities.

Eventually, Harry heard the detective's car stop in the

alley. He hurried to the door and opened it with his finger to his lips. Pete frowned. Harry pointed inside.

“Had an emotional crisis,” he whispered. “He cried himself to sleep. Later, we need to talk.”

Harry hitched his head inviting the man inside. Harry went to the boy and gently touched his shoulder.

“Time to wake up. Your limousine and driver are here for you, young man.”

The boy roused gradually, taking note of the cover and the fact Pete was there. He turned over onto his back, stretching and moving the afghan off with his legs. He pointed to Harry, but looked at Pete.

“This old man worked me so hard I got plumb tuckered out. You’ll need to talk with him about that. Must be laws against it – child labor or something.”

“He probably just didn’t want to feed you today,” Pete said trying to help make light of things, raising no questions.

Willie sat up.

“Good bed. Thanks for the cover. Warm even with all those big holes in it. We will need to talk about how that can be. I didn’t get to read the story to you. I had really practiced it.”

“I will look forward to hearing you read it tomorrow, then.”

“I’ll go ahead and start on another one to make up for . . . well, just to make up.

“You have read my mind.”

“Not really. We’re just gettin’ to know each other pretty good. Pretty soon we’ll know when the other one needs to pee.”

It had not been offered as anything other than a fully serious observation.

The boy stood, picked up his book and walked to the door. He looked up at Pete, making the transition from one important person to the other.

“Back to home to sweet home, James and don’t spare the horses. Not sure what that means, but it was in the story I didn’t read to Harry today. I promise to stay awake tomorrow. If you need a nap, though, I can rub your back.”

“Thank you. I will keep that in mind.”

He went on and got in the car. Pete spoke to Harry.

“I don’t know how you do what you do here, but if it can be bottled I can make you a millionaire by Friday.”

Harry smiled and recognized the comment with a quick smile. He had one final suggestion for the detective.

“When you walk him inside this afternoon try putting your hand on his back or shoulder – just lightly. I’ll be interested in what happens.”

“Like how long it takes for him to rip out all five of my fingernails on that hand?”

“I truly doubt that. It might be well the other boys didn’t see it, however.”

* * *

The end of the first month came and went. All the words in all the stories on all the pages in the red book had been mastered. Willie would sometimes ask for Harry to print ‘big words’ he had never seen so he could sound them out. Their time together had gradually extended to several hours. The judge had, for some reason, suddenly granted Willie four hour furloughs, four times a week, to go home and be with his mother. Willie had borrowed the book with that awful title. He returned it on a Monday morning.

“I liked it. I guess I just didn’t understand the title. I read it to Ma. She liked it. She’s sick you know – don’t get out a bed no more - anymore. A nurse from welfare comes in twice a day to take care of her. Nobody’s told me, but I know she’s not gonna get better. I’m sorry I’ve made her life so tough. Dad left when I was four and I think I took that out on her because she was the only one I could hurt about it. He was no good. I hated him. He shouldn’t a never left a sick wife and a little kid.”

“I didn’t know all that. I can only imagine how difficult that must have been.”

“Still is, you mean.”

“Yes. Still is.”

“She’s much better off with me in Juvie. She knows I’m bein’ taken cared of and she don’t have to worry.”

“When did you decide she would be better off if you get yourself sent to Juvenile Hall?”

“About two months ago. I – oops! Spilled the beans I

guess, huh? Please don't tell nobody I got myself put there on purpose."

"I hope you know I won't."

Willie nodded and allowed a few tears. Nothing like the torrent and heaving chest of all those weeks before – just gentle, quiet tears. He made no effort to hide them. He had come to understand that tears were not bad things at Harry's.

"It was sort of selfish, too."

"And how was *it* selfish – I assume '*it*' means getting yourself arrested."

He nodded and accepted the box of tissues Harry held out to him.

"It was really hard on me seeing her like that and feeling like I had to take care of her when I didn't know how. This way I don't gotta be the only one."

"That makes sense, I guess. It is always difficult to see a loved one suffer. I went through something similar with my wife before she died many years ago."

Their eyes met. Willie nodded. Harry understood.

After a brief period of silence Willie spoke.

"I brought a new book, today. Not really a school book. Is that okay?"

"Unless it is filled with pictures of naked ladies I imagine it will be okay."

Willie grinned a well spread grin. Maybe the old man really did know the important things about boys.

"Those are under my mattress at home. Carlos – he's twelve – says they'll be important to me when I get to be his age so I'm just puttin' in a supply. This book is geometry. It's sort of a kind of math I think. I like math and geometry. There are always right answers if you work on them long enough. Other things aren't that way, you know."

"I suppose we could discuss that, but go on."

"What you just said really was that I might not be right about *other things*, but you aren't going to argue with me about it. That's one of your best qualities – givin' me stuff to think about without makin' me angry. Never knowd a person like that before – well, Pete, sort a – yeah, Pete."

"I'm sorry that has been your experience."

"Yeah. Me, too. But, about geometry. I don't really

need help with it. It teaches itself. You learn some statements – proofs – that are always true and you use them to work out answers. The forward to the books calls it logic – I think that’s philosophy. There’s a chapter at the end of the book that shows you how to measure the height of like mountains and building using angles and things. Trigsomething. I’m looking forward to that, but I figure if it’s at the end it means I need to know the front first.”

“A wise conclusion.”

“Wouldn’t that be more like a supposition than a conclusion because I don’t really know it will turn out to be true?”

“Young man you always leave my head spinning. Where on earth have you learned such things?”

“Like I said, I read a lot.”

“No. You said you hated to read.”

“Oh, that. Sort of a way to keep you from expectin’ too much from me. You can learn a lot even if you don’t know all the words. I know a way into the library after it closes. I sort of got banned for life a few years back.”

Harry had no useful response so he remained silent. Harry was good about that and Willie appreciated it, though had yet to discuss it with him.

“So, supposition?” Willie said getting back to the problem.

“Yes. Supposition. Definitely.”

“I used to hate to be wrong, but you don’t care if I’m wrong. Heck, you don’t care if *you’re* wrong. That takes a lot of pressure off a guy.”

“I look at mistakes like signposts along a road that tell me which way *not* to go the next time. They urge me to search for and investigate other trails – other possibilities.

“That’s a good way to remember about it. When I’m a teacher I’ll use that, if you don’t mind. Maybe I’ll even give you a footnote for it.”

The tears had stopped. His wonderful grin had returned. They had tacos for lunch – Willie’s mother’s recipe. It was important to him that Harry liked them. He did, of course. Harry always washed. Willie always dried and put away.

“So, I’m thinkin’ – that’s *thinking* – that I’m really not a pervert for sort of liking those magazines, huh?”

“The interest is not only normal, but it is essential for the continuation of the human species. There are other less positive aspects of the industry that produces those magazines that we can discuss when you are older.”

“You think we will really know each other when I am older?”

“I certainly hope so. Life is difficult to predict accurately, of course.”

Willie nodded. It had given him something else to ponder.

“You know, Harry, you’re like a box of matches.”

Harry didn’t try to contain his chuckle.

“I can hardly wait to find out *how*.”

“And I know you really mean that. You like my ideas. That’s something new for me. And we will talk about the responsibility that comes with that later on. But, about the matches. It’s like you keep throwing matches toward me for me to pick up and then strike and light later on when I’m ready to use them or to think about them. Most people just bring on the fire, but you allow me to say when the time will be right. You get that?”

“I do. Well put, although I’ve never thought of it in that way before.”

Earlier in their relationship Harry would not have trusted the boy with a match. Turning the young man loose with a new idea just might have similar repercussions. Willie had not allowed an opening for the exploration of what was to happen to him when his mother died. When he was ready it would surface.

Willie set up the card table and Harry arranged the chairs. It appeared it was going to be a geometry day. Harry figured he would learn things.

“I think you’d a been proud a me – that’s *of* me – this morning.”

“I am typically proud of you Willie.”

“I know. Someday we have to discuss that, too. It is very puzzling. Anyway, this morning at mess – that’s breakfast at Juvie – one of the guys asked me if I was going outside

today – meaning away from the Hall. I guess I nodded. He went on to ask if I was going to see the crazy old man or my sick old lady – you have to imagine his tone to get the full effect. The time was when I would have crawled across the table and laid into him. I’d have beat his head against the cement floor – for disrespecting Ma and you. But I didn’t. I did correct him by saying, ‘They are my *mother* and my *tutor*’. He and his friends made the high pitched ‘woo woo’ sound and wiggled their fingers at me, but I just sat there thinking the sausage links had been done perfectly this morning.”

“You exhibited a great deal of self-restraint – and used an adverb *correctly*.”

“Pete says I have to learn to consider the source. That’s been really hard. When the source is a idiot – an idiot – I just have to let it go. It’s like falling into a trap – and I don’t never – ever – want to admit I fell for an idiot’s trap.”

“Pete is a wise man.”

“Pete and I have an interesting relationship.”

Harry sat back. He loved when Willie waxed philosophical.

“We’ve often been on opposite sides of the law – him the good guy and me the bad guy. When I was real little I used to go pester the old man who lived next door so he’d call Pete on me and we’d get to have a talk. When he needs to control or correct me he never hesitates to do that. Other times he’s giving me great advice about how to live a good life – be happy and successful and things like that. He only shows me two faces – a frown or a smile.”

“Interesting indeed. Am I correct that you like him more than dislike him?”

“Pete? It’s hard for kid like me to like a cop, you have to understand. I been taught since I could understand words that cops are the enemy so there’s nothing too bad you can do to one of them. I am growing to like things *about* him – I know that for sure.”

“Such as?”

“Such as he is always dependable. I do something bad and he will catch me. I do something not bad and he’ll notice it and tell me so. When he says something, I know it is true. He’s a very sad case, really.”

That was not at all where Harry thought the monologue was heading.

“Oh, sad?”

“He and his wife can’t have kids – well that’s my take on it. They been married ten years and nothing! And ya know they haven’t just been sleepin’ all the time they been in bed. Margaret is a really nice lady.”

“And you know that, how?”

“In the summer, sometimes I go on picnics with them. I can’t say how good a cook she is. It would be hard to mess up ham sandwiches and deli bought potato salad.”

“How did that get started – the picnics?”

“I was five. Pete and Margret were at the pond in the park having a picnic lunch and I crawled out of the bushes, up behind him, and lifted his wallet – well, almost. He reached around and grabbed my wrist before I made my getaway.”

“That’s how it started? I’m not sure I understand.”

“Oh, yeah, well, he sat me down between them and sort of shook the wallet in the air – all gently like. He looked at Margaret and said something like, ‘Look here, Honey, the kid found my wallet. Thanks, son.’”

Then she said: “The least we can do is share our lunch with him, then.”

She fixed a plate of food for me.

“Did you know he was a policeman at the time?”

“God no – I mean *goodness* no. That reminds me. Some time we have to talk about why you don’t cuss. It seems unnatural – you and Pete, both, I mean. Sort of unmanly, even.”

* * *

The list of ‘*some time we have to talk abouts*’ continued to grow even though most did eventually get a thorough going over. Willie found he liked Trigsomething even more than Geometry. By his tenth birthday he had far outdistanced Harry in the field of mathematics. Their final project together – other than becoming best of friends – followed one of Willie’s epiphanies.

“I’ve noticed that successful people talk like you talk. Let’s get that all fixed up for me during this next month, okay?”

“Why not? You have accomplished a number of things

currently called miracles by people who know you.”

Willie interrupted: “We not me.”

Harry smiled, but let it go with a nod. He continued: “First, you will extract the word, ain’t, from your gray matter and squish it into oblivion with the hard, leather, heels of your new, musk scented, boots.”

“Do you suppose that phrase has ever actually been said before, Harry – anywhere, anytime, by anybody?”

“I’d like to think it has not.”

“Me, too – or – I, also – or – I, as well – or – throw me a life line here, I’m drowning.”

* * *

Willie – well, William Lee Anderson/Miller – placed the story back in the folder. He stretched his arms out to his sides.

“This is what I got folks – still skinny with unkempt coal back hair, and still Willie deep down inside. Part of it, of course, is Harry – probably more than I can possibly realize. One has to wonder what and where I’d be today if Harry hadn’t been willing to address my butt that first time we met. I grew up – I hope that’s obvious. I traded in ragged, ankle baring, faded jeans and knee length Salvation Army T-shirts for a jacket, tie and slacks. The university added a Ph.D. behind my name. Today I teach mathematics at that same university. The time I enjoy most, however, is when I tutor kids at the community center over on 44th.

“Oh, about that convoluted last name – Anderson/Miller. My mother’s name was Anderson. When I was adopted I was torn between keeping my old name or taking the new family name. My new father made the suggestion to use both. I am so proud to be the son of Pete and Margaret Miller.”

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CHAPTER FOUR
The Snow Job of all Snow Jobs
(or, stay away from the northern Midwest in late
December
when all ya got is a T-shirt and jeans.)

“The next name on my list is cryptic. It just says: *The Boy with no Name from Georgia*. Is there anybody here who will claim that description?”

Another tall, good looking young man, took to chuckling. He was at the end of the front row.

“I assume this list was put down by Harry.”

“It was. In his handwriting, in fact.”

“Then, I will admit to being the boy with no name from Georgia. Let’s leave it at that until my story is completed. It is clearly why he addressed me in that way – to guard the necessary secrets he knew the story would necessarily hold.”

He picked up his chair and carried it to the head of the pine box facing the gathering.

“Most of the 60 or so hours Harry and I spent together were spent in chairs – across the kitchen table, or he in his recliner and me on the couch. I have the idea you can all relate to that. So if you will permit me.”

He took the seat. The others moved as necessary so they could see him.

“Unlike many of your stories that cover long periods of time, mine plays out in less than a week. You will all understand, however, that for Harry, it took but hours for him to work his magic. I call the story, *The Snow Job of all Snow Jobs* (or, Stay away from the northern Midwest in late December)

* * *

The late December snow had been falling more or less continuously for most of a week. There were times it fell in such thick sheets that Harry could not see across the narrow alley into which his and a half dozen other apartments opened. Snow clung to the windows and brick walls of the buildings giving the appearance of a sheer-sided canyon right out of an old west movie. The snow on the floor of the alley was four feet high – six to eight at each end where snow

plows working the boulevards had created huge mounds. The sidewalks along the streets were mostly impassible. People were required to risk walking in the streets if something in their lives required them to move from place to place. Some of the younger residents from the apartments that lined the alley had kept a path cleared down the center in case of emergencies. Others knocked on doors willing to do shopping or try to run essential errands. Being helpful in times of crises is one of the very nice traits humans share with many of the lower animals.

Fortunately, the electricity had remained on, and the buildings there were by and large heated with an endless supply of natural gas.

As a matter of personal preference, Harry always maintained an overflowing pantry – something he continued from the days when his wife insisted on it. Milk, butter and eggs were nearly gone, however. He could survive for weeks without them. For the most part the old man was invigorated by the event. It felt like a throwback to being part of an isolated wilderness family on the snowy, windswept plains of Kansas where he had spent his youth.

It was going on ten in the evening and he was sitting in his recliner, editing his latest book. He composed first drafts on his computer, but he edited from triple spaced print outs – a holdover from the way he had first done it years before in the days of typewriters and yellow pads. There was a knock on his door, well, most likely it was a knock. With the wind roaring through the alley and a loose shutter beside his bedroom window, it was sometimes difficult to tell. He stood, set the manuscript on his desk, slipped his reading glasses into his shirt pocket and went to the door. The peep hole had long since been rendered useless, covered as it was in ice and snow. He turned the knob and pulled the door open into the room.

There stood a person – a young person – covered in snow, without mittens or hat and only a light jacket and jeans. Harry knew the young people from the alley and that was not one of them.

“Come in! Come in! I’d say you resemble a snowman, but that would be trite. I’d say you resemble an ice cycle, but that, too, would be trite.”

He closed the door and turned toward his visitor who spoke.

“Or you could say I look like a dumb ass fifteen-year-old from Georgia who got stuck in the middle of an upper Midwest blizzard – believe me that would *not* be trite.”

“So it is then. Does the dumb ass fifteen-year-old from Georgia have a name?”

“He does, but he’d rather not say – personal reasons, none of which should make you fearful of him, er, me.”

The boy spoke well – very likely from an educated family. That should make conversation easy. His clothing verified he was from a warmer climate although his accent was certainly not that of a lad from Georgia. Harry responded as the two of them just stood there facing each other.

“Well, I like people with names. I could call you George after your home state, but you really don’t look like a George. My best friend in high school was Archie. I think I will call you Archie until something better comes along. I’m Harry by the way. Let me help brush the snow off you. I’m sure you have a story. I imagine I will eventually hear some version of it, true or not. I will be interested in either event. Was there some reason you chose my door?”

Harry helped him out of his jacket – the zipper had frozen so they eventually slipped it up over his head.

“The wreath. It looked handmade and friendly.”

“A good eye – and heart, perhaps. It is both of those things. You are soaked to the skin, son. If you like you may go into the bathroom off the kitchen, there, remove the wet duds, dry off, and slip into the bathrobe you will find on a hook on the back of the door. There is a rope that you can – well, let me show you how things work.”

Harry started toward the bathroom, but then paused and turned to look at the boy.

“Are you okay with that? I don’t mean to be too forward about it. I assure you that you are safe here, of course that’s exactly what I’d say if you weren’t, wouldn’t I? Hmm. Your choice I guess – come, stay, or leave.”

“It’s okay. Me and my black belt feel very safe here. I’d like to get out of my frozen stuff. You’ve never experienced real discomfort until you’ve walked ten blocks through three

foot drifts of snow, wearing frozen Jockey shorts.”

“Oooo! I can only imagine.”

He led the boy to the bathroom off the kitchen and strung a waiting line between two hooks at eye level at the ends of the tub.

“Clothesline. Make yourself at home. I assume you haven’t eaten in far too long. I’ll whip up something while you tend to yourself. If a shower or hot bath sounds good, go for it. Plenty of hot water. Clean towels in the linen cabinet there. Petroleum jelly in the medicine cabinet in case any parts rubbed raw need lubricating once they thaw out.”

The boy chuckled and a huge smile blossomed across his face.

“You are something else, Harry – is it Harry?”

“Harrison to my mother and grandmother, but Harry to my best friends – so, yes, Harry, please.”

“Like I said, you are something else, *Harry Please*. I have the feeling *your* story will turn out to be much more entertaining than mine.”

“For sure, mine will be five times longer than yours. You just take your time.”

As he turned to leave the bathroom, the boy spoke.

“You really aren’t afraid of me are you, Sir?”

“No. I and my black belt (wink, wink) feel quite safe in your presence.”

“Touché, Harry. I haven’t got one either, but it appears you assumed that.”

In the brighter light of the bathroom, Harry noticed what looked to be deep bruises on his forehead and right cheek. He didn’t mention them.

“We will have time to talk later, son. You get yourself warmed up and dried out. Your hair is a mass of ice, you know. *Shampoo* on the shelf – sorry I don’t have any *real* poo.”

He left the boy chuckling as he closed the door. He heard the dead bolt being set in place behind him. That was fine. It told him the boy had some good sense about him even though showing up in the northland in late December wearing little more than a gauze diaper might cast some doubt on that.

From his vantage point in the kitchen, Harry was

treated to a variety of unrecognizable songs from his young guest's lungs, accompanied by the rush and splash of the shower. Not really at all that bad – for around a campfire. Twenty minutes later the boy emerged, bathrobed and drying his hair.

Harry glanced up as he removed biscuits from the oven.

“Slippers or sox? You'll find both in the bedroom back there. Slippers at the end of the bed. Socks in the top, right drawer.”

“I haven't thanked you, Sir. Thank you, Sir.”

Harry called after him as he entered the bed room.

“You are entirely welcome. I have been trapped in here alone for six days and can't tell you how fine it is to have a companion that communicates in English. I am yet to discover the language of my philodendron and the cactus won't let me get close enough to determine if it makes any meaningful attempts at all.”

“You are very kind – and funny. I was led to believe Yankees were unfriendly and humorless.”

“Not sure who was *leading* you, but I'd stop following them – him – her – it - whoever.”

‘Archie’ re-entered the kitchen with both sox and slippers. Understandable since his feet must have been nearly frozen.

“You always see the humor in things don't you, Sir?”

“I do try to.”

“I'm not used to that. I can't ever remember hearing my parents really laughing, full out. But, that's another topic. Did I smell biscuits baking?”

Harry held up the hot cookie sheet.

“Can have them with butter or jelly and/or smothered in white gravy. There are pork chops, mashed potatoes, peas and corn. I'm a bit shy on things to drink, I'm afraid. We'll save what milk I have for pancakes in the morning. The water filter on my sink provides first class safe and delicious drinking water.”

At the implication that he would be welcome to stay the night, the boy visibly relaxed.

“Wow! This is so great you will never be able to know.”

I hope I thanked you. I really just knocked on your door to ask directions to the Y.”

“Last time I looked, the Y had no biscuits, chops, potatoes, or veggies served with their pillow and blanket. Anyway it’s 25 blocks across the city. Of course, I can’t offer a swim. A game of Rummy or Hearts, perhaps.”

“I’m more of a chess guy.”

“Then you certainly came to the proper wreath. I haven’t won a game of chess in thirty years, but I do enjoy playing.”

“Wouldn’t that, then, be enjoy *losing*? Sir?”

Harry nodded and chuckled.

‘Archie’ clearly had not eaten in some time. His otherwise engaged mouth allowed little room for conversation. That was fine. Harry loved to see young people eat. A half hour later every plate and pot was clean as a whistle – well, except for being washed.”

“I have ‘*ice cream surprise*’ for dessert.”

“Oh, I don’t know. That was a lot of food and I’m not sure I will ever eat anything *frozen* again.”

Harry smiled hoping to encourage the young man’s attempts at humor.

“I guarantee you will love it and I’ll bet you’ve never had it before.”

“You have whetted my interest if not my appetite.”

“And here I didn’t even know one’s interest could be whetted. I love learning new things. I will join you. First, you get two bowls out of that cabinet – the red ones. I will open the vanilla ice cream and scoop an appropriate portion into each bowl – four for you and one for me. Then, from the stove top, I remove this pan sitting in the double boiler and ladle out warm, chocolate pudding over the ice cream. Reach the graham crackers from that cabinet, please. Be seated. One bowl at your place and one at my place and voila! Ice Cream Surprise! The only rule is that you must eat it with sections of graham crackers – that’s part of the surprise. Go!”

“Is it a race?”

“No, of course not. I just tend to get carried away sometimes.”

“You’re right; I’ve never had this before.”

“And neither have I.”

‘Archie’ offered a nod and smile across the table.

“Something like necessity is the mother of invention?”

“Yes. Like that.”

“Well, it’s great.”

“If there is a secret, I’m thinking it is making the pudding very thick and then just barely warming it so it doesn’t melt and become too runny. In comparison with the cold of the ice cream it seems downright hot.”

“I will remember that.”

“I do have coffee on the back burner if you’re into such.”

“No, thanks. The aroma of coffee is wonderful, but the taste ranks right up there with that swig of cooking vanilla I snuck when I was four. It smelled so good and tasted so dreadful.”

“I imagine you have done other things in your life beside sneak swigs of vanilla.”

‘Archie’ broke a grin across the table.

“Your way of suggesting it’s time I spill my guts.”

“Oh, I do hope not. Cleaning up that spilled gravy on the stove will be hard enough.”

Harry put on a pretend shiver.

“I can tell you some things. I won’t tell you things that might put you on the spot or put me in a bad spot. Can you live with that?”

Harry nodded and drained the coffee pot into his mug.

“Bring your bowl into the living room. I’ll clean up all this in the morning.”

He motioned ‘Archie’ into the other room ahead of him and turned off the kitchen light. He eased into his recliner and set his bowl and mug on the small table beside it. ‘Archie’ made a comfortable nest on the couch, tucking his feet under him and arranging the robe to keep them warm. He continued working on the dessert.

Harry chuckled.

“I suppose feeding ice cream to a frozen teenager was not one of the more astute moves I’ve made in the past 75 years.”

‘Archie’ clearly enjoyed Harry enjoying his own

comment.”

“As I’m sure you remember, teenagers eat most anything, most any time, Sir.”

“There is the afghan on the back of the couch if you need it to stay warm enough.”

“I’m fine. Thanks.”

He drew a huge sigh, lingered over a spoon of dessert and paused before beginning his story.

“My dad’s a minister. My mom’s a teacher. My older brother is a jerk.”

“M, T, and J – I got it.”

“What? Oh, minister, teacher and jerk. You’re never far from the funny place, are you?”

“I think we covered that earlier and I’m sure my behavior verifies that I am fully incapable of being any other way. Go on.”

“I got in some trouble. Didn’t hurt anyone. Didn’t set out to hurt anyone. But it’s big trouble. In a fit, dad told me I no longer *deserved* to live in his home. He didn’t send me away – I want to make that clear. Leaving’s on me. Mom went on about how it just proves that she had been a failure as a parent – it was more to make me feel guilty than an expression of her real feelings. That’s always been her M.O. She is a recovering alcoholic. By the end of that first week, she had gone off the deep end and was drinking again. Her drinking had been a terrible experience for my older brother when he was younger – before I was old enough to comprehend what was going on. When he found out she was hitting the bottle again he took me into the back yard and beat the pulp out of me. Dad had to call 911. I was in a coma in the hospital for several hours. Dave – oops – my brother was taken to jail pending a court appearance. Dad was so embarrassed he offered a letter of resignation to his church. They tore it up. He is well liked by his congregation and by the people in the little town generally. I am so glad they are being there for him.

“Dad bailed Dave out and brought him home the same day I got home from the hospital. That night Dave came into my room and tried to strangle me in my bed. If my dog hadn’t been there in my room I probably wouldn’t be here telling you

my story. You really want me to go on? You have absolutely no obligation to listen.”

“You wouldn’t believe the stories these old ears have heard. What you say and when you stop are strictly on you.”

‘Archie’ nodded in a thoughtful fashion and continued.

“Dave is now in jail without bond. Dad sent mom to a rehab sort of place to dry out. For a few days, it was just dad and me in the house. He wouldn’t stay in the same room with me. I have destroyed my family. They are an odd assortment of people, but they didn’t deserve that. It hadn’t been my intention, but it was solely my fault. Two weeks ago, I cashed out my savings account, got the maximum cash advance I could on my credit card, gathered some of my things and left home in the middle of the night. I left a note, apologized, and asked them not to ever come looking for me. I am smart and resourceful and have a way about me that’ll get me most anything I want – I suppose that’s partly a warning for you, Sir. I have always appeared to be older than I am. My plan is to start over, on my own and take whatever comes.”

“And how is that plan working out?”

He shrugged and shook his head as if to say the answer was probably evident.

“I assume you have not been to court about your transgression, whatever it was.”

“Just the preliminary hearing. I’m also out on bond. Since I left jurisdiction that will cost dad an arm and a leg.”

“Do you have any idea what sort of sentence, if any, you are facing?”

“Could put me in prison until I’m 21. It would be longer if I wasn’t considered a juvenile.”

“That does indeed sound serious. Like you said you are clearly a very bright young man. Didn’t you understand the extent of the problems you would face if you were caught?”

“Dumb as it sounds, no. It was just supposed to be a prank. That’s the only way we ever thought about it. Okay, there was an upcoming basketball game – the big, annual, opening game between us and our rival, another little town fifteen miles away. The rivalry had been going on since dad was a boy. . . . Here’s what I did. Instead of a school bus,

like we had to use to take our players from one town to another, they have four, six passenger, SUV's – expensive, with all the trimmings inside and out. They have a mill over there that pays a huge amount in school taxes I guess. We figured they were just lording it over us – buying those fancy vehicles to put us poor kids down. So, three of my friends and I went over the night before the game, hotwired the four SUV's and drove them to an abandoned warehouse that was just within the city limits of our town. It was so they'd have to arrive in a school bus – that was the whole point of the thing. To humiliate them. It was just a prank, but the prosecuting attorney filed it as grand theft auto. He's running for state senator so he's trying to make a name by frying us."

"You have a lawyer?"

"None of the families have any money. We got stuck with a wet behind the ears public defender – she looks younger than me. Our chances with her handling things against the experienced prosecutor amount to the proverbial little to none."

"In my day, we would have called that quite a pickle."

"In my day, we call it dumb ass stupid – and, you should have heard my dad go off on me when I called myself that in his presence. I expected the Archangel, Gabriel, to swoop down, pick me up, and deliver me straight to hell. That might have made it easier all around."

"You are being very hard on yourself. The other three don't rate any responsibility for how things turned out?"

'Archie' shrugged and looked away. He didn't respond to the question. He was fighting back tears. Harry sensed it was soon to become a losing battle and tossed him the box of tissues from his little table. 'Archie' picked it up and raised it in a thank you gesture, offering a simple nod. As he had done so many times before with others, Harry let the youngster cry it out before beginning to think with him about where things needed to go next.

Presently, 'Archie' set his empty bowl on the floor, arranged the afghan around his shoulders and began speaking again – slowly, thoughtfully.

"I suppose many homes are difficult to be a part of. I found being a part of a minister's home was demanding and

challenging – thankless, in fact. I can never remember leaving the house without my mother saying, ‘Now, Kevin, remember who your father is.’ It was never about me – always about dad – well, his position mostly. As a little boy, I suppose it wasn’t so bad. I was cute and verbal and everybody in the community thought I was adorable. My brother, Dave, is very plain looking – toward the not good looking side. It’s not all bad but by comparison, I’ve always been the cute and then, later, the good-looking brother and he has always resented that. On occasion, like brothers will do, I have used it against him – Donkey Ears, Pinocchio. By the time we were ten and thirteen, things were so bad between us that mom gave up her sewing room so I could have a separate bed room. It’s quite small, but in a corner of the upstairs with windows on two walls and it immediately became my most wonderful place in the whole world. That really did help a lot. I probably never thanked her.

“Dave remembered how terrible things had been back when mother was drinking so much and his main goal in life became to *never* upset her for fear she’d start up again. It has been dad’s goal, too. Less mine, because her drinking had never affected me so far as I could remember. Somehow it failed to compute for Dave that every time he beat me up it bothered her. That was probably because most of my pummeling’s from him were to keep me line so I wouldn’t set her off – set her *back* would be a more accurate way to put it. What’s it called – an endless loop?”

“The past two weeks since I’ve been away from home, I’ve been thinking a lot about our family dynamics – I think that’s the proper term – how we all affect one another.”

He paused and looked at Harry for verification. Harry nodded.

“I assumed it just to be fact that I had it the hardest there. I really never considered how things were for dad. He was a minister with all the responsibilities that went with that – he had to be a good model, be available whenever he was needed, have all the answers for parishioners in need and on down what I’ve now come to see was a long and exhausting list.

“I’m not a bad kid and I don’t mean to paint myself that

way. Neither is Dave. Dave and dad are a lot alike – serious and all business – worry warts. I’m more like mom – easy going, unbothered if I don’t meet deadlines; I procrastinate and have the ability to contrive believable excuses on the spot – on the fly. I’m not the one who volunteers – I’m the one with my head in my desk when volunteers are being called for.

“People would say I’m a social body – that I like and need people. I can see how I might appear that way, but I really don’t like many people. Trusting people isn’t an issue for me because I don’t ever engage in ways where trust is required. I use people to advance my agenda – the things that are important to me. That doesn’t mean I hurt other people. It’s not like I copy homework or tell the prettiest girl in the class I love her so she’ll go to the dances with me, then drop her. It’s hard to explain, but I don’t ever set out to hurt anybody.”

Again, he looked at Harry, clearly needing confirmation that he understood. Harry nodded – exaggerated a bit, perhaps, to leave no doubt.

“I sort of got off course. Where I was going was that all those years I thought I had it the worst – lectures about being more responsible from dad, beatings from Dave, being more or less ignored – unloved, I wondered – by mom. I’m coming to see each of them probably have it much harder than I do – did. Dave with his looks, lower grades and his hair-trigger temper. Mom, I guess, fighting against her desire to drink just about every minute of every day and probably feeling alienated from the rest of us, and dad being required to hold our world together as well as the worlds of his parishioners. Looking at it that way, I find myself overwhelmed – and feeling stupid, insensitive, self-centered – my list goes on and on as well.

“So, I left. My presence at home was the source of most of the friction, I think. I always put myself first – I thought that’s how it was supposed to be. Me, the center of my universe – of course I should be first. I was just about perfect. Nobody else came close. Therefore, my ideas had to be correct and those that differed had to be wrong. My life was pretty simple as I look back at it.

“When it all came crashing down, I figured leaving was

the only option – with me gone, dad wouldn't have to be embarrassed, mom wouldn't have me around to remind her what a failure she had been as a parent, Dave wouldn't need to always compare himself to me. That would surely stop most of his angry outbursts and probably go a long way to improving his self-concept.

"There it is. More of the story than I figured I'd allow myself to reveal."

"My! You have been soul searching, haven't you? How do you feel right now?"

"Unrealistically, good."

Harry chuckled. 'Archie'/Kevin, smiled.

"What?"

"Just you being you. I've seldom heard such honesty from a boy your age – even if much of it seems to be unwarranted speculation. I must say this, I sincerely doubt if your shoulders are going to be strong enough to hold all the weight you have placed on them."

Silence. Then it was Harry again."

"It is going on one o'clock. You need to sleep. It will have to be the couch – that's all I have for guests. I think it's long enough so you can stretch out. I'll get a sheet and blanket."

"I *am* tired. I figure it's been thirty hours since I slept. In the morning, I'll tackle a snow shovel and clear your Yankee winter away from your front door."

"We'll face tomorrow, tomorrow, son."

Harry stood to go get the bedding. Kevin followed him into the bedroom, talking.

"I feel like I know you as well as I've ever known anybody and yet you haven't revealed anything much about yourself."

"I understand. I feel I know you very well, even if much of that doesn't fit with what you've revealed about yourself this evening."

"You think I've lied to you?"

"Oh, no – well, mostly not. You're a teen boy and teen boys have it in their genes to fix things up a bit, but that's not what I'm referring to. I think you may still be seeing yourself as the center of every one of your family member's universes.

'Tain't so. If you are here in the morning we can pursue that if you like."

"If I'm – oh. I must say I've been considering leaving out – more before the dessert than since. You suspected that, I suppose. Now, I have to stay in order to figure you out."

They exchanged a smile as Harry loaded the boy's arms with sheet, blanket and pillow.

"Unless you prefer a nightlight, the switch is by the front door. If you hear noises in the night, it will very likely be me visiting the little boy's room. That becomes part of an old man's routine at night. Sometimes I find myself in there with no idea how I got there. Happily, so far, I have always been able to find my way back to my bed."

The boy stood for a moment just quietly facing the old man.

"Thanks for being Harry. I think a Harry is just what I need in my life, right now."

"That is fortunate, because I am sure I need an 'Archie'/Kevin in mine. Sleep well. And, oh, by the way, if you do choose to leave during the night, there is a small bit of money in the top right drawer of my desk. You are welcome to it. Sleep well."

Kevin returned to the living room and arranged the sheet and blanket, leaving the afghan within easy reach in case he got cold. He never wanted to be cold again. Before he turned off the light and crawled in, he detoured to that upper right drawer just to check. There were several bills – he didn't count them. He smiled, figuring if the past three or four hours hadn't been real, it probably meant he had fallen into a snow bank and was having one last wonderful fantasy before freezing to death. Kevin was fifteen so that seemed quite funny to him.

* * *

Ten o'clock the next morning saw Kevin stretching himself to life on the sofa. Harry had moved his editing to the kitchen table to offer the young man continued privacy. At the moans and groans from the other room, Harry put his papers on the counter to clear the table and began preparing breakfast. The frozen sausage had been thawing since seven – Harry's time to rise and begin a new day regardless of when

he turned in the night before.

With sausage soon sizzling on the back burner and pancakes bubbling into their fluffy, more or less round shapes on the front, breakfast was soon well on its way. He had found a container of frozen orange juice at the back of the freezer.

“That smells a whole lot like *breakfast*,” came words from the living room.

Harry assumed it wasn’t his philodendron. He responded.

“That’s what we used to call it, anyway – back in the Stone Age.”

Kevin appeared at the door securing the belt around the robe.

“Good morning. I see that I really am here. A few times during the night I doubted it, but was too exhausted to mount an investigation. Do I have time to put on my own duds – I believe that was your word – Stone Age nomenclature, perhaps?”

“And a fine word it is. Sure. Sausage is five minutes away.”

Kevin entered the bathroom and went about changing with the door partly open – an interesting adjustment from the locked door the night before. He talked as he dressed.

“Has the snow stopped yet?”

“Yes, it has. Radio said it topped out at 43 inches here on the east side of the city. Not a record, but the two below temp and 22 mile an hour wind gusts turned it toward the most vicious week on record. Welcome to Springfield. Nothing like this in *Georgia*, I suppose.”

Harry did the finger quotes thing in the air around ‘Georgia’. The boy saw.

“Didn’t buy that, huh? My lack of accent, I’m guessing.”

“You’re guessing is exceptional.”

“It’s still my contention that the less you know about the specifics the better off you’ll be – harder to be held responsible for aiding and abetting when the black ops helicopters arrive to whisk me off to swift justice at Guantanamo.”

“You have such a wonderful and unique way with

words.”

“You should hear the line I’d be giving you if you were fifteen and female.”

Harry chuckled on for some time.

“I assume it’s obvious I’m not.”

Kevin reappeared smiling. A response didn’t seem called for.

“Warm clothes. I never contemplated what a luxury it was to be able to slip into warm clothes.”

Breakfast commenced.

“I have some clothes in my closet left over from former guests who for one reason or another left them behind. You’re welcome to anything that catches your fancy.”

“I don’t know. My fancy is pretty fast. Doubt if anything here will be able to catch it.”

“I am enjoying your company, *Kevin* – I am assuming the way that name slipped out so naturally that it is an actual fact of your life.”

“On the other hand, if a quick witted young man like myself wanted to plant a pseudonym, might he not choose that method to give credence to it?”

Harry shook his head.

“I assume your friends back home – on whichever planet that might be – have to carry dictionaries in order to converse with you.”

“It’s a game, Harry. One good thing about my home is – was – that Wednesdays at supper we had SYVN.”

“Oh, well, yes. Any family that participated in the old SVNY on Wednesday evenings would automatically be great.”

“Too cryptic, you say. That was SYVN and I was getting to explaining it. Stretch Your Vocabulary Night. We each came to the table with two new words – that made eight in all – and we would all use each of them as often as we could find ways of working them into the conversation.”

“How wonderful! It has certainly paid off – at least when you’re sitting around conversing with a room full of PhD’s as I assume you must do several times a week just to keep in practice.”

“Kevin smiled across the table.”

“Could it be the simple old sage of *Springfield Alley* just

gave up part of HIS story?"

"No reason not to confirm that, I suppose. Three degrees in English and philosophy."

"These days those two majors would only qualify you to drive a cab or offer up burgers across a greasy counter."

"It sounds like you've been investigating such things."

"I've been planning on psychology – clinical – for years. But now with this felony hanging over my head I'll never be able to get licensed."

"Maybe we can start a burger joint together, then. With your good looks and people skills out front, and me and my grilling skills in the kitchen, we are a shoe-in for success."

It was worth the prolonged exchange of broad smiles. Kevin's faded first.

"I'm just fifteen, Harry, and I've already ruined my life. What am I going to do?"

"If that is finally a legitimate question I will respond to it."

"Consider it the most legitimate question I've ever asked."

"One. You have been away from home for two weeks . . ."

"Four, honestly."

"My point is you have no way of really knowing how things are developing back home – somewhere in the south west – I'm thinking New Mexico."

"How you figure that?"

"First, your story indicated you have lived in the same town all your life. Your accent is definitely NOT from Georgia or anywhere else in the southeast. Then, the turquoise medallion on the leather thong around your neck – the New Mexico state stone. The wolf on the back of your jacket – University of New Mexico's mascot – Lobo Louie, I believe."

"You're good, I'll give you that."

"Just wait until I tell you what your mother's maiden name was and the date of your parent's wedding."

"Really!"

"Of course not. I just work outrageous things like that into conversations because I love to watch faces react to them. My guess, however, would be July and, perhaps,

Miller.”

“July is actually correct. The name was Brown, but I see you were going for conservative protestant background – probably from my archangel and hell references. I’d say you came very close. Why July, though.”

“I figured a prudent young couple would wait to get married until one or both finished college so it would have most likely taken place in a summer month. June to make preparations, August to move to a new location – that leaves July.”

Kevin nodded and spoke.

“I got you off track. Sorry. Please go on. You were talking about the unknown situation back home and I think I see what you mean.”

“Okay, then, number *two*. You are clearly a loving and compassionate person. Part of you is anguishing about just walking away from your family and knowing how sick with worry they are. You need to contact them and at least let them know you are safe. You are not sure how to do that. We will figure a way.”

Kevin managed one of those single nods that leaned to the right – meaning ‘I hear you and at least won’t say no immediately’.

“*Three*, your financial situation is hopeless. Whatever money you have, will eventually run out. Your credit card has very likely been canceled – in the least its use is being tracked. You are too young to get a steady job. The state laws require you to be in school. Ultimately, you are going to be asked for ID and then the jig will up.”

Kevin leaned back in his chair.

“So, you’re saying I even managed to screw up my screw up.”

Harry shrugged and slid the platter of remaining pancakes in the young man’s direction.

“I’ve sort of lost my appetite.”

Still, he slid the three cakes onto his plate and stabbed the last two sausage patties. Harry refilled his juice glass. *Fully sated* and *Teen boy* defined oxymoron.

“So?” he said looking across the table at the old man.

Harry looked back and reacted.

“You tell me, so – options. One always needs to acquire a pile of options before he can even pretend to begin searching for an accurate solution to any problem.”

“Like the saying about always looking at both sides of an issue.”

“Far more than that. If you follow that advice and stop at two, you will miss the next hundred possibilities. Always go for all the possibilities you can find.”

“You’re not going to make this easy – like just offering up those options *for me*, are you?”

“I’ll help, of course, but this has to be on you.”

Kevin nodded.

“I know. If I just wasn’t so dumbass stupid.”

“As interesting as it might be to have a long discussion about just what you mean by that phrase, I think you should move on from it. You did one thing that wasn’t too bright. Clearly, a man with too much legal power and too little common sense on the other end overreacted, but you are where you are in all this.”

“But, like you pointed out, I really don’t know where I am.”

“Bingo, my friend. Go from there.”

“Well, let’s see. . . . Our school paper puts out an online edition. I can access that. You can bet it will be flooded with things about me. Probably the biggest news story in town since Grandma Olsen lost control of her car and ran over Mrs. Carter’s twelve-foot-high saguaro cactus.”

“A sticky problem, I assume.”

It garnered only a polite smile from the boy. Later he would remember it as humorous – that, or he would be satisfied to just remember the sparkle in the old man’s eyes as he had offered it.

“I’ll do the dishes and then, if I may, I’ll get on the web.”

“I’ll help in here. Perhaps you can use that time to devise a way to alleviate some of your family’s anxiety.”

“Dad probably hasn’t told mother about me leaving. That’s good. An email could be tracked down if the authorities really wanted to. The same with a cell phone call. I haven’t used mine since I left home. The postmark on a letter would lead them here to Springfield and take longer than I want it to

take.”

“Think thirty years ago, son.”

“The pony express? Sorry. I know you’re trying to help. Not much of an internet back there – or email I suppose. No cell phones. Ah, ha. And the note in the fortune cookie reads, ‘He who has no *cell* can still *phone*’. You have a land line, don’t you? Can they be traced?”

“I assume so. These day every apple picked in Washington State can be traced from its final digestive tract.”

“There still may be a way,” Kevin said. “One that will delay the tracing, anyway. Dad has two lines for his parishioners – one for general business and one only for emergencies. They each take messages and he gets back to the callers – emergencies ring on his cell so he can try and catch those calls live, immediately. I could leave a short message on the business line. At this end I can block the caller number. I’m sure they can eventually get around that, but it could delay things considerably.”

“That is certainly a possibility,” Harry said. “What part of all this really needs to come first, however?”

“Finding out what’s really going on. I understand. That might change the contact strategy significantly.”

Four plates, two glasses, two skilletts, two forks and two knives later, Kevin was sitting at the computer. Harry stood behind, watching. Click, click, click and there was the newspaper site. Kevin was correct. There had been three editions since he had left town. He worked backwards through them – most recent to oldest – summarizing for Harry as he went.

“Apparently, the position that the Prosecutor had originally taken on the case – fry the delinquents – has caused lots of backlash clear across and up and down the state. The governor is quoted as saying, ‘It is unconscionable that he would escalate what was clearly a harmless – if foolish and misguided – prank to the level of potentially ruining the lives of four of our states fine young people. If I were to make public the pranks he and I pulled together when we were in high school, we would, according to his standards, be led directly to the death-by-injection gurney at the state prison. I think I will wait until after the holidays to begin reminiscing publicly about

those times’.”

“My. He really did rile up the governor, didn’t he? Harry said. “Same or different political parties?”

“Same, if you can believe that. And it sounds like he is threatening to blackmailing the Prosecuting Attorney of all people.”

“My, my! And apparently friends in high school. What about the local reaction?”

“Let me look. Hmm. Here. My gosh! Look at this. A statement signed by every last student at that other high school accusing the prosecutor of mishandling the public trust and asking for him to resign. Unbelievable! That was really nice. And look here. An editorial by the editor of our local paper is reprinted. Let me skim it. . . .

“Okay. That’s hard to believe. He begins by saying, ‘Thank you Kevin Kraft and the three other young rascals who accompanied you, for forcing Prosecutor Carl Kelly to show his true colors – an egotistical, morally deficient, politician who has no heart, and has at long last sufficiently demonstrated that his only purpose in public service is to promote himself on to bigger and better things regardless of the idiocy he spreads in his wake. The *Sentinel* hereby calls for his immediate resignation. A petition to that effect is available for signatures at our office. Hopefully he will have the sense to do that before the tar and feathers arrive – I have it on good authority they have been ordered’.”

Kevin sighed a sigh that just sat there in the bottom of his stomach. Tears flowed in rivers down his cheeks. Harry patted the boy’s shoulder. Kevin stood and turned into his old friend and held himself against his chest. It went on that way for some time before he eased away and wiped at his eyes with the backs of his hands. Harry reached the tissues. Kevin nodded his thanks and said:

“We really have to stop meeting this way.”

Harry laughed out loud. Kevin chuckled through his tears, more at Harry’s reaction than the actual humor in the moment.

“Your seven-letter word saved my life, you know – o p t i o n s. In my head, if it ever came up at all, it was singular – *option* and that single option was to run and keep running

forever.”

“You’re saying it was alright that I made an ‘S’ of myself?”

“You really must write a book some time – oh, you do. That reminds me I don’t even know anything about them. But that isn’t accurate either. Let me see how I am at figuring you out like you figured me out.”

“Alright. Should be fun. How about moving to comfortable seats.”

They moved to the recliner and couch. Kevin began folding the sheet and cover as he spoke.

“I’ll say . . . You often write about kids and teens. There is probably often an old man character. The plots are about kids finding their ways in life. Probably all that is set in some sort of adventure or mystery. No sermons – not anything smothering – just a few solid pieces of advice that the readers will accept as their own and never even realize had been subtly suggested for them to try out by a wily, caring, wise old writer who demonstrates his deep concern and love for people with most every breath he takes.”

“Wow! You certainly paint fine word-images right off the top of your head, young man. If Psychology fails you, please consider writing.”

“Or preaching maybe,” Kevin said thoughtfully. “Preaching needs a good remodel – less ‘you must’ and more ‘how about’ or ‘what if’.”

Kevin’s face took on a puzzled – startled – mien and he looked into the old man’s eyes.

The *wily old writer* just let that lay, not wanting to influence the sudden epiphany that had come as a humongous surprise to both of them.

* * *

An hour later Kevin had talked with his father. He related it was the best talk they had ever had and his father said he looked forward to many more. The weight of the world had obviously been lifted from the young man’s shoulders (now THAT was trite!) Harry’s head spun as he witnessed – on the computer screen – the boy’s father transfer air fare into Kevin’s PayPal account and then Kevin use it to purchase the

ticket on some other site.

“Hmm. Amazing technology! I am experiencing an ongoing battle understanding progress.”

Flights were delayed, but two days later Kevin was on a plane for home.

He preferred to say his goodbyes there at Harry’s place – ‘where I can bawl like a baby without being stared at’. The cab arrived and the young man rode away, out of the old man’s life. There were a few letters, holiday cards, and eventually announcements for high school graduation, college graduation with a PhD - concentrations in clinical psychology and Religious studies.

They each moved on to their own remarkable adventures.

* * *

The tall, handsome, adult version of Kevin Jacobs stood.

He removed a small snow globe from a sack and shook it – slowly, lovingly. He held it up so everyone could watch the swirl, then set it toward the head of the pine box.

“A few weeks prior to – as Harry would have put it – him rejoining the dust of the universe, I sent him an invitation to my ordination. I received a handwritten note by return mail. He was clearly happy for me. He said his time to hand out tissues to passing waifs was rapidly drawing to a close. There was nothing in it about life having been too short or that he was disappointed he had not achieved everything on his ‘to do’ list. Instead, in typical Harry fashion, he referred to his last weeks on earth as a fantastic festival in which a lifetime of wonder-filled memories and faces danced for him inside his old head.

“What a dance that must have been.”

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CHAPTER FIVE

The White Kid and the Half-Breed

“Does a Jeremy Sanchez grace us with his presence, here, today?” the leader asked, standing and reading from his list.

“I does, I mean, I do or I am here. This is me or I.”

The group chuckled. He seemed immediately likeable. Certainly, not full of himself. He was in his thirties, of average height with dark wavy hair and skin the color of dark caramel. He spoke in the slightest of accents – Jamaican, perhaps, some thought. He took what had become the usual place at the head of the pine box.

“My story will vary somewhat from the others we’ve heard up to this point. Mine features two middle-teen age boys, one from an educated and more or less cultured home and one from an uneducated, poverty stricken home – one a blackish boy (he raised his arm, flapped his hand and smiled – the others chuckled) and a very white boy.

“Harry was not known to give sermons. He was more in the tradition of Socrates – asking questions that gently guided young people toward wonderful insights. When he felt they were necessary, he sometimes came close to preachin’, however. So, this may seem more like a sermon than your other stories have been. It covers little more than one very important day in my life there in Harry’s Alley.

* * *

Harry was not one to involve himself, uninvited, in disputes between or among youngsters, and since there were lots of youngsters living in the apartments that opened onto his alley, there were lots of disputes for him to ignore. When, however, it was three on one, as seemed to be the case that morning, he was moved to intervene.

Harry had just left his apartment to do grocery shopping. The altercation was taking place some ten yards to his left. He recognized three of the boys as belonging there. The fourth was a stranger – perhaps a newcomer. A new family had moved into Mary Baker’s apartment when she relocated to a nursing home just days before. My how old Harry hoped he could avoid that fate (the nursing home, not

living in Mary Baker's apartment). He turned and approached the rowdy group. They didn't take note of him until he entered their circle. They would not touch him; he was Harry – the kindest, gentlest, most helpful man they had ever known. They knew immediately he did not approve of what was going on, and excuses to justify the actions began immediately.

The situation was best summarized by Johnson – a generally good kid, but he had been raised in certain traditions that he had no intention of not honoring.

"He's a half breed, Harry – his Dad's a Black and mother's a Mexican."

The boy clearly thought that justified their actions.

"How wonderful," Harry said offering a single clap of his big hands. "He possesses the best traits of two great people while the rest of us here have to settle for what came to us from just one. I was wondering because of his beautiful skin color."

A wave of puzzled faces appeared, an interesting transition from the angry ones present just moments before.

The newcomer lay in a fetal position on the alley floor, bruised and bleeding. Harry offered him a hand up and brushed him off. The other boys knew better than to run – they had no place to hide from Harry and experience had taught them it was far better to deal with Harry than their parents in such situations.

"I'm Harry and you are . . .?"

"Jeremy, Jeremy Sanchez. New here. Don't have a key to the apartment yet. I am waiting for mom to get back from the store with one."

"You're what, about fifteen?"

"Next week, in fact – probably thanks to you."

He glared around the circle at the others.

"I'm thinking these young gentlemen probably didn't properly introduce themselves. The tall red head is O'Malley, the stocky dark haired one is Cuomo, and the blond is Johnson. I am sure they all would like to shake your hand and give you a proper welcome."

He elbowed Johnson who less than willingly offered his hand and mumbled something fully unintelligible. Harry accepted it. The others stepped forward in turn, offering limp

hands to the newcomer and reluctant looks in Harry's direction.

"While the other boys go home and explain to their parents what has happened here, you come with me and we'll tend to those cuts and abrasions."

"You got anything for a broken rib?"

Harry offered a rare frown at the others. He understood they knew they were in Harry's doghouse. He also understood that none of them really understood why. It was not a good start to the weekend for four boys in Harry's Alley. That had become the informal moniker attached to that one block long area. Harry had lived in his apartment for many, many years. That made him the unchallenged, if unofficial, Mayor of the alley.

Harry unlocked the door and ushered Jeremy inside.

"The bathroom is through there. I will leave the outside door open if you will feel better that way."

Jeremy shook his head so Harry shut it and turned the deadbolt.

"There is better light in the bathroom and we can clean you up and see what further steps may be needed."

In there, he turned on the lights and looked him over.

"If it's okay with you, let's slip you out of your shirt. I'm thinking the damage is not limited to your face and neck."

"Sure. No problem. And you're right. It isn't"

Fortunately, it was a button down the front shirt, otherwise it would have had to have been cut off; the boy couldn't raise his arms more than thirty degrees.

"First, I'll dab away the blood with a washcloth so we can see what's what. Okay?"

Jeremy nodded. In the few minutes, he had known the old man, about a billion questions had sprouted in his mind.

With his head, face and torso cleaned up, Harry set the washrag aside.

"You better rinse that out in cold water right away or the blood will set and you'll have ruined an expensive looking washrag."

"Very thoughtful, but I assure you the cost of a piece of cloth is nothing compared to getting you fixed up."

The boy, clearly determined about it, placed the rag in

the sink and turned on the cold water.

“Which rib or ribs?”

Jeremy felt up his right side.

“Right there. Just one that really hurts, I guess.”

“I’m going to leave that for your mother to wrap or consult a doctor.”

He continued to inspect the cuts. He tried to disguise how upset he was growing as he examined the young man.

“Well, I don’t think stitches will be required anywhere. You do need to have your mother look you over to see what she thinks. What in the world did they do to you?”

“A few fists to my head and stomach first. I went to the ground on purpose and balled myself up like an armadillo. I knew I had no chance trying to fight back. I’ve never had to be a fighter. I might have tried it one on one, but not three. Then they took turns kicking me. I’m sure I got bloody legs. I’m not at all modest. That seems to be your concern.”

The boy was right on both counts. His legs were a sea of deep bruises and open wounds from metal toed boots – Cuomo. Harry cleaned them out with warm water, dried them and applied an anti-infection cream.

“When do you expect your mother?”

“About noon. She had lots of moving-in errands to run – electricity, water, gas – things like that.”

“How about this then? You get into that robe on the back of the door and we’ll wash your clothes – skin out – in cool water. We’ll de-blood them and de-dirt them at the same time.”

“Thank you. I have no idea why you are being so kind to me. If it had been you who was on the ground getting the sh . . . heck beaten out of you, I wouldn’t have waded in to save you.”

“And that would have undoubtedly been the sane response for you. I seem to wield some power over the kids in this alley.”

“I saw. It was awesome.”

Harry waited in the kitchen while Jeremy donned the robe. They soon had his things and the towel and washrag in the washer.

“I feel the need for hot chocolate,” Harry said. “Can I

convince you to join me?”

“I guess. Sure.”

“With or without?” Harry asked, putting on a little tease.

“With or without, what?”

He offered a puzzled smile.

“Ah. That would have helped, wouldn't it? Marshmallows.”

“I love marshmallows. Yes, please.”

“Did you know that when I was your age marshmallows came in all sorts of colors – orange, blue, green, yellow.”

“Were they flavored accordingly?”

“No. Just colored. Eat one blue one and your tongue looked like a Smurf for the rest of the day. Of course, Smurfs hadn't come on the scene yet back then.

It garnered another smile and nod.

Harry paused in his search for the cocoa and looked at Jeremy as if studying him.

“I am impressed by your vocabulary and grammar, son.”

“Didn't expect a half breed to be so well bread?”

“I hope you don't really believe that of me.”

“Sorry. It's sort of a reflex action. I really am sorry. Both parents are college graduates. They would be disappointed if they knew I said that. I guess in my way I'm as prejudiced as the alley kids, huh?”

“That is certainly interesting to think about. I believe there is a difference between prejudice and tainted expectations, however. You know *tainted*?”

“Contaminated, polluted.”

Harry nodded and went back to work on the hot chocolate.

Jeremy spoke.

“Tainted expectations. Interesting. Maybe we can talk about that sometime.”

“I certainly hope we can. One of the things I enjoy most about my life is talking with young people.”

Jeremy took his turn and studied the old man from the seat he had taken at the table – he moved like an old man, but his mind was much younger. His outlook on life seemed quite upbeat. He was certainly a likeable person.

“How about you come here to the stove and stir this concoction while I see if I can find something to go with it?”

After a few minutes, Harry stood up straight from having searched the refrigerator.

“I’m afraid the best I can do is cinnamon toast.”

“That’s great – it’s like a dietary staple in my home. I can fix that.”

Harry took the spoon and pointed: “Bread in the breadbox and sugar-cinnamon in a shaker on the bottom shelf in that cabinet. You see the toaster, there. Let’s use paper towels for plates.”

Before long they were sitting across from each other.

“I dunk,” Harry said. “Hope that’s not considered impolite in your world.”

“No, Sir. That’s the only way. It’s why I put spoons on the table.”

“I don’t understand, but I’d like to.”

“To dive for the pieces of the toast that lean over and fall in when they get overly soaked.”

“Ah. Superior to burning one’s fingertips.”

“You make the best out of life, don’t you, sir?”

“Did I somehow reveal that secret?”

Jeremy smiled. No response seemed necessary.

“Good cocoa – that’s what we call hot chocolate at my house.”

“To accompany wonderful cinnamon toast. You may make more toast if you want. It’ll take a while for your clothes to wash and dry.”

Jeremy grew silent. Presently he spoke.

“How are things going to be for me here in . . . your alley, Sir?”

“Well, they will become immediately better for both of us once you begin calling me Harry instead of Sir. It’s like you’re trying to paint me as an old codger or something.”

“I can do that, but you’ll have to explain to my parents. They are sticklers about me showing respect to others. Seriously, though, me here in this alley?”

“Have you experienced problems like this other places?”

“Oh, yes. Most everywhere after I was six or so. Little

kids don't see differences like this in people and if they do they ask about it and that's that. Teens are a different breed, I've found. I've had lots of good friends who were different racially and ethnically from me, but frankly they were from more educated families. From what I was able to tell from the short interaction I've had with these kids, that's not the case. I don't mean to sound snobbish, but it's what I've observed."

"A generally good observation, I think. I hope I can assume this was the worst encounter of the kind you have had."

"Yes, Sir . . . Harry. We lived in my last place five years."

"May I ask why you came here. This is not the neighborhood of folks with degrees and I don't mean to be snobbish, to quote a new friend."

Jeremy smiled and nodded.

My father lost his job in a financial consulting firm. Downsizing. He was out of work for some time until he got a job in an accounting company a few blocks from here on 46th. He took what he could get. Mom was the manager of a high-class restaurant. She's still looking for work. Upshot is we are in pretty bad shape financially. Had to sell one car and some other things. We keep a good outlook though. The running joke is when a new bill comes due, one of my parents will look at me and say, 'We love you son, but looks like we'll have to sell you, too'. It is why we landed here for the time being – to save money."

Harry nodded and dunked.

"I'll be enrolling in school on Monday, I guess."

"I am sorry for your family's misfortune, but I am delighted we are going to get to know each other. I'm eager to meet your parents."

"You can't miss them. Dad is the tallest, most muscular, blackest Jamaican man you have ever seen. Mom is perfectly gorgeous – long black hair, always wears strings of brightly colored beads and offers the best smile in the world."

Harry foresaw two problems: The other boys were all going to fall in love with Jeremy's mother, and whenever his father appeared they were all going to wet their pants in fright. He figured those two things would soon be working in

Jeremy's favor.

"Jamaican! Love the steel band music."

"Really. Dad and I play. It's two things we didn't sell – our instruments. Sometimes, when we're playing in the house, Mom puts on her red, floor length dress and dances with hand-held castanets. We look and probably sound like the third-rate entertainment from some dark and seedy bar just across the border in Mexico."

Harry chuckled.

"I can only imagine that, I'm afraid. I would love to hear you play"

"I'm sure you will. We play often."

When they were finished at the table Jeremy moved the mugs and pan to the sink.

"I can have these washed up in a flash."

"I have the idea the soapy water will not be pleasant considering the scrapes and cuts on your hands and arms."

"Hadn't considered that. In that case, I'm sure *you* can have these washed up in a flash."

"You are addressing an old man, Jeremy. Flash *anything* is no longer a part of my life. I'll do them up later with the lunch dishes. We need to switch your duds into the dryer."

Accomplishing the quick change of venue for the clothes they moved into the living room.

Jeremy started the conversation.

"I guess I don't know your occupation although I guess you are most likely retired by now."

"These days I'm a writer of novels – mostly for children and teens."

"I can believe that. Any I'd have heard about?"

"Look for yourself. You'll find a copy of each one there on that shelf."

"That's a lot of books, S . . . Harry."

He walked to the shelf and examined them.

"Pen names I take it."

"Astute. Yes, several."

"So, you still write?"

"Oh yes. Would feel dead and gone if I didn't write every day."

Jeremy made himself comfortable on the couch. Harry

took to his recliner.

“How am I going to avoid these creeps if I have to live right next to them?”

“Creeps, are they?”

“Sure seem to be – beating me up five minutes after I show my head outside.”

“I can see your point. Seems to me we have at least two approaches here. You can remain convinced they are creeps and they can remain convinced you are some terrible multi-racial virus that will surely wipe out the neighborhood, or you can learn to appreciate each other and get along – grow from your association with each other.”

“The first part of that seems most likely, although in one of your fantasies for kids I imagine the second might play out – very likely has, in fact.”

“You suddenly sound far more cynical than the lad with whom I was just sharing cocoa and diving for toast.”

“The real pain hadn’t set in yet, back then. It’s growing rapidly.”

“I’m sorry, you know.”

“Harry, I’m just worn out about the racial thing. I was in the band in my last school and when we’d go on trips – football games, festivals, competitions – I always ran into problems. If it hadn’t been for my friends I don’t know how I would have survived. You see, by definition, teenagers are not yet *educated* people. Certainly, not tolerant of differences. Still, they are my community. I expect it to be bad.”

“I assume you have talked it through with your parents.”

“Not really, recently. They have way too much to be worrying about right now.”

“Unless your plan is to masquerade as a mummy for the next week, I believe your parents may just suspect something hasn’t gone well.”

“I have to admit that was a very funny image you conjured up. So, help!”

“I think you know what you have to do as far as telling your parents. You tell them I have a plan and I am asking them to be patient until mid-week. Leave your phone number if you will so I can keep you posted. Mine is here on this card. You are welcome in my home any time – day or night.”

“You got a tunnel from my place to yours?”

“I truly don’t believe they will accost you again. You know accost?”

“Waylay, or in the vernacular, beat the hell out of me again.”

As they waited for the clothes to dry, Harry told stories about each of the boys and their families. He didn’t attach family names to them. His hope was to help Jeremy understand how life looked from their perspectives – poor, no appreciation for the value or usefulness of education, and feeling helpless about life. He offered no judgments, just related how they saw the world and why.

The dinger on the dryer dinged and Jeremy got dressed.

He held up the washcloth and towel.

“See, no blood. Just like I said.”

“I see. Thank you. It does mean though that now I can’t get your DNA run. Hmm?”

“What? You want to run my DNA?”

Harry remained silent, his eyebrow raised.”

“Ah! I get it. Just another Harryism. I’ll eventually get used them. We laugh a lot at our house, too – well, not so much lately, I guess.”

“I’m sure it will return. I find it’s hard to keep a good laugh down for long.”

The boy pulled back the curtain at the kitchen window and looked across the alley.

“I see the lights are on in our place. Mom will be wondering where I am. I better go. You got odds on whether I’ll make it across the alley in one piece or not?”

“You need not worry about that. Of course, you won’t intentionally provoke them, will you?”

“You saying I provoked them this morning?”

“Not at all. Just a reminder of things you already understand.”

“Yeah. Okay. Thanks for that *and* for everything.”

The boy offered his hand for a shake and then reached for the door knob.

“One more thing, Jeremy. Can you arrange a little steel band music at about seven this evening – from an open

window, maybe?”

“Okay. Sure. Why?”

“Can you just trust me on this one?”

“Of course, I can trust you. Seven then. For how long?”

“Oh, Half an hour or so. Just see how it goes.”

Harry stood in the doorway and watched the youngster throw his shoulders back and march across to his door as if he were the new king of the alley. Harry chuckled to himself – guts and fear both produce that same behavior.

The three expected heads, which appeared here and there up and down the alley, had not escaped Harry. He focused his line of sight on Johnson and beckoned the boy to come to him. With very little hesitation the lad walked in his direction, looking back at his buddies and shrugging. Harry could almost hear the sighs of relief coming from the other two. He smiled to himself. He remembered how it had been sitting in the outer office waiting to see the principal.

“Yeah? I didn’t do nothing to him. Just watching him. No law against that is there?”

“Certainly not. In fact, I’m glad to see you have taken an interest in Jeremy because I want to talk to you about him.”

Johnson – Dwayne by first name – entered the apartment ahead of the old man, slipped out of his shoes by the door, and took a place on the couch – part sitting and party lying back. He had been in there many times and knew the routine. Often on cold winter evenings he and some of the others would come just to be there – to talk and listen to the old man’s stories. There would be popcorn and apples – sometimes hot cider. They had a good relationship. So it was that *that* time things seemed more than a little awkward.

“You’re mad at us.”

“My first reaction was disappointment in you boys, not anger. You know me too well than to think I was angry.”

Johnson shrugged and scooted back a bit toward the far arm of the couch. It set him in more of an upright position.

“You said your first reaction. That mean you had a second?”

“Yes, it does.”

“What was that?”

“Disappointment in myself and in your parents.”

“I don’t get it.”

“We have obviously failed in helping you learn one of the most important lessons in life.”

“What’s that? Don’t beat up black kids.”

“No, what I had in mind comes long before *that* lesson.”

“You’re doing that thing again – being esoteric – hey, I remembered your word. Did I use it right?”

“You did, meaning not clear or obscure. Very good.”

“Can I go now?”

Harry looked at the boy over the top of his glasses. Johnson understood and pulled his feet up under him. It was worth a short smile between them. They had a good thing going.

“I can see we need to talk about the family of man.”

“I don’t get that either. Even esotericer than the other thing.”

Harry let it go. Other things were far more important at that moment.

“Did you know that if you needed a blood transfusion, Jeremy’s blood would work just fine inside you?”

Johnson did not react. It would have revealed his ignorance of the topic and teen boys avoided looking ignorant at most all costs.

“Did you know if you needed a heart transplant and for some reason Jeremy’s heart was available it could be put inside you and would save your life?”

Johnson squirmed, just a bit.

“Did you know that the color of our skin – yours and mine – came about when something went wrong with the pigment gene in a small group of humans? Originally men are believed to all have had black skin. We could say that you and I are like mutants, mistakes, not the way man was supposed to be. Jeremy is closer to ‘normal’.”

“How do you know that?”

“Medicine and science, my friend.”

“Dad don’t believe in science.”

“He doesn’t believe in TV or cell phones or medicine or bubble gum or computers, or summer blend gasoline?”

“Of course, he does.”

“Well, we have those only because of science. Does he ever take aspirin or ibuprofen? That’s science. Did he see that you got your baby vaccinations? That’s science. Does he consult doctors when you are sick? That’s science. There could be no tires on his car without science, or shirts that don’t require ironing. I suppose we can let him believe whatever he wants to, but you are way too smart to be caught up in such a meaningless catch phrase as, ‘I don’t believe in science’. And the thing is, you either believe in none of science or all of it because the same very careful processes are a part of all science. It’s downright stupid to think you can pick and choose which science a person will believe in and which he won’t.”

“Sounds like you’re calling my dad stupid.”

“I’m saying he is misinformed and doesn’t seem willing to explore that possibility. It is such a waste of human intelligence. Mostly, today, I am asking you why you believe Jeremy deserved the beating you three administered to him this morning.”

“He’s a half breed. They ain’t worth spit.”

“And how do you know that? I suppose you have facts to use in backing that up. Is it *all* half breeds or just the black/Mexican variety that ain’t worth spit?”

Johnson flashed a quick smile at hearing Harry use the word ‘ain’t’.

“Everybody just knows that.”

“I don’t. Jeremy and his parents don’t know that. At least one of the presidents of the United States doesn’t know that. I need proof and proof for something physical like that requires medical and scientific proof. Let’s hear it.”

“You know I got nothin’. You’re smarter than me so it ain’t – isn’t – fair asking things like that.”

“Will you then believe me – the smarter one as you put it – when I tell you there is absolutely no scientific basis to support that ‘not worth spit’ claim? In fact there is nothing to substantiate that the color of people has anything to do with their worth or smarts or usefulness – certainly not their intelligence.”

“Blacks was ignorant slaves. Dad says so and I read it in school.”

“Interesting. I agree, in fact. Excellent point. Let’s think

that through. Now, you tell me why, first of all, they were slaves. I know you have learned about that.”

“Because slave traders captured them in Africa and sold them to plantation owners in America.”

“Good enough for a start.”

“Do you know the difference between ignorant and unintelligent?”

“Ain’t none, I guess.”

“*Ignorance* means to not have knowledge – to be uneducated. *Unintelligent* means a person’s brain learns at a much slower rate than most people.”

“I didn’t know that. Really thought they meant the same thing. So, a first grader might be just as intelligent as a seventh grader because they both can learn at the same rate, but a first grader will be more ignorant than a seventh grader because he hasn’t had a chance to learn as much.”

“You often amaze me Dwayne. You have grasped the essence of the difference very well.”

“I love to hear you talk fancy, Harry.”

“Good. Let’s see if I can talk fancy just a bit longer, here. Now, tackle the second part of my question. If all men’s brains – regardless of the color of the skin that encloses them – work about the same (and science proves that) were those slaves unintelligent or were they ignorant?”

“I think I see. They probably knew everything about where they came from, but not from over here because they were kept uneducated about our ways – ignorant.”

“Good thinking. Now, here’s a top-level problem. If somebody thinks ignorant and unintelligent mean the same thing and call a black or any person ignorant what might they really mean?”

“Hmm. Dumb, like unintelligent, like they can never be expected to learn much.”

“Give that man one glorious moonbeam.”

It got a quick smile, but more importantly a good question.

“So, what does ‘smart’ really mean? All of a sudden it’s sort of a blurry word.”

“It is usually used to mean that a person has used his high level of intelligence to learn a huge amount of information

– both intelligent and full of knowledge.”

“Like you, Harry.”

“I hope that is true. I was born with a high level of intelligence. For that I can take no credit. I have diligently used it to learn everything I can. I wish the same for you, Dwayne.”

“Problem is, I ain’t intelligent.”

“How do you know that?”

“I only make average grades – D’s even.”

“Could you do better if you actually studied – over the years you’ve given me the impression you do the minimal amount to get by. You do the school to pass, to learn wonderful new things.”

“Here’s another one of your words, Harry: It is often extremely *disconcerting* to hear what you have to say.”

“I certainly hope so.”

“But I thought that word meant disturbing or puzzling.”

“It does. One needs to have his intellectual boat rocked regularly in order to encourage personal growth.”

“You’re something else.”

“A wonderful topic for discussion – perhaps next time.”

“It’s okay when you help us think. This time the big thing I learned was something I really hate – the ‘not worth spit’ misunderstanding. You tell me what I’ve always believed about it was never true, but even when I know it isn’t true, deep down inside I don’t think I can change the way I believe about it. I see a black person and I hate them. I see a half-breed and I want to tear them limb from limb. It’s that simple.”

“And that is why I am disappointed, not in you and Marco and Billy, but I’m disappointed in me and your parents for not impressing on you the real facts. Shame on us.”

“You said something like the new kid was twice as good as us and that really made us mad. We already talked about it.”

“Perhaps I phrased it poorly. Hear this. For many centuries, black people lived pretty much together and they developed sets of wonderful traits. The Latino populations of Mexico and Central and South America did the same. And so on for the Asian, the North American Indian, and the European Whites. Because of climate and other factors each of those

groups developed sets of fine and useful traits that are their own, even if only slightly different from some of the others. What I was trying to say was that Jeremy, because of his mixture of human backgrounds, has the possibility of possessing some of the best traits from two different groups.”

“Like his skin for one thing. I took a good look at it and it really is a pretty color. I haven’t seen his dad yet. I’ve seen his mom?”

His face brightened.

“Have *you* seen her? She is drop dead gorgeous.”

“I think you’ll be interested in seeing his father.”

Johnson grew thoughtful and eventually spoke his thoughts.

“So, here’s what I think I been hearin’ you say.”

Harry often asked the boys a question to that effect after they had discussed something.

“Our white skin is like a genetic mistake so it really can’t be all that great. I can see that; it gets burned in the summer sun and later on that causes skin cancer. I don’t think any of that happens to black or brown skin.”

Harry was pleased the boy had tied in things he already knew. Johnson continued.

“That the color of skin is not related to intelligence. That ignorance is related to your education – how much you’ve learned. That anybody that don’t believe in science – all of it – should be herded together and driven off a cliff so DUMB don’t get passed on to our offspring.”

Harry laughed out loud.

“What? Did I miss something important?”

“Actually, you did unbelievable well. I might not be able to support your conclusion about the necessary ultimate fate of people who prefer to remain ignorant. I would prefer we provide appropriate education for them.”

“That would be another way to go, I guess, but you can’t teach a person if he’s against the teachin’.”

“Can I ask you something sort of personal?”

“If it is not related to the birds and bees, go for it.”

He spread a broad grin and added to his comment.

“I think we crossed that bridge together about five years ago.”

“So, we did. Go on.”

“I’m going to be a old man like you are, someday. How do I make sure I get to be as wise as you are?”

The question made Harry’s eyes tear up, but not leave the confines of his eyes.

“First, I thank you for the implied compliment – the possession of wisdom. Second, and this is the important part, allow yourself to make lots of mistakes along the way, AND learn important lessons from every single one.”

“Like if I don’t take time to learn from them, I’m just letting myself remain ignorant.”

“Exactly. And if you don’t *try*, even when success isn’t guaranteed, you’ll miss the opportunity to learn from mistakes you might have made.”

“Got it. I figure I still have about eighty years to work on it.”

“I love you, my young friend.”

“I know that, my *ancient* friend.”

In a nervous overreaction to the stressful discussion, the boy laughed himself onto his back on the floor, clutching his stomach. Harry joined him (in the laughter, not the rolling on the floor!).

* * *

Harry understood that the essence of his conversation with the Johnson boy would be relayed to Cuomo and O’Malley. That would certainly require a group visit in the near future. Harry’s hope was that it could include Jeremy. It would need to address the problem of opinion vs. fact.

The evening was warm. After supper, Harry opened his front door and a bedroom window in the rear, to encourage air flow – using a scientific principle Mr. Johnson apparently didn’t believe in – heavier, cooler air will rush in to displace lighter, warmer air. Perhaps no such thing occurred in their apartment. He chuckled to himself. Perhaps that tended to explain the hot-headed males that lived there. He chuckled some more wondering if an old man’s sense of humor could possibly be any more juvenile than that.

As if a countdown had been underway across the alley, at promptly seven o’clock, a sound, new to the alley, began filling the area. At first it was low tones, setting a rhythm.

That was soon joined by higher tones, a melody that whined and whirred just a bit as it moved from slow and deliberate to faster and less organized. Up and down the alley doors opened, initially filled with inquisitive neighbors indicating by their mere presence an interest in what they were hearing. Furrowed brows gradually became smooth. Puzzled looks, became appreciative. Soon, people spilled out of the doorways and took seats outside – the adults generally on chairs or hammocks, the youngsters on the ground, backs often against the buildings.

It was clear to everybody where the music was coming from. It was less clear what sort of music it was. Several of the youngest children began moving around – dancing. Johnson stood up and went inside his place. Harry hoped that was not a bad sign. The boy was the leader of the young people there. As Dwayne went, so went them all.

Before a mass exit got underway, Dwayne returned with two guitars. He handed one to his father and took a seat near him on the ground. He plucked a bit before finding the key. He began strumming chords that brought a sense of completion to the raw notes coming from Mary Baker's old place. She would have approved.

Women began clapping quietly and swaying gently to the rhythm. A set of bongos emerged from the Cuomo apartment. When the song eventually came to an end, there was enthusiastic random clapping and people looked into each other's faces, smiling and nodding their approval – a few hoots and finger whistles, even. The silence that followed was not acceptable. Young Cuomo began a beat – clearly Latin. Johnson's father picked a melody that everybody knew, but nobody could name. The deep tones started again from Jeremy's apartment. The high tones followed. Dwayne stood and sauntered to that door and began adding chords from his guitar. Jeremy appeared in the doorway, pushing his large steel bowl instrument ahead of him on its stand as his hands moved skillfully from place to place around its surface. He was soon outside. His father followed with a far larger bowl. At the first sight of him – huge, muscular and black as shiny coal – the teen boys scooted away, frightened out of their water at his appearance. He smiled. He reached back into

the room with one arm and presented his wife – Jeremy’s mother, in her red dress and long black hair, with strand upon strand of colorful Mexican beads around her neck, a long-stemmed rose between her teeth and black castanets snapping crisply on her fingers.

She entered the alley and began to dance, slowly at first, gradually increasing her tempo as the music followed her lead. Presently, she moved down the alley stopping, playfully, at each teen boy to offer a prolonged tease. Their faces were red and their hearts throbbed wildly as teen boy’s faces and hearts will do when in the presence of the most gorgeous female ever to set foot inside their alley.

Harry resisted the urge to add his harmonica to the mix. It was wonderful just the way it was. By eight, some of the adults had welcomed the new family to the neighborhood. Some stood back. The boys, reluctant to approach the new kid themselves, brightened when Jeremy encouraged them try his instrument. Cuomo – the bongo boy – actually showed some promise. Harry briefly postulated it must represent some affinity between the boy’s steel toed boots and the steel-band instrument.

Harry nodded, turned, and went inside to his recliner. With the door open he could make out, in general, what was going on outside. A five-year-old, holding up his shorts with one hand so not too much was revealed, popped his head inside, carrying the news.

“A burger and corn on the cob cook out here Monday night. I imagine you’re invited.”

He disappeared, eager to carry the word from door to door. Harry had to wonder if he even knew what corn on the cob was. Clearly, being the messenger was more important.

* * *

After the assemblage had long since dispersed and doors were closing in preparation for a safe night’s sleep, Harry heard the rap, rap, rap, on his closed door – the one he was expecting.

“Come in Dwayne. It’s unlocked for you.”

It was a well-known fact around those parts that Harry had ‘special talents’. No youngster doubted them. Therefore, his response was not surprising. The boy opened the door.

“Pop in the fridge like usual,” Harry said.

“Not a pop visit, Harry.”

“I see. Sounds serious. Make yourself comfortable, then.”

He slipped out of his shoes. Harry handed him a comb. His blond hair was beautiful, but never combed.

He plopped onto his preferred spot on the couch.

“I guess you saw the music thing out there tonight.”

“I did and enjoyed it immensely. You play better than I remembered. Thank you.”

Harry often thanked the boys for things they didn’t fully understand, so they just accepted it and moved on. That was one of those times.

“I’m in a terrible spot, Harry. Deep down inside I really hate that new kid. If he looked at me sideways I can see myself ripping his damn brown eyes out and popping them with my heels against the pavement.”

Harry winced. Dwayne continued.

“Closer to the surface, though, I really do like him – admire him even for his skill and for the guts it took to think up and go through with that concert idea. We talked for a while after. I didn’t apologize. He didn’t bring it up. He’s a smart kid – using the ‘smart’ meaning we talked about. He asked if I’d help him learn to play the guitar.”

“And you said?”

“I said something really dumb like *maybe*.”

“I assume that was your honest thinking at the moment.”

“I had three honest ‘thinkings’ at the moment. I spoke the middle one.”

“What were the others, if I may ask?”

“Started at *no way*, went to *maybe* and ended at *probably*. I guess I offered him sort of an average of the three.”

“At least you have set yourself some options to consider.”

“Oh, I’ll show him how. Not sure why I just didn’t say so.”

“*Of course*, you are sure, why.”

Dwayne offered a sigh and became quiet.

“I really don’t want to hate him, you know.”

“Did your father interact with him or his dad – face to face I mean.”

“Goodness no! The sky’d a fell! I mean it!”

“They did make pretty good music together, didn’t they?”

“Yeah. They did. We all did.”

There was a moment of silence and then another knock.

“Come in Jeremy. The door’s unlocked for you.”

Dwayne bristled and gathered up a pillow from the couch and clutched it to himself. He looked daggers at Harry. It made the old man ever so briefly wonder how many thousands of those kinds of youthful daggers had been directed at him during his lifetime.

Jeremy pushed the door open. Seeing the other visitor, he hesitated and spoke.

“Sorry. I had no intention of butting in. I didn’t know anybody was here.”

“Well at least one of us here is happy to see you,” Harry said. “Please come in. I’m afraid seating arrangements are limited. A chair from the kitchen or the floor by the door.”

Jeremy smiled and entered, still somewhat hesitatively.

“Floor by the door – sounds like something straight out of Dr. Seuss.”

The humor caught Dwayne off guard and an unguarded smile flashed its way across his face if only for the briefest of moments.”

So, something in common, I see – a love of the literary genius - Theodor Geisel.”

“Who?” they said as one looking at Harry.

“Dr. Seuss was the pen name of a man named Theodor Geisel. In addition, something most people don’t know, is that *Seuss* was his real middle name.”

Jeremy took a seat on the floor – cross legged and back against the wall. Dwayne tightened his bear hug on the pillow.

“Do you have favorites – books by Dr. Seuss?”

“Really? You actually just asked us that,” Dwayne said trying to maintain his distance from the suddenly uncomfortable situation.

“I think mine was *Green Eggs and Ham*,” Jeremy said. “Come on, Johnson, I’m sure you had a favorite. It’s about years ago stuff, not now stuff.”

“Maybe, *The Lorax*, but just because it suddenly seems to be a dumb requirement of this intellectual gathering.”

“Intellectual gathering. I like that,” the new kid offered. “I have always liked sitting down and talking with other smart people like this.”

Like this! That got Dwayne’s attention. He scooted into a position that was a bit more upright.

“Me to,” he managed. “Harry and I have had dozens of ‘em – maybe hundreds, huh, Harry?”

He was attempting to stake out his territory and suggest he had dibs on the old man’s brain.

“There have been lots of them for sure,” Harry said. “I have learned something useful from every last one of them.”

Dwayne leaned a bit in Jeremy’s direction as if to exclude Harry from his whispered comment.

“He really means that.”

“I figured.”

The response had also been whispered. Harry took heart. Perhaps there would be no blood bath or eyeball popping, after all.

Dwayne and I were just speaking about you.

“As the new kid, the kid who bangs on the lids of metal barrels, or the half breed?”

Harry turned to Dwayne, that time as if to exclude Jeremy.

“How do we answer that? I tend to think, *some of all of that*, would be the honest way to go.

“I suppose so.”

Dwayne nodded playfully.

It had become an interesting game among three, distinct, though overlapping duos.

When Harry was surrounded by a number of youngsters, he had a way of making each one feel like he or she was really the most important one to him.

“I suppose you heard that,” Harry said looking at Jeremy.

“I suppose. You two always go on like this? It’s like

you know each other so well you can predict what the other one is going to say or do.”

Harry provided the answer.

“I must admit, Johnson here and I are like an old married couple when it comes to that.”

It provided smiles all around – even momentary eye to eye contact between the boys.

Dwayne here says he’d like to kill you, and don’t even ask the creative way he’d go about destroying your eyeballs.”

“Let me guess. Dry them and use them for guitar picks.”

Dwayne smiled and offered his response.

“I bet they’d help me hit an awesome ‘C’ major chord.”

“And ‘eye’ can ‘C’ you have been around Harry far too long.”

“Oh, you took ‘note’ of that did you?”

It went on for some time – stringing along, fretting, knocking on wood. They giggled like small girls sharing secrets during a sleepover. Harry let it go on, chuckling as much *at* them as *with* them. Of one thing, he was certain. In the long history of mankind, humor had just hit an all-time low.

They calmed down and wiped damp eyes. Jeremy broke the short silence that followed. He looked directly at Dwayne.

“So. How do we precede with you wanting to rip my guts out and me being terrified as hell at the mere sight of you?”

Dwayne seemed surprised at Jeremy’s offering – puzzled even. It had been formed like a question, but was clearly as much an accurate statement of their situation.

“You’re afraid of me? No, I’m afraid of you.”

“Why in the world would you be afraid of me?”

“You’re the one with black genes floating around your blood stream or wherever black genes float.”

“I don’t get it. You are afraid of my genes?”

“White folks have to be afraid of black folks, that’s just the way it is.”

“Why. I guarantee my color won’t rub off on you.”

Silence.

Jeremy threw up his hands.

“While Dwayne thinks that through why don’t you tell us

why you're afraid of him – a white boy?"

"That's it. He's a white kid who already tried to kill me once. I think my position is completely defensible."

More silence. Then Dwayne offered a response.

"Okay, I'll give you that. We did sort of get off to a bad start."

"Bad start! Sort of? You tell me what would have happened to me if Harry hadn't happened by."

"I suppose you would have been hurt."

"*Would have been?*"

Jeremy removed his shirt and stood up, moving across the room to the couch. He turned around slowly until he was again facing Dwayne.

"Does this look like, '*would have been?*'"

By then, seeping, slimy looking scabs had begun to form giving each scratch and cut a stomach-turning appearance. Dwayne gagged and looked away.

"I really had no idea," he said in a barely audible tone. "My head lost control of my feet. I don't know what to say."

"I for one am confused," Harry said. "Didn't you tell me you wanted to kill Jeremy? It looks to me like you stopped much too soon."

"Yeah. Thanks to you."

"Sarcasm or genuine?" Harry asked.

Dwayne sighed. He looked at Jeremy.

"If you want easy answers, never ever under any circumstances whatsoever enter Harry's lair here. He'll push you and twist you and make you feel like an idiot, and the really odd part is that when you leave you'll feel good, believe you are greatest person who ever lived, and tell him thanks."

"Does two of us against one of him help?" Jeremy asked, pretending to get confidential. "We could gang up on him."

"A hundred to one would still be in Harry's favor. Let me try and explain some things – very seriously. I've never thought it through so just hear me out as I try. I've been taught to hate – usually not in so many words, but what I took from watching and listening to dad and other men react to blacks – er black people, I guess that's better. You'll have to go into that with me some time. Before I entered school, I

knew several things were eternally certain: black people were wicked, they stole everybody blind, they took jobs whites should have, they romanced white girls for which they deserved hanging, and look at one of 'em wrong they'd slit your throat – all black men carried knives just for that purpose. Those are things I knew were absolutely true before I had ever met a black person. Did I have any proof; had I ever seen any of that happening? No, but still I knew it was true just the same. It never entered my mind to question any of it or ask for proof.

“Half breeds were even worse because making babies between races was a ‘go straight to hell’ offense. Period. Somehow that made the baby bad, even though I have wondered why when, at least according to Harry’s birds and bees talk, the baby had nothing to do with it – with who or what he was.”

“I see,” Jeremy began. “Well, then, I admire you for having the guts to remain in the room with me here tonight. With all that stashed away inside me I’m not sure I would have.”

Dwayne frowned and shook his head ever so slightly. Jeremy had returned to his spot on the floor and was struggling to button his shirt. Dwayne tossed him a pillow from the couch. They exchanged eye contact and maybe indications of nods.

Harry thought some basics were in order.

“Opinions and facts,” he began.

Dwayne knew how the game was played so he spoke to provide an example.

“Opinions are what people think without having facts to back them up.”

Jeremy gave it a shot.

“And facts are truths established by reliable observation, testable means of some kind. The result of a carefully done experiment would result in facts.”

“Opinions may or may not be facts, then, I suppose,” Dwayne went on. “I’m guessing we are supposed to get to the place that basing beliefs on opinions is not appropriate.”

Jeremy:

“Non-factual opinions can’t – mustn’t – be handled as if

they were truth, or false beliefs will follow.”

Harry was pleased. He continued cryptically.

“Iron and oxygen.”

“Rust or . . . what’s its science name?” Dwayne said looking at Jeremy rather than Harry for assistance.

“Iron oxide or ferric oxide, I think.”

Harry nodded and continued.

“Fact or opinion?”

“Fact.” The responses came in the same instant.

“How do you know rust is iron oxide? What makes it a fact and not an opinion?”

“Rust can be analyzed and found to contain both iron and oxygen,” Jeremy said.

“Expose iron to oxygen for a while, especially like the oxygen it can remove from water, and rust appears.”

That had been Dwayne.

Harry nodded again.

“Fact or Opinion: All people with red hair have ferocious tempers.”

“Opinion,” Dwayne said, “although O’Malley makes me question that sometimes.”

He slipped in a little smile as he looked at Harry.

“Myths or folk lore or old wives tales,” Jeremy added.

Harry nodded.

“Personal beliefs.”

“Can’t say,” Dwayne said

“He’s right,” Jeremy added. “They might be either one or a combination of both – facts and opinions”.

“Let’s head back to myths and folk lore,” Harry said altering the direction slightly. What are they?”

Neither boy spoke. They were clearly contemplating the question, however. Harry helped out.

“How do they develop? Where do they come from?”

Jeremy’s face brightened.

“They are like stories that have passed down from one generation to another.”

“Yeah, and I’m guessing to qualify they have to be unproven – in the opinion category, huh?” Dwayne added taking his lead from Jeremy.”

Harry took it up:

“Sometimes that’s called unfounded in fact. Often they are built on a single occurrence or coincidence like throwing salt over one’s shoulder brings good luck. Somebody did it once and good fortune came their way. Although it would have happened anyway, they traced it to the salt and the story was repeated as truth and was eventually established as the myth.”

Jeremy raised his hand. Seeing that, everybody including Jeremy chuckled. He continued.

“Like superstitions, then, too. Athletes wear their lucky sox or won’t wash their lucky shirt as long as they keep winning.”

“Excellent. Excellent, gentlemen.”

Harry had another one ready – a step up the ladder.

“So, all black people carry knives so they can slit white people’s throats.”

“Opinion,” Dwayne said. “Probably comes under the category of lore – unfounded or based on a one or two time event or coincidence.”

“I must admit I have known black men that carried knives,” Jeremy said. “I never considered that the idea behind it was for the purpose of slitting anybody’s throat, however – more for protection against the white men. I see how the lore could be built on an occurrence or two – say two facts built into an *always* sort of belief after it got repeated often enough.”

“Can I try the ‘half-breed’ one,” Dwayne asked, not *really* asking. “Say a baby was born to a black and white couple. The white people around them hated the black one so the only place that couple could live was in an awful neighborhood where there weren’t good opportunities. The kid grew up having to fight for everything he got. He had to steal to eat and things like that and maybe he even ended up killing somebody. People just looked at the fact he was a half-breed and used that as the reason he was a bad guy. They overlooked everything else about him. Maybe they were looking for something terrible to pin on him that proved their previous opinion of half breed – really, what they wanted to believe about half-breeds. That tale spread easily and soon came to be thought of as a trait held by all half breeds.”

Harry looked at Jeremy. He positioned his hands as if ready to clap and raised his eyebrows as if asking permission. Jeremy followed his lead and they clapped.

“Never heard that one put any better, Son.”

“One thing about it, though,” Dwayne went on. “I see that half breed is a terrible term. If anything, it should be a *double* breed. What’s a better word?”

Jeremy spoke.

“Speaking as one – a half-breed not a word – I prefer *mixed racial* or even better, *blended racial*. Or even better still, no term at all. Why not just refer to me as Jeremy? Why does everybody have to be identified with or categorized as some color?”

“Hmm. So, I’d be called, Dwayne, instead of boy with genetically deteriorated skin color.”

He smiled at Harry. Harry winked back.

“What?” asked Jeremy, looking back and forth between them.

“I will ask Dwayne to explain that to you later. It’s getting late. Your parents will be wondering where you are.”

“No, they won’t.”

It came as one from two voices. It was worth a smile and chuckle between them.

“How is this,” Dwayne asked looking mostly at Harry. “I hate the unfounded opinion I find I have to carry around in my gut about Jeremy and his kind so I will try to find out real things about him and base my beliefs about him on the facts I discover.”

“That’s a remarkable insight, *guitar boy*,” Harry said kidding him about needing to use labels for people. “You must recognize that for a long time it will be a constant struggle to try and keep those things separate in your heart and emotional life. When present in the lives of young children, hate and prejudice become fully accepted, way before a person has any reason to question it. You already stated that quite effectively. Spreading hate to innocent, defenseless children is the one thing I fear the most.”

“I think I suddenly know about fearing *that one thing* better than you do, Harry,” Dwayne said.

“I think you are correct. What I said was not meant as

a put down.”

“I know. You are just trying to save me from myself.”

“Where did you hear that phrase?”

“Some older guys you knew as kids say that all the time. ‘Stay away from old Harry unless you want him to save you from yourself. It always seems like a high complement, but it never made sense ‘til just now.’”

“Now, I need to say something to you Johnson, er Dwayne,” Jeremy began shifting slightly on the floor so he was facing him directly. “I’m not innocent in all this. I seem to carry a set of those false opinions about you – that all white boys are out to get me, put me down, hurt me. I apologize. Like you, I can see it’s not going to just evaporate because of a 30-minute discussion.”

“Thirty minutes?” Harry said holding up his watch. “How about two hours and thirty minutes?”

“Really?” Jeremy said. “I had no idea.”

Dwayne smiled at him.

“One time I recall – and I swear it’s the truth – Harry and I started talking one evening when I was seven and didn’t finish the discussion until one morning when I was nine.”

There were smiles all around.

“It seems you already carry a part of Harry inside you,” Jeremy said enjoying the humor.

“You be careful, steel drum kid. Very few folks who have really known Harry have escaped leaving without a part of him tucked somewhere inside them. One night I gained two pounds just being here.”

Jeremy nodded at Dwayne and spoke directly to him again.

“So, after all this, I ask again; where do we stand – really?”

Like I said, I am going to work hard to make the facts I learn about you push away the unfounded opinions I have grown up believing about people like you – blended racial. I promise if I sense my ‘old opinions part’ is becoming stronger than the ‘fact part’, I’ll give you a 25-foot head start.”

“Fortunately, I am really, really fast. I have a track trophy to prove it.”

It was worth a prolonged laugh, perhaps more a

release of nervous energy than anything related to humor. The real work had just begun and they had some idea that was the case.

“There is something very sad about all this,” Dwayne said slumping his shoulders. “Even if I confront my dad with all the facts, he will just say he doesn’t believe them and that will be the end of the discussion. When facts don’t agree with his beliefs, he will stick with his beliefs every time.”

“And that, my young friends, is why the greatest threat to free societies is lack of education and the malignant ignorance that must follow in its wake.”

* * *

“Well, as you can all see, if Dwayne, in an uncontrolled, hate-filled stupor, ever really tried, he never did catch me – five fingers on each hand (he held them up as to offer proof) and an eyeball in each socket (he pointed).

“I only lived in Harry’s Alley for six months and I only returned a few times after I left. Dwayne really came through for me during those six months that we were thrown together. I could see how hard he had to work at accepting me – well, in the beginning just not being disgusted by the very sight of me. We both learned that knowing something was true, and being able to accept it without question, were two *very* different aspects of life. Most of you here today are white and I’m sure you have noticed that only a few times did my knees shake in uncontrollable fright.

“Dwayne was one of the bravest people I’ve ever known. He had gone against everything his family believed about black people and Mexicans and half-breeds, but he was steadfast. I know that I wasn’t privy to many of the talks he and Harry had after that awesome evening the three of us spent sharing and searching together, and I know they were the source of great help for him as he worked to strike a balance between what had always been and what needed – wanted – to become. Like all of us here today, I suspect, I had my share of treasured one on ones with Harry as well.

“I had the privilege of growing up, getting married, having a daughter, working in the field of entertainment, and eventually not being terrified every time I had to approach a new white person. I thank Harry for pointing the direction for

me. I have to thank Dwayne for letting me practice on him – with him.

“Dwayne can’t be here today. He careered in the Army. In one of our infamous wars, he saved his platoon by falling on a grenade – Six black soldiers are alive today because of him.”

He turned to the pine box.

“Thank you, Harry. I’m sure that Johnson kid with the never combed, blond hair, thanks you as well.”

He offered an 8 by 10 glossy for the others to see.

“Dwayne Allen Johnson, Sergeant, United States Army.”

He placed the picture on the pine box.

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CHAPTER SIX

Raw Eggs, Mustard, and Brine

The director stood, clearly amused at what was on the sheet of paper.

“Next on Harry’s list is – believe it or not – Simple Simon. Will anybody here claim that designation?”

A pleasant looking man in his thirties stood. He was well dressed in a casual vein, and spread an absolutely wonderful smile from face to face.

“Leave it to Harry to have remembered.”

He walked to the front and stood behind the unpainted, pine box.

“I am Winston Adams. My story spans less than a day. My relationship with the old man spanned fifteen years. After our first encounter, twice a year I would show up at his yellow door with a bottle of scotch. We never touched it, but its symbolic presence was powerful for both of us. I call my story: *Raw Eggs, Mustard, and Brine*. Many of you understand its, shall I say, cleansing significance. I owe my life to it.”

* * *

Outside, the snow swirled, a pretty picture against the street light through the window from inside Harry’s place. The bell in the tower of the cathedral several blocks upwind, chimed ten o’clock.

Harry saved his work and shut down the computer. He took a moment to be amazed once more at how one tiny flash drive held over 100 of his books. He removed his reading glasses and set them aside. He stretched and stood, then moved to flick the living room light switch beside the front door.

There was a not immediately recognizable sound just outside. He stopped and listened. It hadn’t really been a knock although it was in some way associated with the door – more like a thump – the sort of sound he remembered from his boyhood days on the farm in Kansas when sacks of potatoes would be not so gently tossed onto the barn’s wooden floor.

He turned the knob. The weight from the body of a young man who had been sitting, back against the door,

pushed it open. The boy fell back onto the floor. Harry noticed the snow had grown deep outside and the temperature had dropped below freezing. Wires were coated with ice. The boy wore a long black coat that didn't fit him – perhaps from Goodwill or the Salvation Army. It looked warm – wool, buttoned up to his chin. There were loafers on his otherwise bare feet. His unclad hands were still mostly in his pockets.

Harry pulled the limp body inside and closed the door. He knelt beside him to gather what facts seemed available. The boy's eyes fluttered open, looking directly up into the old man's face.

“Did a stupid thing. Took pills. Changed my mind. Please . . .”

He fell limp again and slipped into semi-consciousness. The young man was too heavy for Harry to maneuver into the bedroom or even lift up onto the couch, so he went about making him comfortable with a thin pillow under his head and afghan from the couch snuggled around his feet – the cold wet shoes removed. He left the boy in the coat.

Harry stood and went to his phone – land line. There was no dial tone. Snow and ice frequently disconnected him from service. He went to the kitchen. Into a coffee mug, he combined two raw eggs, a tablespoon of mustard, two tablespoons of salt and just enough warm water to thin it to a drinkable consistency. He stirred it vigorously until mostly blended. Taking a two-gallon plastic tub from beneath the sink he returned to the living room. He struggled to sit the boy up with his back against the couch. He positioned the tub on the lad's lap. He patted his cheeks – gently at first and then more vigorously in an attempt to awaken him.

Again, his eyes opened in starts and stops. It was clearly a struggle for him to hold them open. Harry spoke with more authority than typically left his lips.

“You must drink this concoction. It will force you to throw up – clean out your stomach. How long ago did you swallow them?”

“Sometime after nine o'clock.”

He mumbled something else – perhaps the name of the drug. He couldn't repeat it and Harry's old ears had missed it.

Harry held the mug to his mouth.

“You must drink all of this. It will taste like warmed over rat guts and I’m not guaranteeing it isn’t, but you must drink it all.”

The old man figured the disgusting description itself should initiate the necessary process. The boy worked on the drink for some time. He was clearly committed to following Harry’s directions, but his strength was nearly gone.

He tilted his head back as if to drain the final drops into his mouth. It was all over in a matter of moments after that. Harry brought water for the boy to use to rinse out his mouth and a wet wash cloth for his face and hands.

“Now, drink as much water as you can. I’m thinking it will dilute whatever drug remains in your stomach. Odd as it sounds I need you to begin clapping now. We need to keep your circulation as high as possible. I can’t possibly help you walk, which would be the best. If you can move your legs that will also help. You need to stay awake for a while longer whatever the struggle.”

There was no way to know many pills he had taken or how lethal they actually might be. Those instructions were a combination of bits and pieces of information he knew for sure, thought he had heard somewhere, and made up on the fly from what seemed sensible.

The boy did his best to comply with Harry’s directions. It was clearly a struggle. Harry imagined that if one were in the boy’s situation and really wanted to keep from dying he would put his heart and soul into the process. Clearly the boy found himself right there – continue the struggle or die.

From time to time Harry would take the boy’s drooping arms and reinitiate the movement. The boy shivered. Shivering was a natural body reaction to bring body temperature back to normal so as much as he hurt for the lad, he resisted the desire to add covers and make him warmer.

“Talk to me, Son. I imagine you have a name. I met a boy once who did.”

The boy managed a faint smile at the absurdity.

“How about Simple Simon?” he managed.

“How about Rumpelstiltskin?” Harry came back. “How old are you?”

“I was sixteen when I took the pills. What day is it? I

may be older.”

“Same day, I imagine. Suppose getting your parents’ phone number is out of the question at this moment?”

“You are a very good ‘supposer’.”

Harry realized the boy’s words were slurred. Perhaps from the drugs. Perhaps from alcohol.

Harry leaned in close to his mouth.

“I do believe you downed those pills with way too much scotch.”

“You are also a very good ‘way too mucher’.”

The boy managed a chuckle.

“I was drunk as sin first – to give me the courage to take the pills. Probably not one of the brightest moves I have made in my life. I am still alive, am I not?”

“I figure you’re clinging on somewhere between barely and almost.”

“You use words in interesting – no make that fascinating – manners, sir.”

“I could say the same for you, Simon.”

“Who? Oh, yes. Simon the Simpleton as I recall.”

“We need to contact your family.”

“No. YOU need to contact my family. I gave up needing them years ago, or weeks ago, or at least some sort of *ago*. At some time, I will want to thank you, sir, but right now I must concentrate on moving my body parts, is that correct?”

“Correct.”

“I really don’t want to die. Please don’t let me die.”

He began sobbing and reached out.

Harry had taken a seat on the floor beside him. Years before he had left behind stooping and squatting, for more than a few seconds at a time. He leaned in close and they managed an awkward embrace – hug – whatever. The boy clung to him as if letting go would surely produce his immediate demise. Harry wondered how many young people’s tears had mingled with his own during his lifetime.

As he continued to sit there with the boy drawn to his chest he began formulating a plan. There were several steps that needed to be taken. First, keep the boy alive. Second, get him sober. Third, listen to whatever part of his story he

would be willing to share – when he could share it. Fourth, ascertain what truth it might contain. Fifth, let things take the natural, healing course that things generally took when Harry interacted with a troubled youngster. That interplay was purely instinctual on his part and Harry was aware of that. It was based on no set of guidelines or therapeutic philosophy. What took place was just seat of the pants Harry. It had seldom been very far off course.

After an hour, Harry felt the boy's face and hands and feet. Natural warmth had returned to his body. That brought a sense of great relief. It seemed safe to let him sleep.

"I think it's safe for you to sleep now. If you can crawl up onto the couch that will be more comfortable."

The boy just allowed himself to fall over onto the floor on his right side, the side opposite Harry.

"Or *that*, I suppose," Harry said fully aware the boy was dead to the world. (Perhaps the author could have found a better descriptive phrase)."

Harry positioned the pillow and straightened out his legs into a more comfortable position. He rewrapped the boy's feet in the afghan and struggled to *his* feet.

In the kitchen, he put on a pot of coffee, as much for him at that point as the boy. He took a seat at the kitchen table from where he could keep an eye on the young man. He could go through his pockets and see if there were pieces of identification. He didn't typically do things like that. It seemed an invasion of privacy. He could continue trying to get through to 911, but he had the feeling *he* needed a shot at the boy first – now that the medical crisis seemed to have passed. For whatever reason, the boy had come to him. It could have been on purpose – he had heard about Harry from somebody – or it could have been strictly a random occurrence – Harry's door was available at the moment the boy decided he wanted to live. Either way, once he was clearly out of the woods, he felt the boy should be a part of any upcoming decisions. So, he waited, at times finding himself counting the boy's breaths as if for proof his condition was on the mend. They had become slow, long, and regular, better from the rapid, shallow, catch as catch can variety with which he had fallen through the doorway.

It was midnight. The boy slept on. Harry turned off the fire under the coffee, filled his mug and returned to the living room where he eased himself into his recliner. There he could watch and catnap until some next step became obvious.

He awakened again at three o'clock finding himself covered in the afghan. He hoped the boy had not left. He was not on the floor. He was relieved when he saw the boy was sprawled out, face down, on the couch his bare feet snuggled under several throw pillows for warmth. All of that must have been a sign of great improvement.

'A considerate, probably appreciative, young man,' Harry thought. 'Clearly indicates things about his upbringing. Hmm? Yet here he is.'

The earlier samples of his speech indicated – aside from intoxication – an educated home. Some of his responses reflected an interesting sense of humor, still close enough to the surface that even booze and a near lethal dose of drugs could not completely hide.

The living room smelled like a bar, suggesting it had shared its air with the boys lungs all quite selflessly. Lysol seemed in order.

Though not rested, Harry was no longer sleepy. He made his way to the kitchen, tossed his mug of cold coffee and heated what was on the stove. He was already feeling the downside of having been up and down off the floor those several times. Where was the horse liniment when he needed it? He smiled. Where was the pretty nurse to apply it? At that point he'd settle for a bearded Vet in cowboy boots.

He put that behind him and rummaged through the pantry. He determined he could feed the boy for several days if necessary. That was good in two ways: they wouldn't starve, and by then the sidewalks would be shoveled and he could get to the store. He made up a large pitcher of orange juice from two containers of canned concentrate. He remembered it was a staple source of sustenance during the first 48 hours young people were in the local rehabilitation center where he sometimes volunteered.

He found chocolate pudding in the refrigerator. He took it to the table and worked his way back and forth – a spoon full of pudding; a sip of coffee. It was one of his favorite taste

treats – and yet he contended he disliked mocha. He set his old, green, plastic radio to the station that played music from his youth at night. At six a.m. it changed to conservative talk radio. He did not follow that. His fantasy was that the station manager had an elderly person in his care and discovered he or she spent large amounts of the night walking the floor. If he or she did that, so did many other old folks. Instant market. For however it had come about, Harry enjoyed it.

He spent some time making notes for revisions on his manuscript – things made necessary because the story had taken a turn he had not anticipated early on. Change a name here or insert some direction shifting conversation there, and it would all work out just fine. Truthfully, at that point, it was more something to fill his time than a serious undertaking.

At six-thirty he noted the morning light was beginning to creep up the ally. He heard the trash trucks and was reminded it was Thursday. Harry made so little trash he only put his out during the first week of every month – it was the second.

He heard his visitor groaning. He had cleaned and returned the plastic tub to the floor beside the couch just in case. From the sounds, it had been a wise plan. He put on fresh coffee and approached the living room with a glass of water and a damp wash rag. The boy was sitting up and had removed his long coat.

“Coming in if that’s permitted,” Harry called ahead.

He proceeded without permission – in fact, without any response at all. He paused in the doorway. The boy looked him over and spoke.

“So, I guess you aren’t a figment of my drunken, drug laced, night time fantasies.”

“That would be true. I’m Harry in case you forgot. I have come to know you by what I assume is an alias – Simple Simon.”

The boy chuckled, switched the tub from his lap to the floor and sat back.

“First, it would appear, I need to say thanks – for everything and whatever.”

He indicated the surroundings with a sweep of his arm. He continued.

“Well, no. *First*, it would appear I am still alive. As I recall that had not been my plan for this morning. Whether that is a good thing or not remains in doubt. I hope my bother was not hurtful for you. Has my head actually cracked wide open?”

“It’s called a hangover and I’m guessing it’s your first.”

“My only, if I live through this one. Did I say I’m sorry for whatever I may have put you through?”

“It was nothing compared with the time the two black bears chose my living room as their venue for romance.”

“Really?”

“Of course not. I just wanted to make sure I could get and hold your attention.”

The boy offered a broad smile and nodded several times – the pain obvious.

“Thanks for the water and wash rag. Somehow that has a déjà vu quality to it.”

“It was a full repetition from last night.”

“How did you find me?”

“You found me – it was going to be my question to you.”

“Hmm. I remember seeing a bright yellow light ahead of me and figured I had died and was on my way to the afterlife.”

“Probably my bright yellow door with the light above it. Or, as close to death as you appeared to be it may have been real, if you postulate such a thing as an afterlife.”

“You’re a straight shooter – tell it like you see it – I like that. In my home the only things allowed to be spoken are those things one believes the others want to hear. Jeez! It’s awful.”

“That related to your misadventure last evening?”

“Probably. Lots of things. Do I smell coffee?”

“You do.”

“I think I need some. It’s supposed to clear your head isn’t it?”

Harry figured if that’s what he thought, the placebo effect alone should make it beneficial.

“I have a kitchen table that has been a part of a whole lot of fascinating conversations.”

“Sounds good. Never met a talking table before, however. Do you believe it; my feet are still cold?”

Harry took a few steps closer and looked them over.

“May I touch them?”

“Of course. They’re just feet.”

He looked puzzled.

“They have warmed up nicely, actually. I doubt that any permanent damage was done. Do you remember where you lost your sox, by the way?”

The boy stood and followed Harry into the kitchen. Harry pointed to a chair.

“I do remember, actually. I was already stewed. Hadn’t taken the pills yet. There was a homeless man squatting and shivering in a doorway. He was barefooted. I gave him my sox – white, wool, wonderfully warm.”

“Let me get you some sox. Just be a minute. Help yourself to coffee. Mugs in that cabinet.”

With coffee in their mugs, seats at the table and fresh, double, sox on the boy’s feet they got down to business.

“I suppose I bored you with my life story.”

Harry understood it was a sly way of establishing a baseline – what had he divulged and what was still private?

“You were quite closed mouth and my bent is never to press.”

The boy felt for his wallet.

“No need not worry there either. I would not look except in case of emergency.”

“So, what we had together didn’t qualify as an emergency?”

“You continued to breath. I was here in case. I figured we had it handled. I gave you an emetic, which worked within fifteen seconds.”

“Thanks for that. Taking the pills seemed exactly correct, right up to the point when I realized killing myself meant I was going to die. May sound odd. The intoxicated mental faculties, I’m thinking. How close do you think I came?”

“I’m not a doctor, but from my layman’s perspective we are talking minutes to get the drug out of your stomach and perhaps an hour of life beyond that if we hadn’t.”

The boy shivered.

“By the way the bathroom is behind that door.”

“I found it in the night – twice.”

“Thanks for the afghan, by the way,” Harry said.

“I really don’t remember anything about an afghan, Sir.”

“Well, either you or my resident ghost cozied it over me during the night.”

“Ghost? Oh, I see. Harry’s twisted sense of humor.”

“You mean it is already showing?”

“It is and given that choice, I’ll choose *me* as the thoughtful donor.”

“Simple Simon, you mean.”

The boy hesitated.

“How confidential is all this – you and me?”

“Completely confidential up to that point where my more mature judgment says that is no longer in your best interests.

Silence. Harry got up and topped off the mugs. He returned to his seat.

“I guess if I can’t accept that after what you apparently did for me, I should just walk away. I don’t really know where to begin.”

“I’ve found that just starting someplace always works. You can go both directions from there.”

The young man offered a quick grin and stared into his coffee mug as he began.

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

It was a fully unexpected start. Harry reacted with a tummy jiggling chuckle.

“Okay, seriously. This is really hard for some reason. I feel like I’m telling secrets.”

The boy anticipated some response, but none came. He tried to continue.

“My name is Winston – the last one will come on a need to know basis if that’s satisfactory?”

“This is your dance, Winston. Go!”

“I am an only, moderately spoiled kid from an upper middleclass home. Dad and mom both teach at the community college – History and English, respectively. Mom

was raised Catholic. Dad Evangelical – Southern Baptist. From what I've been able to piece together since they couldn't agree on a church, they agreed not to speak of religion. Neither one attends church now. That way, at least, there are no quarrels about it. I imagine that problem was largely about what religion I was to be raised in. Myself, I'm agnostic, I guess. Pretty much came by that on my own. I think their super sensitivity about not offending each other regarding religion has permeated most areas of our life. We live by the philosophy of Thumper the Rabbit's mother – 'If you can't say something nice about somebody, don't say anything at all'. That got translated into never upset anybody for any reason. We are all emotional wrecks because of it.

"Finally, two weeks ago, I'd had it up to here, with it and I lit into them unmercifully about that. That morphed into what terrible parents they were and how depressed I had been for years and how I hadn't asked for help because I knew it would be an embarrassment to them, and on and on and on. They just sat there at the dinner table and listened. They indicated no reactions. I wanted them to yell back at me, or throw a plate at me or douse me with a glass of water – I would have taken anything. But I got nothing.

"I went up to my room and took what money I had there – about two hundred dollars, grabbed a jacket and left the house with a good deal of drama. I had no plan. I didn't know if I had left for good or just for a walk around the block. It was dark and began to get chilly. I got on a bus and rode it to the end of the line. I had nothing better to do and it was warm. I tried to think things through, but thoughts wouldn't come. It was strange, like I was there, but I wasn't. Hard to explain.

"That night I slept in an empty box car that sat on the railroad siding, close to the bus garage. I tried to think, but few useful thoughts beyond the obvious came to mind. It was plain that I had no place to live, no means of support, and I figured I had just blown my relationship with the two people I loved the most in the whole world. I was in an impossible bind because in my home we didn't talk about problems so if I went home it would be like the whole episode had never happened and life would just supposed to go on like it always had.

"Don't get me wrong, mom and dad really are good

people. They volunteer. They give to charities. My friends are always welcome. But, get this. One night when mom thought I hadn't come home yet, she went into my room to deliver clean clothes. Well, she caught me in bed with a girl – I mean out on top of the bed being as affectionate as a male and female can get. And, she just turned around and closed the door and left. It never came up. I'm quite sure she never brought it up to dad either. Can you see how infuriating it has been to live there?"

"I suppose that would be the title of the picture you have painted - *Infuriating*."

"It would be, reds and blacks, mixing in a turmoil of angry swirls and funnels."

Harry nodded without comment.

"Anyway, I just used my money for food and continued to sleep around anywhere I could find that was out of the weather and private – and free. I had just worked up my courage to go inside a store front soup kitchen and check things out. The man, homeless I assume, told me it wouldn't be a good idea for me to go inside because they'd likely call the authorities since I was so young.

"But, you know what he did for me? He gave me his coat – the one I have – and said he could always get another one. He went on inside and I watched through the window. Five minutes later he did have a new coat. Convinced he was okay, I moved on.

"Four or five days ago I ran into a kid a little older than me. He steered the conversation around to drugs. I found myself asking which kind did what. I'm really dumb about drugs. He had beer and shared it with me. I never drink. Later I realized that was part of his sales plan, get the kid sufficiently buzzed and convince him a few drugs would make life wonderful again. I fell for it and gave him \$100 for a vial. To his credit, I suppose, he warned me not to take more than two a day, because they could be dangerous otherwise. There were twenty pills.

"I just carried them with me for the next few days as life got worse and my prospects plummeted to none at all. I was terribly depressed. Too depressed to even want to do anything about it. One time I started to approach a policeman,

but I chickened out. The fact I couldn't even do that really did me in – sent me into a complete tailspin.

'I mean, for god's sake, it didn't even seem my parents had reported me missing. I'd watch the local news on storefront TV's – nothing. I'd scan the electrical poles as I'd pass them – not so much as one stinkin' flyer with my picture on it – plenty with dogs' and cats', even one damned parakeet – but none with mine. It seemed obvious to me they really didn't want me anymore. Maybe I'd been the source of our family problems all along. Maybe mom got pregnant before they were married and they took it out on me. I've heard that happens. I can't imagine the two of them doing it without god's blessing, though. Sorry if that was offensive.

"Anyway, I was running out of money. I was hungry. It had been snowing off and on for several days. Every aspect of life was miserable – irreconcilably miserable. I'm not dumb. I understood that even if a pill would make life seem good for a few hours, I only had enough for 20 of those kinds of experiences and then I'd be forever right back where I was. So, I made the only decision I thought I had to make. I used the last ten dollars I had and found a wino who bought me bottle for whatever would be left of the ten. I didn't know much about alcohol either. We never had it in my home. By asking the man a few questions I determined that if I downed the whole bottle within a half hour I'd probably develop enough drunken courage to take the pills.

"For some reason, I kept walking. I'd take a few concealed swigs and then a pill. I'd walk on for a while and do it all over again. Apparently, I got stinkin' drunk after half a bottle. I remember at that point still being able to understand that I would soon be fully incapacitated, so I put the vial to my mouth and swallowed the rest of them, using the scotch to wash them down.

"I'm sure there was a period following that about which I have no memory. Like I told you, the last thing I remember is that wonderful blotch of bright yellow light. It looked warm and inviting. I guess if that's your door, I must have either sat down against it or fallen down.

"Look at me now; probably sober, out of pills and sharing a pot of coffee with a very kind and understanding old

gentleman, but I continue to have all the same problems I had before. So, have you done me some sort of grand favor or a tremendous disservice?"

"If that's really a question directed at me, I will go with *favor*. You have undoubtedly heard the saying: Suicide is a permanent solution to a short-term problem."

"No, I haven't heard that. It would make sense if my problem was really *short term*, but it's dragged on, getting worse and worse ever since I was a little kid."

"You are sixteen. That makes you a junior in high school, I imagine. A year and a half more in that home and you will probably be off to college – away, at least – one way or another – from the daily troubling situation at home."

"You can have no idea how long eighteen months feels like, Sir. And I can't think of it as just *troubling*, like you called it. It is intolerable, unacceptable, unbearable and inexcusable. It can't get better, you see. Even if they recognize what's been going on and how it is affecting me, they won't be able to deal with it. They will package it up and find a way to put it on a high shelf, out of sight, so it '*won't bother anybody*'."

He looked Harry in the face for a long moment.

"I don't suppose your couch is available for, say the next 550 days, is it?"

"If it had to be, it would be, son. It is certainly available for a few more while we work things out."

"The reason you seem to feel so confident is that I must not have painted my picture big enough or dark enough or horrendous enough so you can see it as the unresolvable, life consuming situation that it is. Think about the terrors of Revelations!"

"Why do you suppose that a very bright person like yourself has been unable to construct a way to trouble-proof himself against the problems and inadequacies of that home?"

"Huh? You making this my problem?"

Harry let it hang.

"Are you ready for some toast and scrambled eggs, Winston?"

"Just like that? 'It's all your problem son so how about drowning your troubles in breakfast.'"

"Not at all. You've been working very hard the past

hour. You need a break and I am hungry.”

For just a moment the angry, seething face, broke a smile – sort of. He nodded and visibly relaxed.

“How about while I destroy a few eggs you burn a few pieces of toast.”

“Burn toast. Now that might just be an employment avenue I could succeed at.”

Harry chuckled, but didn’t look at Winston.

A few minutes later Harry added glasses of juice and a jar of jam to the table, and they began eating.

Winston sat back and folded his arms as he looked across the table at his new, old friend, nemesis, savior – he really had no idea at that point.

“You are a sly old fox, you are,” the boy said.

Again, Harry let it go. Winston began to eat. The eggs were delicious – a mixture of cream and butter another young visitor had taught him.

Eventually, the boy pursued his ‘sly old fox’ comment.

“You saw through my whole problem in just minutes. It is probably the greatest and most disturbing revelation of my life.”

“Are you going to share this epiphany I supposedly unleashed?”

“I understand. You want to make sure I understand it correctly.”

Harry went with it and pointed to the boy’s plate and made a face as if to say, ‘you better get after those eggs – cold, they will be terrible’.”

Winston seemed to understand and ate as he spoke. It wasn’t fully disgusting so long as Harry didn’t look directly at the boy’s mouth.

“Okay, Harry, here’s what I heard. All these years I’ve been blaming my parents for our unpleasant home life. What you just pointed out was all I ever did was wait for *them* to solve it. I didn’t assume any responsibility at all. I need to ask what things I can do too, *first*, fix what I need to so I can survive there for just a while longer and *second*, do what I can to help my parents be happier people, more successful human beings.

“All those years I’ve just passively sat there taking and

hating whatever came. I need to get active. I am smart. I do know what I hate about the home. If I put my smarts to work on just one hate at a time, I can soon, maybe, make things at least tolerable. That what you intended to say?"

"More important than what I may have intended to say, is the wonderfully positive message – a plan really – that you heard. I wouldn't change any part of it. I'm here to help you or at least get you pointed in the direction of the help you may need or want."

They finished their breakfast. Winston poured himself more juice. Harry filled his mug and turned off the fire under the empty pot. They moved into the living room. Winston dealt with the plastic tub while Harry sprayed the room liberally with air freshener. He looked out the window.

"Snow's still falling – lightly. Beautiful."

Winston reentered the room and joined him at the window.

"You often find beauty and worth in strange places don't you – even in drunken dying, filthy, young ignoramuses who fall against your door in the middle of the night."

"And transform my living room with the distinctive aroma of a saloon."

"And that. I hope you know how sorry I am about that, but then you can't, you haven't really had a chance to get to know me."

"Oh? Haven't I?"

The answer was obvious so they traded smiles rather than words. Winston was not inclined to focus on how the old man knew what to do and say. He was totally committed to the plan he suddenly believed was going to save his life. That was, HIS plan, not THE plan.

"I need a shower."

"That had crossed my mind – or nostrils – as well. You'll find everything you need in the bathroom. Hand me out your clothes and we will get them washed and dried before noon. Robe on the door."

Although a large dose of air freshener typically caused Harry's eyes to water, just having the disgusting combination of alcohol, vomit and teen boy armpits removed, provided a pleasant new outlook, regardless. By noon Winston was back

into his clothes and feeling somewhat human again. They had talked the morning away – well mostly Winston had done the talking. He was a therapist’s dream – open a topic and off he went, always thoughtful and generally nonjudgmental. He was, surprisingly, already beyond his lifelong ‘blame my parents game’ and even allowed hints of compassion for them.

He remained serious. Clearly the thinking had continued. It was as if the conversation had never been interrupted.

“My religious and political orientations both lean toward liberal – very liberal – just the opposite of my parent’s. Do you suppose I’ve taken those positions just in opposition to them or do you think I actually hold those beliefs as a result of some sort of thoughtful consideration?”

“That can’t be mine to answer, you understand,” Harry said.

“I know. It means I have to do a complete rethink, I guess.”

“And I hope that will be a wonderful, honest adventure for you.”

“I’ll delay my feeling about how wonderful it will be. It looks difficult and potentially devastating at the moment.”

“I have typically found ‘*difficult*’ comes in on the side of both wonderful and adventurous.”

“I haven’t a doubt in the world about that – for you. You have to realize you have fifty or so years on me in the positive experiences department.”

“Well put, just as *you* have a huge head start on your parents in all of this.”

“And the old man has done it again! ZING, and the new insight gently spreads its wisdom across my psyche.”

Winston commenced a lingering, thought-filled series of deliberate nods and remained silent for some time. Harry, in his recliner, wiped his eyes – Lysol, not emotions. Winston seemed to pay no attention and presently spoke.

“Dad is home by one o’clock on Thursdays. I will need to call him then. I thought about leaving a message on the home phone. There is no doubt that would be easier on both of us, but I have to discard the habitual, ‘old-easy’, and begin confronting the ‘not-so-easy-but-honest’, right? I mean I know

it's right, but still, I'd just feel better to observe a nod or hear even the faintest positive words."

"I agree with what you said. I admire your courage and determination. I do have one caution to repeat to you. You must keep in mind that your mother and father have most likely not moved a centimeter from the old system the way you have. Be prepared to meet them right where they have been in your past."

"That *is* something I'm trying to get my head around – just not something I'm hoping for, you know?"

"I do. So long as you keep the alternatives in mind, you are going to do fine."

"A big part of this plan stinks, you know. It seems like it's all on me. I'm not supposed to be in charge of the family."

"Maybe thinking of it as taking charge of your own life will provide a useful perspective. As part of that, it is necessary to provide support for your mother and father. Focus on the eventual goal and realize that to achieve it there will be some necessary distractions and give and take."

"Saying, I can't have it *all* my way as of 1:05 today?"

It was accompanied by the boy's wonderful smile – unpracticed, but wonderful. Harry truly hoped that would soon become easier and natural. Perhaps it could even become the boy's signal to himself that things were on the mend.

"There is one thing I feel like I have to be sure of, Winston. Do you have any idea how intelligent you are?"

The sigh of all sighs, then his response.

"I've been tested at the college Psych Lab. I qualify for Mensa – you know Mensa the society for the upper two percent, intellectually."

"May I ask if you are a member, then?"

"God no. The ultimate snob society as I see it. It's as if qualifying makes you somehow worth more than everybody else. Watch me shudder at the thought!"

He put on a very convincing shudder.

"Is that another way of saying since your parents hoped you would join that you, of course, declined?"

"I'm just 16, Harry. I can only take so many ZINGS in one day. I promise to think about that. I have considered there would be girls there I could actually converse with on a

meaningful level – see how snobbish that sounds. So far I have just dated girls because they were well designed GIRLS – if you get my meaning.”

“You old Romeo, you.”

The boy blushed. Harry chuckled.

“Which phone – mine or yours?” Winston asked as the big hand on the wall clock clicked onto the twelve.

“I suppose I don’t know the advantages and disadvantages you must believe there are.”

“Yours and it will anonymous. They will pick up and answer. Mine, they will recognize. So, may or may not pick up.”

“Does it seem appropriate to at least allow them to make that decision – on your first attempt?”

“I believe there is a ‘wise question-well’ somewhere inside your head from which you can retrieve just the perfect one for each problem. You do realize that you seldom offer an opinion or even a straight-out answer. You’re always with questions – think it through for yourself.”

“Caught in the act. That doesn’t usually happen. Sometime you may want to look up the Socratic method of teaching – perhaps method of encouraging thinking would more accurately describe it.”

“I’ll do that. Now I’m going to ask you if you think I’m ready to make the call and you are going to ask – what do you think?”

“You make this so easy, Winston. It appears all I need to do is sit here.”

Grins.

Winston sighed deeply, ran his fingers through his hair as if to make himself presentable, and punched the number into his phone. Harry could hear the answer from across the room.

“Winston! Are you safe? Your mother and I have been so worried. We have every agency we could think of searching for you.”

There were tears on both ends of the line. There were tears on both sides of Harry’s living room. Winston sank onto the floor, back against the door. The conversation went on for over an hour. Winston figured it was the longest he and his

father had talked at one sitting in his life.

“Give me the address where you are and I’ll be right over to get to, son.”

“I will take the bus home. Where I am, is just my place. I hope you will come to understand that. It may be an hour. I love you, Dad”

He hung up. He sat and allowed himself to sob on for some time. Harry took his coat to the kitchen and gave it a good brushing and floated it in Lysol. No reason to immediately telegraph the full measure of how bad it had been for Winston. The boy should handle that in his own time.

Presently, Winston appeared in the kitchen. He saw what Harry was up to.

“Thanks for that. I’ll see that it gets back to the Salvation Army. I’ll wear your sox home, if that’s alright. It will give me excuse to come back.”

“As if Simple Simon ever needs an invitation. I’m not one to intrude on other people’s lives, but I will be pleased to hear how things are working out – let me rephrase that: How your plan for building a wonderful life is progressing.”

“I have lots of things to say to you. I’ll wait until I get them organized in my head – another unnecessary excuse to return.

“One last question – for today, that is – are you to be known to my parents? I mean I don’t want to make your life any more uncomfortable about all this.”

“I feel no need to be known to them. If a situation arises that suggests that should be, I will leave it as an open option for you.”

Winston nodded. It was the answer he predicted. Harry helped the boy into the coat.

“I have a pair of boots for borrow if you want?”

“Rather just leave with what I came with – except for the sox. My feet still feel cold.”

With the coat buttoned up tightly against his chin, he reached out and embraced his new friend.

“I love you, old man. More on that later, I promise you.”

“I love you, young Simon. You know where I’ll be.”

Winston slipped his hands into his pockets as folks will do in the presence of suddenly awkward moments.

“What’s this?”

He removed a ten-dollar bill from the pocket.

“I doubt if the bus driver will let you ride solely on the basis of your good looks, son. I believe you said you managed to spend yourself into abject poverty during the hours before we met.”

“Thanks. Ten bucks. That’s how much the worst decision of my life cost me. I will use this one more productively.”

He opened the door and looked Harry in the face one last time.

“Keep an eye out for bears in heat.”

He chuckled to himself and walked out into the snow. He shut the door behind him. Harry watched from the window as the boy stopped and turned around, apparently studying that fortuitous patch of yellow that saved his life. He turned, squared his shoulders and set out to build his new life.

* * *

“It pleases me to be able to relate that once my shoulders had squared, I found what was necessary to accomplish the tasks, which I had set out for me. Short version, my mother and father were eager to do whatever was necessary to fix our lives. We attended counseling together and I’m guessing put Dr. Blankard’s three sons through medical school. I married – Mensa *did* turn out to be good for something – and we have a son and daughter who eagerly anticipate their monthly visits with Grandma and Grandpa Adams. I’ve been pleased and somewhat surprised that I am not the least bit jealous of the horsey back rides their grandpa gives them, joyfully and all quite tirelessly. How I yearned for those as a small child. The children enjoy spending time up in my old bedroom playing with the toys that were special to me, and laughing at how their father dressed ‘back in the day’. Even I am finally coming to see it as something more than the prison it had seemed to be for so many years.”

He ran his hands across the smooth surface of the box.

“For me the thing that’s missing here is that brilliant, yellow, spot of color that gave me a second chance at life. So, I took the liberty of bringing a full color, 8 X 10 picture of his locally famous front door. If I hear no objections, I will set it in

place here on the top with four yellow thumbtacks.”

He paused, looking out again from face to face. He was met with nod after nod. The deed was soon done. He leaned down, kissed the box, and returned to his seat.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The T & T Conspiracy

“It looks like Tim King is next on Harry’s agenda. Tim .
. . ?

He was dressed in jeans and a dark colored hoodie. At the pine box he unzipped the top and pushed the hood back revealing a nice looking man somewhere near the juncture of the late thirties and the early forties. The garb seemed odd, but nobody judged it.

“Harry knew me as 9 year old Timothy, a skinny, fast talking, compulsively lying, young pickpocket with a far too adorable grin that got me out of more than my fair share of scrapes on the streets and alleys close to where he lived. The night we first met I was wearing – he held his arms up – well, let’s just jump into the story.

* * *

It was a few minutes past nine that evening. Old Harry was on his way home from Bingo night at the storefront community center on 46th Boulevard. He entered the alley onto which his, and five other, apartment doors opened. The light bulbs above each door provided minimal illumination, their primary function being to light the lock.

He stopped ten yards from his bright yellow door. There was the shadowy figure of a person there, back toward him – squatted or short. He moved in closer, quietly, to discover what was going on. Ten feet away he stopped again and cleared his throat. The figure swung around – startled. There, facing him, was a boy – perhaps nine. Harry had the brightest light on the block and that was noticeably magnified by the yellow paint that reflected it clear across the alley. He could make out the lad’s features quite well. Harry did not know him. He wore jeans, a dark colored long sleeved hoodie and dark tennies. He had dark hair – seldom combed the old man figured – dark eyes and probably white skin beneath the smudges.

“May I help you, young man? This is my apartment.”

“I am I glad to see you, sir. A few minutes ago I was comin’ up the alley from 47th and I run across a guy at your

door. He looked to be havin' trouble gettin' in so I offered to help – thinkin' maybe he was drunk or somethin'. He took one look at me and run off 'round the corner at 46th."

Harry tried the door. It was unlocked.

"The door is open, son."

"Yeah. I noticed that right away. It's why I stuck around – to keep any bad guys – thieves, ya know – from breakin' in. Like I said, I'm glad ya showed up. Ya really don't gotta give me a reward or nothin'. I'm just glad I was here to keep ya from getting' robbed blind."

Harry's first impression of the waif's story was that it had not been fully convincing. The boy had just sealed it with his fancy patter that flowed far too easily. He had to admit, he wore a world class grin. The lad had clearly found himself at the juncture of the rock and the hard place before. He had a mental flow chart of responses available and down pat. There was something about a young con man that had always intrigued the old gentleman. Harry could play the game, too.

"Well, if you won't take a reward, how about I offer you hot chocolate and strawberry twisters – it makes a wonderful combination."

At first disappointed, then puzzled, the boy's face soon lit up. Whether it was at the prospect of hot chocolate or the opportunity it would give him to 'case the joint' remained unanswered. Harry pushed the door open, reached inside and turned on the light before motioning the boy in ahead of him. He watched the lad. His eyes darted from the nice, if old, computer, to the outdated little TV and finally to the shelves of books. His attention came back to the computer – apparently, the only thing he felt was worth his attention – for his next visit, perhaps.

Harry removed his jacket and laid it over the back of his recliner, moving right on to the kitchen. He again flipped a switch and the room lit. From the boy's reaction, it seemed clear *that* room held better prospects – microwave, toaster, blender, popcorn maker.

"Have a seat at the table. Shed our hoodie, if you like. It will take several minutes. Sometimes I add just a little vanilla to my hot chocolate. Do you think you would like it that way?"

Content to just unzip his top, he managed a response.

“I think I’d like it plain if you was really askin’.”

“I was. That’s fine. Plain it will be.”

Harry proceeded to work on the drink.

“So, you are about nine, I’d guess. How close did I come?”

“Right on.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t remember seeing you around here or down at the community center. Perhaps you are new to our area.”

“I live east on 44th. Was walkin’ home from church and took a different route tonight – change is good for the soul, ya know.”

Predictably, with every new entry, his story became more farfetched and humorous.

“You live in one of the Hampton Apartments there on 44th?”

“In the building across the back ally from the Hamptons – this way from ‘em.”

“You and your parents live there, I assume.”

“Just me, mom and my brother.”

“How old is he if I may ask?”

“He’s nine, too. We’re twins – identical. He’s not very adventurous. A mama’s boy. He gets better grades than me, but I’m not dumb. Just don’t give a d . . . care about school ya know. In fourth grade there’s a lot a readin’ and my head really just ain’t cut out for readin’. I’m more a math guy. Ask me the timeses and I’ll prove it.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to me. I’m just happy we stumbled onto each other so we can become acquainted. Children and I generally get along very well.”

“You make hot chocolate for lots a kids?”

“I suppose I’ve done my share.”

Harry placed two mugs on the table, filled them and set the pan back on the stove.

“Let’s see did I offer you something else, also?”

“Strawberry twisters. They’re my favorite.”

The boy’s face lit up in anticipation.

“Really. How nice. Mine, too.”

Harry removed a new pack from the refrigerator.

“Why you keep ‘em in the fridge? That’s a strange

place to keep 'em.”

“I keep them in there so they won't get warm and become unpleasantly sticky.”

The boy nodded apparently granting his approval. Harry sat them on the table beside the boy and took a seat across from him.

“Can you get the package open? My old hands don't do that very easily anymore.”

The boy tugged from several directions unsuccessfully. He applied his canines with due diligence. He eyed the toothpicks in the small vessel at the center of the table beside the napkin holder. He was soon repeatedly puncturing the plastic sack in a fairly straight line across one end. He pulled with all his might. It ripped right along the open dots.”

“Quite ingenious . . . It occurs to me that we haven't introduced ourselves. I apologize. I am Harry.”

He offered his hand for a shake. Clearly that was not part of the boy's well practiced repertoire. He knew what to do; he was just fully unpracticed. With a bit of assistance, he managed to his satisfaction and offered his standard grin. He did not offer a name.

“I suppose if you don't want to reveal your name to me that will be fine. I understand I am new to you and all.”

“Oh, no. I just forgot after the shake and all. My name is Timothy. I like that better than Tim or Timmy – just so you know. Some of the girls at school call me Timmy. I guess it's alright from girls.”

Timothy managed all eating and drinking motions with his elbows on the table – sometimes far apart, sometimes close together, but always on the table. His system seemed flawless.

“Do you reveal your brother's name?”

“Oh, sure. Thomas. He don't like Tom or Tommy neither. So, we are Timothy and Thomas – high class, I've always thought.”

“Yes. What great names for twin boys. Which school do you attend?”

“James Fennimore Cooper Elementary. You know where that is?”

Harry nodded and reached for a twister.

“Here’s the secret to using twisters with hot chocolate. First, make sure it isn’t too hot by taking a sip directly from the mug.”

He demonstrated.

“If it passes that test you need to bite off the closed ends of the piece of twister.”

“Kind a like gettin’ a cigar ready to light, huh?”

“Much like that, I suppose. Yes.”

He demonstrated again. Timothy did the same, not really needing the visual aid.

“Then, stir the twister around a little bit – that leaves some of the flavor in the drink.”

“And then suck up like a straw,” Timothy said. “That’s really cool.”

He spent some time practicing and nodded his approval.

“You was right. They taste great – the chocolate and strawberry together. I wonder if mixin’ in some strawberry jelly to hot chocolate would be good, too?”

“I must say I had never even considered that. Maybe next time you come to visit we can try that. You be sure to remind me. Maybe you can bring Thomas.”

“I know he’d like it. Mom says he’s a sugar addict. Ya can’t even see his cereal once he gets the sugar on it in the mornin’s.”

“I do hope he’ll come. You look alike, you say.”

“Well, mom and our best friends can tell us apart. Not many others can. They put us in separate rooms at school. Not sure why – probably because I’d copy his work.”

It seemed an unlikely bit of honesty.

“I bet you make good lunches, too, huh?”

The lad had the subtlety of a bull elephant on the charge.

“Old men don’t really eat much for lunch, but perhaps someday we can give it a try. A whole can of soup is always too much for me.”

“I’d be happy to help you out that way.”

“That is very considerate of you.”

“If we are going to be friends, like you said, then I got to tell ya that I don’t understand lots a your big words –

considerate?”

“Thoughtful, kind.”

Timothy nodded.

“There was another one – something like indianous, maybe.”

“Help me remember how I used it.”

“After I poked the holes in the twisters package, you said, ‘Quite indianous’, or something that.”

“Oh, yes. *Ingenious*. It means smart, clever, inventive.”

“That’s a pretty good word. You really think I am ingenious?”

“Without a doubt.”

The verification clearly affected the boy in an immediately positive way. The hot chocolate was soon gone.

“Now, I imagine your mother will be worried, you being out this late. Do you need to call her before you leave for home?”

“She ain’t got no phone. Couldn’t pay the bill. Maybe next month.”

“Does she have a job?”

“Sometimes she does.”

He didn’t explain further. Harry didn’t press.

“Would you like me to walk you home? It really is late for a nine-year-old to be out on the streets alone in this part of the city.”

“I’m like a invisible shadow in the night. I’ll be just fine. If you want me to go I’ll go.”

“It’s not a matter of wanting you to go. I said I think it is time for any nine-year-old to be at home.”

“Okay. The ‘twistokolate’ was really good.”

“Twistokolate?”

“Twister and chocolate – twist-ok-olate – emphasis on the middle syllable. You seem to have a lot to learn about words.”

“Perhaps. I like your word. I’ve never had a name for the combination before.”

At the door, while Timothy zipped up and pulled his hoody into place, Harry said goodnight. The boy was more focused on what lay before him outside than managing a

polite parting. He moved with stealth, hunched down and disappeared into the shadows. Harry felt certain he was an expert on moving around the city at night and really wasn't concerned for his safety – well, on a scale of 1 to 10, probably a 3 minus. He wondered if he'd ever see him again. He wondered if the boy's brother was well, perhaps confined to home due to some handicap or disability, which Timothy was not willing to, or not allowed to discuss. Few things seemed obvious about young Timothy, other than that he would always produce well-practiced answers for all possible questions – and grin.

* * *

Several days passed. Harry was returning from his morning walk, entering the alley from 47th – not his usual route. As he turned off the sidewalk heading south toward his door he came upon Jake, a man his age although a good deal feebler and far less agreeable. Standing there, he had a kicking and screaming boy in a headlock and was rapping his cane against the lad's head.

Harry rushed toward them.

“Whoa, here. What's going on?”

Harry took hold of the cane.

“This young ragamuffin just tried to pick my pocket. Had my wallet in his hand before I understood what was happening. I'm going to get a policeman.”

The boy looked up at Harry. He flashed a quick grin and then returned to his struggle.

“I know the boy, Jake. Let me handle it. You make sure everything that should be in your wallet is actually in your wallet.”

He released the lad who turned around and backed into Harry as if applying for asylum there.

“It all seems to be here. Since you know him, Harry, I'll trust you on this one.”

As a parting shot, the old man shook his cane in the boy's face.

“From now on you stay out of my pants.”

The boy laughed out loud. Harry stifled a chuckle. Unaware of his odd phrasing, Jake turned and went on his way.

“So, we meet again, Timothy.”

“I ain’t Timothy. I’m Thomas. Who the heck are you?”

“I must have mistaken you for your brother.”

“How you know my brother?”

“We met a few days ago.”

“You the twist-ok-olate man?”

“Yes. I suppose that would be me.”

“My brother says you’re okay. You seem to be. I better get goin’.”

“Oh, no my friend. I promised Jake I’d handle things.”

“Things. What things. I don’t see no things that need to be handled.”

“You just tried to rob a man – take what is probably all the money he has in the whole world. That’s the major sort of *thing* in my book. I suppose you have a choice – me or Pete.”

“Pete the cop? I guess I take you.”

He started down the alley toward Harry’s place. Harry wondered how much Timothy must have shared with him about their time together. The boy stopped in front of Harry’s yellow door.

“Seems you know more about me than I expected you would.”

“That Timothy is quite the motor mouth. Tells me everything. We’re twins. Twins are very close you know. Hard to miss the only yellow door in the alley.”

“Yes, I have to agree that it is.”

Harry searched his pockets as if looking for something.

“My goodness. I seem to have misplaced my key.”

“Maybe you keep a spare above your door frame. Lots a folks do.”

Motor mouth indeed, Harry thought to himself, referencing how his brother was well on his way inside at the moment their paths first crossed. He retrieved the key and they entered.

Harry slipped out of his jacket and indicated the boy could do the same. The boy opted to leave his dark hoodie in place although did unzip it half way.

“Lot’s a books, I see,” he said moving across the room to the shelves.

“I hear you like books.”

“My brother sometimes tells more than he really knows. But, readin’ ain’t all that bad.”

After a few moments, he continued.

“Looks like lots of kid’s books. Why you have books for kids?”

“Because I wrote them.”

Thomas nodded, neither applauding the activity of writing nor showing any particular interest in them. It was just a general acknowledgement that he had heard.

“It is breakfast time here at my house. You eaten yet?”

“Well, yes, real early. You know growin’ boys. We can eat all the time.”

“Breakfast it will be then. Do we talk before or after?”

“Talk?”

Harry pretended to look at the boy over the tops of the glasses he wasn’t wearing. He got *the grin*, apparently like his brother, the boy’s opening volley whenever he detected the hint of an upcoming problem.

“Oh, you mean the old man who beat on me with his cane. Oughta outlaw old men like that.”

The diversion technique. Very good, Harry thought. This lad, like his brother, had been well schooled in surviving out on the street.

“Now’s okay, I guess. I don’t like leavin’ stuff hangin’.”

He took a seat on the couch, bouncing up and down just a bit – to determine if its comfort level was to his liking, Harry supposed. Harry sat in his recliner.

“So, about that wallet. I am eager to hear how it came into your possession.”

“I swear to God I saw it fall outa his pocket and was on my way to return it to him when he grabbed me around the throat and started beatin’ on me.”

“You swear to God, do you?”

Thomas watched Harry through the top of his eyes – his head was lowered.

“Well, what’s one step down from God, would you say?”

“*Imp*, perhaps, but since you are one, I doubt if swearing on yourself will be very convincing.”

“*Imp* is like God? I been called a *Imp* a lot.”

“Actually, *Imp* is more like a little devil, I guess.”

“That sure makes more sense.”

He nodded, but didn't explain further. He sat back apparently feeling the talk was going well.

“So, you're saying Jake's rear pocket unbuttoned itself and somehow the wallet just floated right up into the air and fell to the sidewalk.”

“Well, I didn't actually see how all that worked, but what you say does seem likely.”

He still was skillfully avoiding the line that might incriminate him.

“Tell me if I understood you correctly: You would rather deal with me than either Jake or Officer Pete.”

“I know Pete pretty good. Don't really know Jake. I guess I sort of know you through Timothy. So, I choose you. Breakfast now?”

“How would Pete handle it?”

The boy thought for only a moment.

“First, he wouldn't believe my side of it. He's always takin' everybody else's side. He used to just talk to me. I stopped arguin' and just started noddin' and lettin' a few tears run down my cheek. That shortened things quite a bit. The past few months he's been takin' me to the station tryin' to scare me, I think. I like ridin' in his car. He's got a shotgun in there standin' up right beside the steerin' wheel. Locked in place, of course.”

“Why is it he has to deal with you so often? That seems like your admitting to being a perennial trouble maker.”

“Perennial?”

“Often. All the time.”

“Timothy said you use lots a big words.”

He didn't confirm or deny the *perennial-ity* of his troublesome behavior.

“What does your mother say about all this?”

“She's usually at work. Works as temps so I never know where she is. I don't think Pete's ever met her. I choose not to tell her about the cops' harassment. As a single mom with two growing boys she has enough to worry about, you see.”

The boy was good. Harry would give him that – a thirty-year-old in a ten year old's skin. He could only imagine

the line he'd have for girls after the next few years of the impending, inevitable, hormone invasion. Father's lock up your daughters! He chuckled. Timothy reacted.

"It *is* all just sort of funny, isn't it? Breakfast?"

"Do you happen to know what apology means?"

"Sure, it's like when a kid does somethin' bad to me and his mom makes him say, 'I'm sorry,' to me."

My, he *was* good! Put it on the other kid's shoulders.

"Let me cut to the chase, Thomas. If you want to keep Pete out of things this time, here is what you are going to do. First, you will go apologize to Jake."

"But you'll never know if I do that. He'll just lie to you and say I didn't. You know how old men are."

He didn't see the problem with making his contention to another old man.

"Oh, I will accompany you – that means I'll go along."

The boy drew up his lower lip. Harry figured it indicated speed thinking. His response was surprising.

"What's number two?"

"You will offer to carry his groceries home from the store every Saturday morning for the next four weeks."

"Why?"

"Misbehaviors have consequences. You understand those words?"

"Yeah. Pete's been usin' 'em for years. Will that be on Jake's time schedule or mine?"

"Most certainly it will be on his."

"You got somethin' after 'second'?"

"Third and fourth. You and Timothy will come to see me together. Does he get in trouble as much as you do?"

The question seemed to catch Thomas off guard. He paused a moment.

"Breakin' and enterin' mostly for old Timmy. He's a pretty good kid like me. Don't know about comin' together. He's goin' to church camp weekends beginnin' this comin' Friday. During the week, we'll have homework evenin's."

"Okay. We will work that out later. Ready for number four?"

"No."

"At least we seem to have an uncontested truthful

answer. Here it is anyway: I will meet your mother.”

If Thomas had been wearing a collar, he would have been pulling at it. The lad obviously felt the noose tightening.

“It doesn’t seem fair for you to have to go to so much trouble, Sir.”

“It will be my pleasure. I like kids, remember.”

“I could open the door right now and yell ‘rape’.”

“With your reputation for always being in trouble and mine for never being in trouble, who will the authorities believe?”

“Never can tell.”

“You are far too smart to offer such a downright stupid answer, son.”

“Why do you call me, son?”

It was more than just a distraction; his tone suggested a genuine question.

“It is an affectionate word I sometimes use when I’m referring to a young man I like.”

“You like me? Why? Nobody but Timothy likes me.”

“I am sorry that has been your experience. But, it simply isn’t true unless you’re calling me a liar.”

The silence went on for some time. Presently Thomas shifted his gaze from the door to the old man. He looked him up and down.

“You have any kids of your own?”

“I had one. He died.”

“Sorry. I bet you had fun together.”

“Yes, we certainly did.”

“I’ll talk with mom and see about a time you can meet her. Here or at my place?”

“Either one will be fine. That takes care of our business, I guess. That means it must be breakfast time, then.”

“Maybe just a glass of juice and some toast. I really gotta be on my way. Got stuff. Can’t waist a perfectly good Saturday.”

* * *

“Tell you what. I will join you in juice and toast and then we will pay our visit to Jake.”

“You remembered about that, did you?”

“Oh, yes. I would never deprive you of doing the right thing.”

Harry got a look – part ‘that’s what I expected’ and part ‘exasperation’. Old men were clearly supposed to be forgetful.

Jake lived five blocks away. It was a ten-minute walk at ‘Harry Speed’ as Thomas dubbed it. Jake was sitting on his front stoop – ground floor. He was clearly surprised to see them approaching him. He looked up at Harry.

“Thomas has something he wants to say to you.”

The boy looked up into Harry’s face.

“It really isn’t honest to say *I want to*. How about this?”

He turned back toward Jake who seemed to have grasped the humor in the comment. He kept a straight face. Thomas continued.

“Harry has pointed out that I shouldn’t a tried to take your wallet because you’re old and don’t have much money. I can see that, now. I guess I’m sorry as I think back on it. We okay?”

“Well, we are certainly better than we were when I was choking you and you were kicking your heels into my chins. I suppose, since you came to me, we are okay.”

Thomas nodded and fell silent.

“And,” Harry said squeezing the boy’s shoulder.

“Oh. I’ll tell you, Jake. Harry here don’t forget nothin’. Not like most old people I know. He says I gotta carry your groceries home for the next four Saturday mornin’s – your schedule.”

“I don’t know. Frankly, you are a scary boy. I don’t have any more fights in me.”

“It will be okay because I’m sure Harry will be within arms’ reach every step of the way. He don’t seem to trust me.”

“Are you saying you’d like for him to trust you?” Jake asked doing what he could to support whatever it was Harry was trying to accomplish with the young incorrigible.

“Don’t know. Sorta, I guess. Probably not off to a good start, huh, Harry,” he said looking up into his face again.

“I think you understand the situation and that is a wonderful first step.”

“What is?”

“Realizing that there has been nothing in your behavior that could possibly lead me to trust you.”

“That just sounds *bad* to me.”

“The behavior is bad – I would call it unacceptable; the realization part is very good.”

“Hmm. I suppose we need to talk about that.”

He turned back to Jake.

“Harry here is a great one for talkin’ about things. He’s a writer, you know – books for kids my age. I seen and even touched a lot of ‘em.”

It was as if the boy felt some of Harry’s status and prestige rubbed off on him because of his association with the man. Harry understood that was a good start. Before setting the lad free, however, he did check to make sure his wallet was where it was supposed to be.

* * *

Many hours of talking did take place over the next months – some with Timothy and some with Thomas. They consumed gallons of twist-ok-olate (emphasis on the middle syllable!). Thomas would borrow books and felt moved to prove he had read them by presenting lengthy summaries – often with critiques and suggestions. Harry loved it. Many of his ideas weren’t bad. The old man took mental notes for future literary endeavors.

Those weeks were not without incident, however – it was Thomas who seemed to get into the most trouble. It was Timothy who typically ‘ratted him out’ to Harry and Pete. While Timothy put in an almost daily appearance at Harry’s; Thomas came far less often. His excuse was that somebody had to do the housework while their mother was away, and Timothy refused to help. Also, Thomas appeared to be the more studious – always doing his homework. Not so much, apparently, for Timothy.

Almost weekly – less often, later on – Pete, the beat cop, would show up at Harry’s door with one or the other of the boys in tow. The ‘collar’ would ask if Harry had seen his brother, insisting it was *his* fault – whatever it was. It was a good scam – twins accusing each other. Eye witnesses proved useless.

Eventually those visits with Pete became rare. It was

not obvious whether that was because the boys had actually reduced the number of troublesome behaviors or, because of the surge in brain power that occurs at about that age, they were just able to be more careful. Harry hoped it was the first, but would have probably put his money on the second.

Both boys, especially Timothy, appeared to have become quite comfortable there in Harry's place. He no longer had to question either of them about missing items, in fact, at one point a half dozen things miraculously reappeared. The boys were simply amazed.

Harry was a patient man and viewed the way things were progressing amounted to generally good news. The boys continued to find reasons their mother wasn't available to meet him. Harry figured they wanted to keep her sheltered from their misdeeds and were still uncertain about how much of those bothersome beans the old man might spill.

Mainly, however, the boys felt good about Harry and Harry felt better and better about the boys.

* * *

The pounding on the door went on relentlessly. Harry looked at the kitchen clock as he tied his robe in place. Two thirty in the morning. What in the world?

He peeked through the peephole as he turned the deadbolt. He could see nobody outside. It was one of the twins. Too short and too close to the door to have been visible. After all that time Harry could still not tell them apart by looks, movement or voice quality – if the hair was combed it was likely Thomas.

"Harry. You gotta come. Thomas is hurt bad. We need you right now."

"I will hurry into some clothes. Come with me and tell me more about it while I get dressed."

The details were foggy. Timothy only seemed able to dwell on the horror of the situation and the fear he might lose his best friend.

"Perhaps we should call 911 and have them meet us there."

"I don't know no address. You'll know what to do. I brought Mom's phone if we need to call somebody."

In the living room, Harry slipped into his jacket and took

the flashlight from the desk drawer. With the door quickly locked behind them they hurried off along the alley crossing 46th and on along the alley as it continued toward 45th. Thirty yards beyond 44th, still in the extended alley, Timothy slowed and pointed toward what appeared to be the basement in a rundown brick structure. The area was engulfed in darkness.

The boy offered his arm to help Harry navigate down a flight of fifteen, crumbling, cement steps – vintage early 1900s. At the bottom, Timothy stopped them.

“Okay. I sort of lied to you because I didn’t have time to tell you the truth and I wasn’t sure you’d come if I told you – the truth.”

Harry was more intrigued than upset. Goodness knows, few of the things the boy had ever told him had turned out to be without some degree of fabrication. Timothy continued as he worked to open the door with a key.

“The truth will take too long. Here’s the deal. I don’t have a mom. I live here with my grandpa. He’s old and sick and tonight he is having real bad breathing problems. I’m scared he’s going to die.”

There were two rooms, furnished from years of scavenging. The first served as living room and kitchen. The rear room was where they slept. Harry was surprised by the cleanliness and orderliness. Each room had a large watt bulb hanging from the center of the ceiling.

“He’s back here. His name is Oliver. I’ll call whoever you say if I need to. We ain’t got no money to pay for a doctor, but I’ll work my whole life to pay it off if that’s what it’ll take.”

The old man was propped up on several pillows in a four-poster bed. He was under a sheet. There was a well-worn rug and pictures on the walls. A smaller bed sat on the other wall. The boys’, Harry figured. Small for two. It reminded him of something.

“Where’s Thomas? Shouldn’t you contact him?”

“I’ll try and call him if you’ll look after grampa.”

Harry approached the bed with a smile and his usual calm manner.

“My name is Harry, Oliver. I’m a friend of the boy. What’s going on with you?”

He was, indeed, having great trouble breathing.

“Emphy . . . sema,” he managed.

“You have oxygen?”

“Not for years, I’m afraid. The boy had to eat. He’s the most important thing in my life. Promise me he will be well taken care of.”

“Of course. Of course. First things first, however. I’m going to call 911.”

“No. No. I can’t pay.”

“I know somebody who can fix that. In charge of emergencies here in the city, you know. Do I have your permission?”

He nodded. Timothy had already placed the call and handed the phone to Harry. He outlined the problem and gave the approximate location.

“There will be a boy in the alley to direct you right here.”

Needing no instructions, Timothy darted outside and up the stairs to wait. He paced and likely swore at their inefficiency. In less than five minutes Harry heard the commotion up in the alley. Timothy led the three men with the gurney down the steps. By then the boy’s tears were flowing freely. He knew to stand back and let the professionals do their job. He moved back into Harry who stood near the foot of the bed. Harry enveloped him with his big arms and kissed him on the top of his head. Timothy melted, trembling, in to his old friend.

Fifteen minutes later the lead EMT took Harry aside. Timothy knelt beside the bed and held his grandfather’s hand, clearly interested in the oxygen set up. He could see that he was breathing with much less difficulty. He brushed the hair back from the old man’s forehead. The EMT spoke in hushed tones with Harry. Oliver appeared to be in the final stage of the disease. Although not a doctor, his estimate was that he had no more than a month or so.

“If the boy can’t go along, we will need to have a very good reason or he will destroy the entire four block area around this room.”

“Here’s a trick I’ve used a few times. I keep two cell phones in the ambulance just for such situations. He won’t be able to come. He will probably be able to visit in the hospital

sometime during the next few days. Between now and then, you see that he gets one phone. I'll have one at the man's bedside with instructions it is to be answered by the nurse. We have a great understanding – especially where either kids or the elderly are involved. With both of those, in this case, it's a shoe-in to be allowed."

Harry motioned Timothy to him and explained. It took more than one attempt to convince him that the plan was in his grandfather's best interest. The hospital was within walking distance. Oliver spoke briefly to Timothy before he was put on the gurney and moved to the ambulance.

The boy stood in the alley and watched the vehicle's flashing lights until they turned the corner and were out of sight. At that point he heard the siren start.

"That's better. I was afraid they didn't think he was worth sirens."

The two of them returned inside.

"Did you reach your brother? Where is he at this time of night?"

Timothy slumped into a large chair. He looked up at Harry.

"There ain't no brother, neither."

"What?"

Harry took a seat in the other chair.

"I kinda, sorta, made him up. It was a great way to stay out a trouble – whatever it was, it was always the other one who done it."

"I see. I must say you used the ploy masterfully."

"I don't know those words."

"*Ploy*, tricky method. *Masterful*, very well done."

"I already knew that, you know."

"I'm sure. How long?"

"Since we, I mean I, was six."

"You had a mother once?"

"Not for long, I guess. Grampa says she died birthin' me."

"I am so sorry."

"It's okay. Me and Grampa's done just fine."

"Have you always been with him?"

"Yup. Right from the start. He wasn't so sick at first."

He gets his SS check every month and we do good. I sort of supplement it you know.”

“Good word, *supplement*.”

“Learned it from Pete.”

There was a period of silence. Harry allowed it. Presently Timothy spoke, staring out into the room.

“He’s gonna die ain’t he?”

“Yes, he is. Not tonight.”

“I have knew that for a long time. I praised the Lord every morning when I first seen he was still breathin’. I wonder when.”

“Soon, it appears – may still have a month or so.”

“I can probably make out okay. I suppose his check’ll stop, but I’m a good supplementer.”

“A boy your age won’t be allowed to live alone.”

“Nobody needs to know unless you snitch on me. I even got the secretary at school convinced she’s met and talked with my mom. I can make it.”

“I have no doubt about your prowess.”

Timothy looked over at him.

“Prowess – skill at doing something.”

“Figured. So, what then. I ain’t goin’ to Juvie til I’m growed up.”

“Juvie is not a consideration – not something that is going to happen.”

“What is then? Will you take me in? I promise I’ll be on my best behavior. All I need is your couch to sleep on. I can get a job to help out.”

“If I were younger I would probably consider such an arrangement, but you need to be with younger people. You need a man in your life who can play catch with you and take you swimming and coach your soccer team and a woman to sit with you at night when you aren’t feeling well. I can’t to those kinds of things anymore. I do promise you, that I will help find you a great home. Do you believe me?”

He nodded. The tears hadn’t stopped or even slowed. The front of his hoodie was wet. He sat there white knuckled terrified. It seemed a reasonable reaction.

“Here is what I suggest – see what you think about it,” Harry began. “You will come and stay with me for a short time

while you help take care of your grandpa – the EMT said he would arrange it so you could visit him in the hospital.”

The boy nodded.

“He provided us with a phone you can use to call his room anytime you need to – I suggest you only use it a few times a day so it won’t interrupt the doctors and nurses who are taking care of him. The nurse will probably answer and will be able to give you updates. Maybe sometimes your grandpa will be able to talk. I’ll find out when and how often you can visit him. How does that sound?”

“Terrible, you know, but if it’s the best ya got I guess I’ll have to take it. Thomas would just sneak in at night and stay with him.”

It had not been offered humorously.

“Let’s get some of your things together – things you need every day. We can come back for other things later.”

Timothy nodded and got up. He moved into the bedroom and began selecting a few things, which he placed in a large, black plastic trash bag. Harry made no suggestions. With the first bag filled he handed it to Harry.

“I can’t sleep without my own pillow. I’ll just carry it under my arm. And Plimpton, okay.”

“What is a Plimpton?”

He felt under his bed and pulled out a very well used stuffed bear – one eye, one ear with stuffing protruding from under one arm.

“Well, hello Plimpton. I am happy you have agreed to accompany us to my abode / house.”

“I guessed that one before you said ‘house’,” Timothy said. “Abode. That’s a funny sounding word.”

He looked around the room, turned off the light. He locked the front door behind them and delivered a huge sigh out into the world.

Walking, as they were, it took significantly longer to make the return trip to Harry’s place. At the door, Timothy took a key from his pocket and opened it. He flipped on the light and looked up at Harry, holding the key out toward him.

“I sort of had one made for myself – for emergencies. You probably should take it.”

“For as long as you’ll be here with me, it seems right

that you should have a key.”

Without response, the boy returned it to his pocket.

“How we doin’ this?”

“Well, the bottom drawer in my chest in the bedroom is empty. You may use it for as long as you need it. In the bathroom I have sheets and blankets for you to use on the couch at night. We will clear out a shelf in the linen closet where you can keep them folded up when they aren’t in use.”

“I caught that.”

“Caught what?”

“The folded-up thing so I wouldn’t just stuff them in there. I guess you know me pretty well.”

“Let’s just say I know nine-year-old boys pretty well. I was one, once, remember.”

“We better get the couch made up so you can get some sleep.”

Timothy agreed and, as it has been said, was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

One afternoon a few weeks later Timothy’s special phone rang. It was the nurse – her voice was always filled with cheer. He could almost see her smile.

“Timothy. Your grandfather would like to talk with you for just a few minutes. Be patient. He doesn’t have much strength today.”

Timothy wanted to tell her that he had been patient with him for years and she had no business saying that to him. He decided that was one of those probably inappropriate desires he and Harry had spoken of so he remained pleasant. The conversation was mostly about how much the grandfather loved the boy and how much he appreciated the good care he had given him once he had become bed ridden. There was a short sermon about being a good person. His grandfather had done almost all of the talking. Still, Timothy thought it was just about the best talk they had ever had.

* * *

Grandpa’s funeral was spectacular in Timothy’s eyes. It was military with burial in a veterans’ cemetery. There were marching sailors and rifles shot off numerous times. A trumpeter played. One of the sailors presented him with the flag that had draped the casket. Timothy really wanted to get

a peek inside to make sure it held his grandpa, but he figured with the entire United States Navy in charge, he could trust they had done things right.

Harry worked his magic and Timothy soon found himself with a young couple in a loving and comfortable foster home. For several months, he continued to spend Friday nights at Harry's. They had long talks and laughed together about Thomas and what a struggle the two of them had trying to keep that rascal in line.

Six months later Timothy's foster parents announced they were moving to another state. The story goes that when Timothy found out about the pending change of location his response was immediate, very clear and 100% Timothy.

"I've heard it's illegal for adults to take kids that aren't theirs across state lines so I guess you'll need to adopt me – just to keep you two out a trouble ya understand."

The grown-ups did understand. They were happy to have Plimpton accompany them. On the way out of town on moving day they stopped by Harry's. Timothy administered a long and robust hug – his first he had ever initiated toward his old friend. He delivered a whispered message.

"Thanks for helpin' make me somebody's son, Harry. I'm gonna be fine, now. I'm gonna leave Thomas with you just in case you get in a bind or somethin'."

* * *

Tim closed the folder. He removed his black hoodie and laid it on the pine box. He patted it, then turned and spoke to the gathering.

"With the help of my parents, I always remembered Harry's birthday with cards – one from Tim and one from Tom with a 'Ha Ha' after his signature. Largely thanks to the good start Harry secured for me along life's way, I think I've been able to be a pretty good father to my son. He just presented my wife and me with our first grandbaby – Harold King, the second."

He picked up a twister and returned to his seat.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Rattle, Rattle, Thud Kid!

“It appears our next contributor is Joel Black.”

A man in his late twenties approached the front. He wore a light blue blazer over a red shirt. His slacks were dark with red socks and spats. That will hold some significance later on. He had a military bearing – shoulders back, chest out, eyes straight ahead, and arms swung freely at his sides. It was as if he were for some reason particularly proud to move toward the front of the room. He carried a single crutch, which he placed on top of the pine box.

“I think my story will handle my memories without an introduction. Please remember, this story attempts to summarize nine months of *Harry* into 7,500 words or less as per the instructions. At best, a fully impossible assignment.”

A murmur of chuckles crossed the gathering.

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It was a sweltering mid-June day – unseasonably hot by any way of looking at it. The city streets were sticky and in some places, had buckled. With tall buildings on each side, Harry’s alley was like a narrow canyon, thereby covered in moderate shadows for much of each day, and allowing welcome relief from the heat experienced on the boulevards into which it fed on each end.

Harry was hurrying west along 47th Boulevard toward home as it neared noon. He had agreed to begin tutoring a boy who was new to the alley. His single father had made the arrangements based on the recommendation of Pete, the police Detective who had walked a beat in that area years before. The first meeting was set for twelve o’clock that day. Harry prided himself in being punctual.

As he approached the alley he saw yellow tape and police cars with flashing lights.

“What in the world could have happened?” he said out loud, if only to himself.

He slowed to better take it all in. The entrance was blocked off by official vehicles and an EMT ambulance.

He stopped at the alley and looked in.

“You’ll have to stay back, Sir,” a young policeman said.

“But I live in there – the apartment with the yellow door.”

He pointed.

“Just a minute, please.”

The officer walked to a man in plain clothes who was facing away from them. He turned. His face brightened when he saw it was Harry. He raised his hand and apparently assured the officer that the old man could pass. They walked toward one another. Pete offered his hand.

“Bad stuff, here, Harry. A drive by. A thirteen-year-old boy was shot in the back. Still holding onto life, but things don’t look good.”

“How terrible. There has never been a drive by around here, has there?”

“Not in my memory and you know I go back a long time. The driver wrecked the car in the next block and he and a couple of the other bad guys have been apprehended. It sounds like it was a mistake. They were after somebody who was supposedly staying in the alley in the 1200 block between 46th and 47th. This, of course is the 2100 block – a dyslexic driver maybe.”

“Adults or kids?”

“Guys in their late twenties. I figure there was more than one mess up, here – hitting a kid like that. The culprits don’t seem very bright according the initial report.”

The lights on the ambulance began flashing as it backed out onto 47th. The young man was on his way.

“I think you may have met the boy’s father – Jimmy Black. He and his son just moved in during the past week. I know Jimmy from when he was a kid growing up over on 44th – got into some minor scrapes with the law. He has been able to turn things around. His wife just died of a lingering illness. He’s worse than broke – owes tremendous medical bills. They’d be even worse, but he’s an RN at the hospital that cared for his wife. It’s mostly doctor’s that he owes I think. I’m really proud of Jimmy. They moved here to save money, of course. It’s the very best alley in this part of the city – maybe the entire city, mostly thanks to you. I told him about you and the alley and as fate will have it sometimes, a place opened

up. His boy has taken his mother's sickness and death really hard and has fallen behind in his school work. Now, who knows how things will go."

Harry nodded.

"Yes, I know the man. In fact, I was supposed to be having my first meeting with the son at this very moment. This is just dreadful."

"If he makes it, he's going to need the old Harry Magic. You got any left after all these years."

"I don't claim any magic, but you know I will do what I can. I assume his father went along."

"Right. I'll keep check on how things are going and keep you informed. Same phone number you've had since back when sliced bread was invented?"

"The same. Please let me hear – often. If things stabilize see if you can get permission for me to get in to visit him. That poor father, he'll need a lot of support."

"They love Jimmy at the hospital. You can be sure the whole staff will be busting their buns on this one."

"Can I go on down to my apartment, now?"

"Sure, let me have that young officer guide you around the evidence areas. Thanks, by the way."

Harry nodded and followed the young man.

Inside his apartment, he turned on the AC in the living room window and collapsed into his recliner. Harry would allow a few tears, but would never let them interfere with what he knew needed to be done.

After 36 hours, the reports turned toward the positive side; the boy's condition began improving. Since the first predictions had been lifelong paralysis from the neck down, 'improving' seemed like a miracle. He had been fully uncommunicative except to his father – conscious but would not speak.

It was a Wednesday morning when the ambulance brought him home to his new place. His father accompanied him. Joel – the boy – agreed to let Harry stay with him while his father was at work. The plan was for other volunteers to be worked into the schedule when that seemed appropriate.

At noon Harry arrived with a briefcase in one hand and a plastic sack in the other. Joel reluctantly said good bye to

his father. He worked the three to eleven shift, but had business to take care of before he checked in.

Joel was in a specially rigged hospital bed in the living room. One leg was in a cast and was slightly elevated by weights. He was in a plaster body cast from his neck to just below his navel – more preventative than curative his father said. The boy just didn't dare make any sudden moves because of the damage to his spinal cord. Harry had yet to witness a smile and had wiped away a gallon of tears since he had met him weeks before in the hospital. He acknowledged Harry's presence by raising a finger on his left hand – the one closest to the old man. It wasn't that he couldn't raise his arms – it was that his very soul seemed to be depleted of energy.

“Need your help, Joel.”

“Then your out of luck, I'm afraid. And it's 'Invalid', not 'Joel' from here on out.”

Harry ignored the comment and held up the brief case in one hand and the sack in the other.

“You choose – left or right.”

“How about neither?”

“Fully unsatisfactory. Left or right?”

He turned his head and looked at the choices.

“I'm thinking the case contains school work so I'll take the sack.”

“Excellent choice.”

He set the briefcase aside and walked to the bed passing the sack back and forth in front of the boy's nose.”

The boy's face brightened a little.

“Smells a lot like real food, but I'm on a liquid diet so my intestines don't press on my spinal cord.”

“I got special permission.”

“From who . . . er, whom?”

“A wino in an alley two blocks south.”

Joel actually snorted a chuckle at the unexpected absurdity.

Harry spread a towel across the cast on his chest and began taking things out of the sack announcing each new arrival.

“Burgers – one with cheese one without. Fries – plain and curly. Vanilla malt or super-sized Dr. Pepper – your

favorite I understand from Nurse Alexander. Fruit pies for later on.”

“For after I puke my insides out, probably. Thanks, though.”

Although accepting Harry’s gesture with a faint smile, he showed no real enthusiasm.

“I can cut the burger in half if that’ll make it easier,” Harry said.

“And so, the story of my life begins,” Joel said, clearly irritated. “I can fix this *for* you. I will arrange that for you. Is it too cold? Is it too hot? Let me do for you, you poor helpless Joel baby.”

He picked up the burger and hurled it across the room.

He turned his face away and closed his eyes against the bright light from the window.

Harry put the food back into the sack and took it into the kitchen where he put it on the counter, safely out of Joel’s reach. He returned and took a seat beside the bed ignoring the burger on the floor in the corner.

Eventually, the eye, which Harry could see, opened – just a slit. He figured he was under surveillance. He opened the briefcase and removed a book. He settled in and began reading - silently. It seemed to anger Joel – of course everything had angered Joel since he was lucid enough to understand what had happened to him.

“I thought we were eating.”

“That didn’t seem to work out very well.”

Harry closed the book and sat up straight looking directly at Joel who remained with his face turned away.

“Let me give it to you straight, young man. I have absolutely no idea how terribly frightened you must be right now. I know I would be beside myself in your place.”

“I’m not frightened.”

“And I’ll believe that when I see daffodils sprouting from your ears. If you know what’s good for you you’ll be plenty frightened. The future, where what you are going to be able to do with your body is concerned, is fully up for grabs. You know the predictions aren’t good. Your spinal cord was kicked in three different places. Your knee was shattered. You received a concussion when you fell.”

“You’re just making my case for me, old man. I might as well give up and wait to die.”

“It sounds like you already have. You better be a good waiter, because from everything the doctor’s say you’ll be waiting around for another eighty or so years. Is it your plan to allow yourself to be miserable that whole time?”

He turned his head and looked at Harry. Harry continued.

“You are scheduled for physical therapy once you shed your plaster shell. It won’t be until then that any of us will get a good idea what your capabilities are going to be.”

Joel spoke.

“Doc says that won’t be for another two months maybe longer. I can’t stand just laying here all day. How am I ever going to stand it – just laying here worrying for two or three months? I’ve never been helpless. What if this or a wheelchair or crutches will be the best I’ll ever be able to do?”

He grew quiet and apparently contemplative. He turned his head toward Harry.

“Dad tells the story of me climbing out of my crib at night before I could even crawl. He said he and mom would hear, ‘rattle, rattle, thud’. They’d go into my room and find me laying on the floor pulling myself toward the nightlight.”

“That’s a wonderful story. Did that portend your independent penchant?”

“Portend? Penchant?”

“Sorry. You are such an intelligent person I expect you to know things you have no reason to know. Portend means foretell. Penchant means tendency or talent”

“No *sorry* to it. I just like to understand what’s said to me. It’s how I learn. I don’t forget once I hear something.”

“I believe that. I hope you can see how fortunate you are to be that way.”

Another period of silence followed. He stared at the ceiling.

“Five hundred and seventy-six,” he said without changing his expression.

“What? You have stumped me, son.”

“The number of little holes in a single ceiling tile. You know how many that makes in the whole ceiling?”

Harry took a quick glance around the ceiling figuring the number of tiles.

“About 130,000 – assuming your single tile count is accurate.”

The boy’s face lit up just a bit.

“You’re really good for a

“For a fantastically intelligent mature gentleman.”

“Yeah. That.”

The boy managed another smile.

“My studied estimate is 129,600, actually.”

“Okay, number boy, here’s one for you. How many letters in the word, pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanokoniosis.”

The response came after virtually no pause.

“Forty-three, give or take one or two.

“Actually, very close – 45 actually. How in the world did you do that?”

“Well, I know regular English words average 4.79 letters per syllable and medical terms average 2.5. I just counted syllables as I listened and, figuring it was a medical term, multiplied by 2.5.”

“You are amazing. What fun. You have an exceptional brain. Aren’t we pleased that your head was not damaged?”

Joel frowned and rolled deep ridges across his forehead. He looked away for some time. After a period, his stomach growled – a long, rolling, echoing growl. Harry chuckled. Joel managed to allow the edges of his mouth to turn up – an almost, sort of, maybe indicator of a smile.

“I’m sure I just heard your stomach bellowing, ‘Where’s my burger that old man promised?’ ”

“I already lost my burger, but some of the rest of that stuff really does sound good.”

“My doctor would kick me from here to the moon and back if he thought I’d eaten a burger,” Harry said. “If you have any compassion for me at all you will save me from his wrath by eating mine. I think it’s the cheeseburger that’s left.”

Harry soon had the offering spread out once more. Joel ate slowly, savoring every bite.

“You can’t know how delicious this tastes after three

weeks of broth, Sprite, pea soup and I'm not even going to guess at the orange stuff. Sorry about the other burger. The past six months I've let myself fall into what mom would have called a 'funk'."

"Oh, yes, the dreaded F Monster – no energy, no goals that seem worthwhile, extreme unhappiness, a sense of dread and unbearable helplessness that infuses itself into every nook and cranny of your being."

Harry expected the spigots to turn on again. Instead, it garnered a smile.

"A smile?" he asked offering unguarded surprise.

"I have to wonder if the word 'infuses' and the phrase 'nook and cranny' have ever in the whole history of the English language, been used in the same sentence before."

Harry just shrugged, met smile with smile and let them play out. He understood there was nothing like a smile to cleanse away the shadows of grief and despair. He had once been there.

Joel returned to his fries – one regular alternated with one curly. He became serious.

"What you were saying before was that I should be grateful for what I have."

"I was, and more than that; you must carefully and thoroughly assess the progress your body makes over the next months – years perhaps – and turn even the tiniest indication of improvement into a victory worth celebrating as you move toward whatever ultimate goals you set for yourself."

"It's not fair, you know. Dad says I don't dare think that way, but what's wrong with seeing things the way they are – *unfair*."

"Sometimes things are more than *one* way, Joel."

"Huh?"

"Losing your mother and getting shot are terribly unfair – I'll *never, ever* argue that. The first of those horrible things means, however, that you will probably develop a wonder filled closeness to your father that would not have happened otherwise. Overcoming your physical condition is, if you allow it, going to be a fascinating adventure that will force – allow – personal growth like you have never thought was possible for

you.”

Joel lay quietly clearly considering Harry’s words.

“You’re saying I have to accept my situation and move on from where I am with determination to build a good life for myself.”

“A well-stated recitation of a remarkable revelation. You love words, don’t you?”

“I do. Mom said my first ‘word’ was, “I want to go see grandma now.”

“Proof positive!”

Joel lay quietly for some time taking the occasional long draw on the shake. He offered an extended sigh.

“Talk is cheap as they say, Harry. I can plan to run a marathon someday, but words won’t make it happen.”

“Words can form both reasonable goals and impossible obstacles, Joel. Thoughtfully selected words choose appropriate goals. Self-pitying and fear based words choose defeat and misery. Maybe there’s a marathon in your future and maybe not. The most successful goals are reached as a series of small steps – little gains that a person needs to complete on his way to the final outcome.”

Joel thought for several minutes. Then:

“Like a big, way out there, *Maybe Goal* or *It Would Be Nice Goal*, but every day have smaller, *For Sure I Can Do That Goals*. They rebuilt my knee with bolts and plastic and who knows what else. My *Maybe Goal* is to run as fast as the wind again, but one of my first *For Sure Goals* will be just to tolerate being able to stand. Then move the leg and then walk on it and so on.”

“That is certainly the right approach I think.”

“From where I stand – well, lay – it looks like a huge, probably impossible task, Harry.”

“Is that when you’re focusing on the *Maybe Someday Goal* or on the *For Sure Goals*?”

“I am terribly impatient. Always have been. Mom used to call me her, ‘Wish it was already tomorrow boy’. Right now, I’m wishing I could be ‘back to a month ago boy’ so I could make sure I was somewhere else when the bullets began to fly.”

“Oh, I see. You’re only asking for a little ‘time/space

reset'. I'm sure that's going to happen if you just keep dwelling on it."

"You know that I *do* know all that, Harry. It's not the knowing that's the problem. It's the accepting and doing."

"Every time you master a new small goal it will bolster your faith in your ability to master the next. Consider yourself at step one – ground zero. The sooner you begin getting some of those For Sure Goals mastered and under your belt, the sooner you will begin building your faith in your future."

"I just don't know if I'm strong enough. It looks so hard."

"Where did the *rattle, rattle, thud* boy go? I wasn't aware he had disappeared."

"You're not going let this thing go are you?"

"By *this thing* do you mean the chance for you to have a grand and wonderfully fulfilling future?"

Joel let the tears flow down over his smile. That moment probably characterized the next months – perhaps years – in the boy's life: tears and smiles; smiles and tears. He looked Harry straight in his face.

"You know there will be times' I'll hate you, Harry. I've been precariously close to it all week."

"Been there, done that, lots of times."

"That's what Pete told dad. Sometime we must talk about *why*, why you do it."

"At your convenience. And, just as a teaser to that conversation, I have found it is often more productive to ask '*how* did it come to be' rather than, '*why* is it'. *Why* typically accepts any old hunch rather than requiring facts, and leads to a nowhere path filled with the irrational and, in the end, no true answers at all."

"You may need to write that one down for me to study."

He offered a quick grin.

Harry would be happy to be the focus of the boy's anger if it meant he could maintain a basically positive relationship with his father. The time ahead would be absolutely fascinating, of course, but more importantly it had to be healing at a number of levels.

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Within that week, they settled into a schedule of tutoring time, homework time and talking time. The first two

often got slighted. At the least it provided a distraction for the lad; at the best it moved the young man on to new personal and educational horizons. Harry was with Joel from two, when his father left for work, until six when Volunteers, several of them retired policemen, filled in until ten when Jimmy returned for the night.

On a Monday, six weeks later, Harry arrived at a few minutes before two as was his routine. Jimmy was usually on his way out the door and the two did little more than exchange a minute or so of pleasantries. Any instructions that needed to vary the routine were posted on a small bulletin board in the kitchen.

That day however, Jimmy lingered and followed Harry into the living room.

“Hey, Harry. Thirty seconds early, but that’s okay. Can you get all these blankets off of me? Dad gets carried away when the temp drops below 80 outside.”

Harry glanced briefly back at Jimmy who winked. Whatever it was to be, Harry would play along.

“I’ll say daddy is being more than a little over protective today.”

He removed one, then two and three and four. What was going on? The size of the body beneath them appeared to shrink dramatically.

Number six fell to the floor. Joel raised his arms.

“Ta taaaaa! Look, no plaster shell and my leg is free from its cast. I am no longer tortoise-like. Doc cut me out of it yesterday – a house call, can you imagine that? And best thing yet. Look! I’m wearing actual pants again.”

“I am so pleased for you. Can you tell me how it is?”

Before the boy could speak, his father spoke.

“Since I’ve been hearing the ‘how it is’ for the past eighteen hours I’ll be on my way. All the old rules still apply. No belly laughs and no bending of any magnitude until after the CAT scan tomorrow morning.”

Jimmy kissed his son on his forehead and left.

Joel began addressing Harry.

“Doc ran down a list of good signs. I have never lost feeling below the belt line. I’ve always been able to move my toes. He moved my new knee and said it was like it had

always been there. I realize that was cheerleading, but still, good news. When I reach my full height, I may need to get another, slightly larger one. I'm supposed to begin turning my foot on that leg left and right for a few minutes a half dozen times a day – no more than that until he examines me next week. I made a chart so I can keep track – one check mark for every practice session.

“And look here, my best friend from where we lived before sent me a card and said he'd call me as soon I let him know it would be okay. Dad says I can call him this evening.”

He suddenly became quite serious.

“If anybody had told me last year that the time would come when I'd be so elated about just being able to move my foot back and forth I'd have thought he was crazy. Little steps, like you said. I'm trying to celebrate every little step I accomplish. I'm thinking 'step' means something quite different to me from how most would think about it.”

“I applaud your positive frame of mind.”

“It isn't like this, every hour of every day, but you have something about you, Harry. I'm seldom down in the dumps when you're here.”

“And wonderfully, neither am I.”

Harry was still waiting for the inevitable anger that would periodically return. Until then, he was delighted at how things were going.

“You know those dolly things that mechanics zip around on under cars. I'm thinking I could probably get around on one of them. Doc says I have unrestricted use of my arms.”

“Or just lie on your back and search out nightlights like back in your early days.”

“I take it that's a vote against dollies?”

“Well, when I was your age we boys called pretty girls, dollies. I would never vote against that.”

Sadness over took Joel's face.

“I still can't move my hips. I've been worrying that if I never recover to the place I can move them, that those dollies and I aren't ever going to . . . I guess you get the idea.”

“Two things: First, I do understand. Second, it is way too soon to begin worrying about things for which there is no possible way of knowing, now.”

It got a slight smile.

“You aren’t going to ask me to diagram that sentence for English today, are you?”

“That one really did have difficulty getting to anywhere useful, didn’t it?”

“That’s one of the best things about you, Harry.”

“My poor sentence construction?”

“No. The way you just accept the little errors you make as if they don’t matter.”

Harry took on a dramatic expression.

“You mean they *are* supposed to matter – and here I’ve been doing it wrong all these years?”

“No belly laughs, remember,” Joel said. “You know what I mean. I can’t really do that. It’s like every little, tiny, infinitesimal thing I do that’s not perfect hurts – lowers my self-concept, takes a bite out of my self-esteem. Especially if other people see it or find out about it.”

“Yes, indeed. Believe it or not I have seen your condition before . . . Just in *every adolescent I’ve ever known*, including me when I was one, and I *was* one once, I’m pretty sure of that.”

“So, you’re saying . . .?”

“I’m sure you’ve heard the first part of this before. A youngster your age belongs to an in-between age. Clearly no longer a child, but still some distance from being adult, except perhaps in physical ways. Because of that most teens – especially boys, in my experience, begin believing they are expected to know many of the things adults know and to have skills they have had no opportunity to perfect. You’re not expected to, of course, by anybody but yourself. But, every time you get some indication you are not fully grown up – perfect, even – you take it as a put down. Every teen ager is his own worst critic – from acne to bad hair days, from muscle development to physical skills, from the size of your nose to the way your bellybutton looks. I suppose if you took inventory it would be those things over which you have absolutely no control that bother you the most – height, eye color, the green horn growing from between your eyes.”

Joel offered a modest smile, but remained serious, clearly interested hearing more.

“Self-criticism just comes with your age. Knowing that, won’t alleviate the effects completely, of course. Here is something my grandfather told me when I was about your age: “When something goes wrong, or isn’t like you wish it were, ask yourself, ‘even so, will the sun still come up in the morning?’ If your answer is yes, then you must remember whatever it is can’t really be all that important in the largest scheme of things, so let it go – try to put it in a more realistic perspective. Here’s my version of that: When something doesn’t go right in my life I always tell myself, ‘if that’s the worst thing that goes wrong for me today, I’m still in very good shape and life is basically good’.”

“Hard to say that about taking six slugs to your body, Harry.”

“One of them could have, probably should have, *severed* your spinal cord. One of them could have blinded you. One of them could have made you impotent. One of them could have blown your head apart. Hard to say? I don’t think so, Joel. Granted it takes practice.”

“Practice and an implacable old man in your life that is hell bent on not letting you give up.”

“Yes, and that, I suppose. *Implacable* – good word, by the way.”

“Comes from a song Fred Astaire – that dancing dude – sang in an old movie. I used to watch them with mom. I think if he’d have been available when she was eighteen, I’d still be cosmic dust. It was something about an implacable heart meeting an irresistible force or some such thing.”

“It sounds like you and your mother had some good times together. You ever watch those shows now?”

“No. It would just make me sad – reminding me that she’s gone.”

“Or, make you happy when you focus on the happy feelings those times still hold for you – when you decide to stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

“I didn’t like that.”

His face suggested something more than irritation.

“You’re welcome.”

Harry playfully put his hands up in front of his face as if preparing to ward off an attack.

“You put me in a bind, Harry.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I’m not supposed to laugh and I can’t as yet crawl out of bed and strangle you.”

“I see. Yes, well what can we do about that?”

“I can lay here and practice exploding your head telepathically when you make me angry.”

“I believe you mean when you choose to get angry instead of offering some more productive reaction.”

“You lost me – so what’s new? Other people make me angry. This having to be here all helpless in bed makes me angry. I hate it that mom went and died and that makes me angry. It’s the bad stuff, not me.”

“May I offer something for you to think about?”

“You will anyway so why ask.”

He, put on a pout and turned away.

Harry picked up the book and his briefcase.

“Perhaps it’s best if I remain in the kitchen where I can’t offer unwanted words. Call if I’m needed to help with your physical needs.”

He stood and walked toward the door.

“You are the most difficult, hard headed person I’ve ever tried to train, Harry Halvorsen. If I knew your middle name I’d a said that, also. Sometimes you make me so angry – oh, I guess we’ve already established that haven’t we. Grrrr!”

Harry stopped at the door and turned to look at him. He held his arms out to his sides, palms up, as if asking, “So, what now?”

Joel crossed his arms over his chest like a defiant toddler. They looked at each other for some time – neither moving. Unexplainably, the boy’s face brightened.

“Hey. See that. I haven’t been able to fold my arms across that horrible body cast for months.”

It had been as if an inappropriate frame had been slipped into a movie film. Things seemed to stop, having lost all continuity. Harry tried to force the issue by turning to leave again.

“Stop, please. What started this whole dumb thing?”

“I was about to offer a comment and you probably

rightly indicated I tend to do that too often when it hasn't been solicited."

"So, you're saying my point was valid?"

"Absolutely. I seem to be pressing you beyond your limits."

"I know what you're doing. I think it's called bating me. And worst of all it seems to be working. Grrr!"

"Your directions are still not clear, Joel."

"Come back."

"I might say unsolicited things. May not be a good idea."

Joel lifted a pillow and threw it across the room at the old man. In the process, he moved his hips – not just a few centimeters, but several inches up in the air. Harry hurried to his side.

"You didn't hurt yourself, I hope."

"Well, let me check: toes still move. Feet move. I can feel the bed under my legs. This is so great."

That time two spigots opened. Harry moved his in close to the boy's face and they studied each other for some time. Presently, Joel spoke.

"I love you for letting me hate you, you know."

Harry nodded and gradually moved back into his chair. He reached out the tissue box to the boy, commandeering a few for himself.

"So, what was it you were about to lay on me when I threw my tantrum."

"Consider an image in which there are two paths, one follows the ridge of a hill and the second runs along the base of the hill. There is a place, a juncture, toward the beginning of that hill where one path splits, making the other two. Got that?"

Joel nodded, the hint of puzzlement on his face.

"Where the paths split, there is a road sign designating the upper path as 'Fix Path' and the lower path as 'Blame Path'. Notice, once a person is on one of them he can no longer reach the other due to the overgrowth of bramble and thorn bushes on the hillside."

Joel closed his eyes taking the imagery seriously.

"Got it."

“A person comes along the main path. He has just been hit by a volley of stones thrown by a gang of kids for whatever reason. At the sign, the man has to make a decision – to take the Fix Path or the Blame Path. He looks down the Blame Path and sees it has three divisions: the first section is labeled *get angry*, the second is *find somebody to blame*, and the third – furthest on – is *punish the offender*. He looks down the Fix Path which also has three divisions: *understand*, *plan* and *fix*.”

Eyes still closed, Joel spoke.

“I may be seeing where you’re going. Keep on.”

“If the man followed the arrangement on the bottom path, he would first get angry at the boys. Once one lets himself become angry he tends to stay angry – adrenalin and all – and then always feels the need to place blame on somebody else – the second stage, in this case the boys. Once a human being gets to the place of blaming he has the virtually unstoppable urge to punish whoever displeased him. What do the kids learn when the man chooses that route? Simply that in order to not be punished again, they must just stay away from that guy. Inflicting pain is almost never successful in changing behavior unless the punished party knows that the punisher is always close enough to detect the misbehavior when it reoccurs. They certainly did not acquire any knowledge or skills to prevent or influence the stoning of strange men from happening again.

“Following the arrangement on the top path, he would, first, remaining level headed, try to understand what motivated the stone throwing – how it had come to pass. With that information, he would ask himself, ‘What do the children need to learn so assure that same thing won’t need to happen again – and thereby get them in trouble? He determines a plan that will make positive behavior on the part of the gang of boys more satisfying than the stone throwing – or they will acquire new information about how dangerous the activity is – putting out an eye or making the man fall down the hill and hurt or kill him, understand that he has a caring family just like the boys have. Finally, he devises ways to teach the solution to those boys so they will not have to get in trouble for it and other people will not get hurt.”

Joel opened his eyes.

“Okay. But I’m always angry about my situation – well sometimes at you. I don’t want to punish my situation.”

“Right. Let’s extrapolate – you know that term?”

“Infer, generalize, conclude.”

Harry nodded.

“Think about the life cycle of anger.”

“Well, once anger begins it isn’t easily brought under control because its very presence causes chemicals to be produced in the brain and bloodstream that tend to keep a person angry. It doesn’t possess any way to help a person solve a problem.”

“So, if, instead of allowing oneself to become angry at the very beginning, one merely asks what needs to be fixed and how he can go about fixing it . . .”

“Then, there is some possibility of solving the problem – beating the limiting condition in my case. Wow! Where have you been?”

“Well, according to at least one youthful source, it would seem I’ve been busying myself by *making you* react with anger.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Where would we be at this moment if you hadn’t let yourself become angry?”

“That’s a pretty weak argument, you know.”

Harry shrugged.

“I need to text Dad. He can read it at his break. We have a signal; if I have an emergency I begin the text with three capital E’s in a row. Otherwise he can wait.”

Harry remained silent while the text was composed and sent. He had absolutely no idea which of the half dozen things that had transpired it was all about. When finished, the boy spoke, the first real sparkle Harry had seen in his eyes.

“I’m thinking that text message will take a good deal of explanation,” Joel said.

He smiled and handed the phone to Harry so he could read what he had written.

“Dad – Harry just did something to me that made me so mad I discovered that I’m pretty sure I’m going to be able to give you grandchildren after all.”

They chuckled together for some time.

“I assume it has to do with the hip moving discovery?”

“Yes. Don’t you see it means . . .

“I do know what it means. Please spare an old man any erotic details.”

* * *

As time went by Joel was able to move to a chair and eventually to a motorized wheel chair. As soon as the doctors allowed it, Joel demanded that he be allowed to use the power-it-yourself variety figuring it would build the muscle he had lost in his chest, shoulders and arms from his six months of inactivity. His physical therapist began helping him take the first steps toward the use of crutches. It was as much about learning how to balance as about moving his legs.

Eighth grade was drawing to an end. Joel had been attending half days for several months – in his move-it-himself-wheelchair. Graduation would be on Friday afternoon. Joel was more than a little excited. It was a dress up affair – pretty dresses for the girls and jacket and slacks for the boys. Each had been given a bright blue graduation hat with a red tassel.

“I need your help, Harry. I’m afraid dad is going to spend money we don’t have to buy me a new outfit. I have that really nice blue sweater and my one pair of black dress jeans. Nobody can see much of me scrunched down in a wheel chair anyway. You have to promise me you’ll stop him.”

“I will agree to talk with him, but stopping a parent who wants to do something nice for his child is a near impossibility.”

Joel reached into the sack secured to the right handle of his chair.

“Here is a letter from the school I want you to read. It came in the mail this morning. Also, Marcus, my physical therapist is coming in about an hour. You can’t stay. Stuff I need to do alone, now.”

“Seems to have been a lot of that recently – you and Marcus alone. Of course that presents no problem for me.”

Joel paused and looked into the old man’s face.

“I’ll always remember how you held my hand during those first weeks when my therapy was so terribly painful. Still

hurts like hell, but I've learned how to handle it. Well, aren't you going to read the letter?"

Harry put on his reading glasses and began, silently.

"No. Out loud. I want to hear it all again."

Harry started over. He cleared his throat for effect.

"To: Mr. James Black. It is the great pleasure of James Fennimore Cooper Elementary school to inform you that your son, Joel, is one of the four honor students in his graduating class this year. He will also be the recipient of a special award. We share your pride in this young man's academic achievements and personal accomplishments. . . ."

Harry handed back the letter and removed his glasses.

"That is simply wonderful, Joel."

"That isn't what I thought you'd say."

"Oh. What then?"

Joel tried to mimic Harry's deep voice.

"Well, well. How do you *feel* about that, son?"

The boy broke into hysterical laughter. Harry chuckled at the boy's reaction.

"Well, young man, please note that I said exactly what was in my heart."

"I've always known you were proud of me and I've known you loved me. It's why I could throw hamburgers and tell you to go to hell when I thought you were pushing me beyond my limits – you'd love me anyway – like dad. I think I've been harder on you than on dad and I think that was all part of your insidious plan – to take the heat in order to keep things cool between him and me. Seems like I have a book full of things to thank you for."

"And I, you."

"What? What have I ever done for you?"

"You have helped keep alive my belief in man's resiliency – his irrepressible spirit. If anybody I've ever known has had reason to quit and just curl up in a corner and turn to dust, it is – was – you. Also, you've been a good friend. You often laughed at my terrible or off the wall jokes or at least recognized that humor had been my intent. And, not the least of the things that I have learned from you is how to string long lists of profane words together in remarkably creative ways."

Joel shrugged and smiled sheepishly. What had been

had been and no comment seemed necessary – certainly no apology. This was Harry, after all. Harry added an essential afterthought.

“And, we have had wonderful conversations that I will always treasure.”

“Yeah. The conversations were about the best part of it all. I hope we can keep having them now that summer’s here and you won’t be tutoring me anymore.”

“Me? Go without an hour or so of Joel every day? I’d be the one who would wither and die.”

They both understood. Harry continued in a more serious vein.

“You know, I do need to ask *that* question.”

“What question?”

Harry lowered his voice to mimic what Joel had done earlier.

“How do you feel about all this, son?”

Joel smiled and became thoughtful.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about what I’ve been thinking about.”

He broke a smile.

“I even think that now, after your magnificent tutorage, I can diagram that sentence if it should be required. Back to the question. First, I am thankful I had my dad and you to see me through it all. I can’t imagine how difficult it must have been for you two, also. I hadn’t considered that until very recently. It was triggered by something Marcus had mentioned while he had me in an excruciating half nelson one day.”

Joel didn’t mention just what that was. He continued.

“I’m proud of how I continued on, all those times I really wanted to throw in the towel. I’m pleased that, with your help, I came to understand how smart I am and what I need to do to be able to use it wisely – the responsibility that comes with it. I feel really good about the way I have come to grips with mom’s death and for how you helped me begin focusing on the wonderful and helpful sides of my memories instead of upon the sorrow. The grief is still there, but that’s not a bad thing. It just reminds me how important people should be to each other and that I have a responsibility to help improve the

lives of others and ease suffering where I can. My plans for next year, by the way, include meeting lots of girls. I have a great deal to learn about them. At this point I'm not ashamed to admit I really don't know squat about what makes them tick. But I figured if I've been able to accomplish all I've done this past year, surely I can learn to understand girls."

Harry smiled to himself thinking, 'if he does, he may well be the first fourteen-year-old male who ever has,' but he didn't share that with young Romeo, of course.

* * *

His father compromised and fitted Joel out in a 'new' outfit from the Salvation Army store – like new, and a perfect fit. Medium blue blazer, dark blue slacks, and bright red shirt, socks and spats. Joel suspected Harry's wallet where the red accessories were concerned.

The graduates sat on risers to the rear of the stage with the superintendent, principal and school board members in chairs in front. Joel was in his wheel chair to the right side of first row of the risers. Tradition was that the honor student was the last to receive his diploma. It came with remarks from the principal about his or her accomplishments. In 8th grade it was usually a girl.

The principal made some opening remarks – probably the same ones he had made for the past twenty years. It really didn't matter what he said. Nobody ever remembered. He was well aware of that. There were to be some changes that year.

"This year we have four honor students instead of just the valedictorian as in the past. This came about at the insistence of the student who, this year, blew the top off the grade point standing. I have learned during the course of the year not to quibble once that particular student began speaking his mind."

He audience recognized his humor with a chorus of quiet chuckles.

The principal began calling the students forward, beginning with the 'A' names and working through the alphabet – Abbott to Zimmerman. At the end, each of the names of the four honor students was called and some short

remark was offered to set each one apart from the others. The final name of the four was called:

“Joel William Black. Before he presents himself for his diploma I am pleased to announce that Joel is being recognized as the ‘Most Courageous Student’ of this academic year as voted unanimously by his fellow students.”

“The graduates all stood and applauded.”

Joel managed a smile and offered a wave up to his classmates.

The students retook their seats. The principal continued.

“This is to be an ongoing award each year. The students have decided that it will be called the *Mary Ann Smith Black Award for Courage* – named after Joel’s mother, partly in recognition for the courageous battle she waged against her own disease and partly for the years of volunteer work she put in here at Cooper Elementary.”

Shamelessly, Joel engaged his handkerchief and wiped his face of tears. They couldn’t disguise his grin. Understanding that was his cue, he rolled straight forward toward the audience and then turned to face the principal who stood some twenty feet away in the middle of the stage. Joel set the brakes. Joel inhaled deeply, set his hands on the arms of the chair and began lifting himself up off the seat. The students were clearly amazed. Joel managed himself into a standing position. His best friend began to clap from the risers – slow, steady, quietly.

Joel moved his left leg forward, then, after a moment of hesitation, his right. The students held their breath in fear and amazement, and gradually joined in the soft applause. As he moved across the stage it grew louder and faster. At the moment he reached out to receive his diploma, two hundred blue hats with red tassels flew into the air behind him and the applause became cheers. Those in the audience, most not knowing about Joel, but sensing the magnitude of the moment, stood and joined in the recognition.

Harry, sitting near the rear of the auditorium, wiped his wet cheeks, muttering to himself, “It will be fine. Little steps, son; just one little step after the other.”

* * *

Joel turned back to the pine box, kissed his fingers and used them to pat the crutch, which he left in place. He returned to his seat.

CHAPTER NINE

I'm Sure, Maybe, Possibly, You Think?

"The next name on the list is simply, Rajeel. Will somebody here admit to that?"

A man in his early forties with medium brown skin raised his hand, stood, and spread a wonderful smile.

"That would be I – Rajeel the Arab boy."

The others accepted the remark, not really understanding, but getting the idea they soon would. He was striking, wearing a gold blazer, dark brown slacks, a tan shirt and brown and yellow striped tie.

At the front, he paused, facing the pine box.

"Gracious me, Harry. You should see how these kids have littered your pretty pine box."

There were chuckles. The feeling spread that his was going to be an enjoyable presentation. He lowered a sack to the floor and turned to face the group.

"I was almost late today. My camel got ticketed for double parking out on 46th boulevard."

There were more chuckles. What was this; some reincarnation of old Harry?

"I know how much we are all enjoying the wonderful stories and diverse perspectives that we are hearing. I'm sure it is an experience none of us will ever forget. You and your families, if they are close by, are invited to a get-together at the conclusion here. We can eat, laugh, and get to know each other and fuse the bond we all share, but have never had the opportunity to complete. I'm sure that was Harry's plan. There will be directions. Transportation is on you, however. I am limited to a one-man camel."

It didn't really matter what was in his story, he had already endeared himself to the others.

He removed several folded sheets from his inside jacket pocket.

"My story bears a title that will immediately fill your souls with absolute confidence: *I'm Sure, Maybe, Possibly, You Think?*"

It received the chuckles Rajeel had hoped for.

* * *

Harry walked almost everywhere he went. He had no car and only seldom allowed himself the luxury of a cab. For distances further than shoe leather would easily allow, he took the bus. He found even that was seldom necessary. His world was comfortably confined within a few city blocks from where he lived.

It was a pleasant Sunday morning in July. Harry had walked the five blocks to Walden Park – a square block thoughtfully appointed with trees, ponds, trails and benches; in one section, even small fireplaces to grill the burgers or fish. Once twenty yards inside from the street, the city noises disappeared thanks to the thick stand of eighty-year-old trees that framed the area. The park was a place of abundant laughter. Children there with parents or grandparents – sometimes both – ran and swung and teetered. The younger ones populated the sand boxes bickering over shovels and pails. The teen boys shot baskets and had batting contests. The teen girls watched the teen boys shoot baskets and have batting contests. By nightfall there were couples walking the trails hand in hand, looking for havens that offered some promise of privacy away from the lights and those who didn't understand.

It was shortly after eight a.m. Harry had brought food in his backpack – it would work for breakfast or lunch. Typically, it made it no further than brunch. He often shared it with some new acquaintance – that was always his hope so his supply was plentiful. Harry enjoyed walking the trails and just sitting, enjoying the people as they did what people did on Sunday mornings in a park. Sometimes he would take out his yellow pad and write or make notes for future reference. There was a badminton game being set up thirty yards off to the right of where he sat. About that same distance in the opposite direction, an amorous couple was doing what amorous couples do on blankets in parks on warm August mornings.

There came a voice – somewhat tentative – from behind his bench.

“You are Harry. I am Rajeel.”

Harry turned around and found himself facing a high

school age boy. The name he offered matched the medium brown skin, black hair, brown eyes and slender build. He wore a blousy pale yellow shirt, baggy white pants and leather sandals. He would have appeared more at home in the Arabian Nights. His expression was neither happy nor sad, upbeat nor disheartened. Something between serious and terrified probably caught the mien best. Beyond that he was just Rajeel – a handsome, Rajeel – who Harry figured half the girls gathered there that morning would gladly take home to mother.

“Rajeel, is it? So pleased to meet you.”

He offered his hand across the back of the bench and they managed an awkward shake.

“Come, sit here.”

Harry patted the bench and scooted a bit toward one end as if to give the lad lots of room.

“I promise not to bite or even growl if you behave yourself.”

The boy broke a broad grin.

“You are the right Harry for sure.”

He took a seat on the far end.

“You have me at a disadvantage,” Harry said. “It seems you know things and I don’t.”

“No offence, please. I have heard boys talking. Your name comes up sometimes – ‘Harry said this’ or ‘Harry told me that’. I’ve learned about your odd sense of humor – no offence, again, please.”

“Didn’t you hear that old Harry cannot be offended? Lighten up, please.”

“Yes I did and I will try.”

Harry gave that little to no chance, watching the bare knuckle performance of his hands, hitting each other in his lap.

It played out as if he had been given a direct order to ‘lighten up’ and would risk his life to carry it out.

“It seems obvious that you searched me out and found me. That suggests both persistence and that you have something specific on your mind.”

He flashed his grin again, shrugged, and presented some additional degree of uneasiness, returning his gaze to his hands in his lap.

“I am pathologically shy – that is what my uncle calls it.”

“And you have come to me why?”

It was offered gently with a smile not as an interrogation. The boy shrugged his shoulders again – apparently, the pinnacle of his social skills.

“A few of the boys said you can do stuff.”

“Ah, so you are after my stuff. Wait, that didn’t come out right.”

Rajeel laughed out loud.

“I would bet you constructed that error on purpose – from the things I have heard.”

“Perhaps you’ve heard too much. Your English is interesting – the words you use and the way you put them together.”

“My father teaches at the university – Arab Studies – I am sure *that’s* a shocker looking at me. My mother is also a teacher – not common where they came from for a woman to be a teacher.”

“Syria, Lebanon, Jordon?”

“Very good, yes, Jordon near the sea. They have been here twenty years though. We are citizens – I because I was born here and they because they became naturalized. I was a United States citizen before they were. I often kid them about that – *Yuhanan Come Latelys*. Yuhanna is a close translation of Johnny from Arabic.”

With the explanation, Harry’s puzzlement turned to chuckles and smiles.

“And the lad has a sense of humor,” he said. “One for the plus side.”

“I think I have several plusses. I make excellent grades. I can hold my own in badminton and can beat all my relatives at chess and Backgammon. I assume you are familiar with Backgammon.”

“I am and used to enjoy playing although I haven’t for many years. One thing I liked about the game was that when I lost I could always blame it on bad luck.”

“Luck does play a part. Good players know how to minimize its effect, however.”

“Then I imagine you have many tricks up your sleeves. By the way, those sleeves you are wearing this morning

present quite a fashion statement.”

“I am trying for a combination of the clothes of my heritage and what’s going on here, today. Mother approves. I do not think father does. He still wears a turban and doesn’t really feel dressed unless he’s in a thawb, that’s a long, flowing robe.”

“Sadly, I must claim a good deal of ignorance about modern day Arabs, but two things I do know – what a thawb is what Rajeel means.”

“Really, you know that?”

The boy brightened considerably and even turned closer to actually looking at the man.

“Well let’s see. Way back when I was in college losing in Backgammon to my roommate, Ahem, I learned he had a younger brother named Rajeel. If I recall it means something like ‘the boy who walks too much’ also ‘he who leads the way’. And one other thing I guess. The name is often spelled with an ‘H’ – Rajeel. Can it be that I remembered any of that accurately from fifty some years ago?”

“Actually, yes. Very good, in fact. All of that is accurate.”

The boy visibly relaxed – well, tensed less. He turned even more. His expression returned to something more lifelike than mortuary ready.

“Do you have an Arab community with which you are associated?”

“The Mosque, but my parents prefer that we blend in – be Americans they say.”

“So, back to why me?”

“Like I said, I am so shy I have no social life. Even when I am asked to join in to something I make excuses and then spend the next 24 hours hating myself.”

“So, you want me to help you find *other* ways to hate yourself?”

Another wonderful smile. Harry couldn’t understand why a gaggle of girls hadn’t rushed the bench, hog tied him and carried him away.

Harry continued.

“How is it with boys and girls, men and women, dogs and cats?”

“I do fine with dogs and cats although I understand that was added for a humorous effect. But with the others, very poorly.”

“Do you have a closest friend?”

“I think I could have. Tony. He is shy and backward, also. But I don’t know how to approach him and for certain he won’t come to me.”

“How do you know him?”

“We were lab partners in Chemistry last school year.”

“Lab partners and you don’t know each other? That must have taken some well-orchestrated footwork.”

“Like I said, I’m hopeless.”

“No. You didn’t say that, you said you were pathologically shy. *That* I’ll buy. That you are *hopeless*, I will *never* buy.”

Harry shifted in his seat to more directly face the boy.

“When did this condition or whatever begin creeping into your life?”

“I have no actual verification of it, but my studied estimate is that it came upon me at *that* very moment when I first arrived in the world, wet and naked. I’m quite sure I probably secured a small towel around my midsection before the doctor had a chance to find my behind.”

“Ah. Modest as well as shy – sort of the same and sort of different.”

Again, a shrug.

“Here’s the first step, Rajeel. Stand up and take off all your clothes right here right now.”

The boy sprang to his feet and took several steps backwards. *Perplexed* turned into *terrified* in mere seconds.

“Rajeel! I thought you had heard about me. My penchant for the absurd. I do apologize. It did, however, certainly verify your contention. I have to wonder if you are still wearing that same little towel under your clothes.”

It had coaxed another smile onto his face. He returned to the bench sporting a wildly thumping heart. He took a deep breath. He seemed too well-practiced at that.

“Girls?”

It had come as a question from Harry.

“I am very much in favor of them if that is the point of

your cryptic query.”

“Have you dated?”

“Oh, no.”

“But you’d like to?”

“Oh, yes. But the likelihood of that happening prior to my entombment is on the same order of magnitude as a cat making nice with a canary.”

“Again, let me say you speak like you were part dictionary. You use English in an extraordinary way – now STOP IT!”

The boy scooted away, to the very edge of the bench, clearly bothered when Harry raised his voice – if only for effect.

“What?” he managed. “You confuse me, sir.”

“Wonderful! Often confusion is necessary before we can understand ourselves.”

“That really didn’t help, you know.”

Mimicking Rajeel, Harry made a quick move to his end of the bench and acted offended.

Rajeel frowned and threw up his hands. Harry offered his assessment.

“One, you are afraid of being wrong or put down – to such an extreme that not only won’t you risk trying, but you physically move away from things you see as criticism. Two, you have fallen into linguistic habits which, although they allow you to communicate when you are forced to, make you sound like an egghead or ivory tower guy, or dork to the other kids – are egghead and dork still words?”

“I know them – I assume you mean an intellectual snob who is also a dull and socially inept person. I assume you did not intend ‘dork’ as the slang term for the male genitals.”

“Yes, and, no; I must admit I was unaware of that second meaning. Thank you for enlightening me.”

“So, you are saying I intentionally build a wall by the words I use and the way I use them.”

“Intentionally or unintentionally – probably some of both. In either case, give that man a cigar.”

“I don’t smoke – oh, the idiom. I get it. Because I *got* it.”

They shared a chuckle at the confusing word play.

“Please fix it. The guys say you can fix anything.”

“Son, nobody, in the long history of mankind, has ever ‘fixed’ anybody else. I will be happy to assist you, but the doing will have to be yours.”

“That is not what I wanted to hear, you know. I guess I have known that all along. So, *assist*, please. I can pay. My parents are wealthy – oil land coming out their ears.”

“It seems you haven’t listened long enough or carefully enough to the other guys.”

“I have. You never take anything. A rich brat’s go-to default is always money. I guess I was testing what I’d heard. No offence – oh, that’s right, you don’t get offended. I really need some of that.”

“Some of that not getting offended?”

“Yes. Everything offends me – maybe more like a combination of upsets me and scares me.”

“Threatens your self-worth, maybe?”

“Yes, exactly. Right on.”

“I think if you’d ‘*right on*’ more frequently and ‘*yes exactly*’ less often, the other kids would soon begin feeling more comfortable around you. Will you take an assignment?”

“An assignment? Oh. Sure, if it is less extreme than stripping naked here in front of the world. Just elucidate its nature.”

He grinned sheepishly and corrected himself.

“Just lay it on me, Harry.”

Harry offered a simple clap and acknowledged the good switch with eye contact and a nod. He continued.

“It appears this assignment may not be as difficult as I expected. My bad.”

“I know that idiom – my bad, meaning my fault.”

“I suggest this week you listen to other kids – boys, mostly I guess – while they are talking together. Examine how they talk – vocabulary, structure, and idioms as you have mentioned. Practice remodeling your approach to language after them – at least to some extent that still allows you to pass as literate.”

Still another smile. Harry felt he was on a roll.

“Okay. How do I find boys to listen to?”

“We really are starting at the basics, aren’t we?”

“And we are already making progress. The implication of that last thing you said didn’t offend me.”

Harry offered a nod.

“I suggest sports – go to soccer and baseball games and sit close to groups of young people – boys, especially like I said. You could also enter into pick-up games. Do you play basketball or baseball?”

“Only with my uncle. He is new here and speaks very little English.”

“Are you any good – shooting baskets, hitting balls?”

“Yes. I can consistently hit three pointers and with my uncle pitching I hit 428.”

“And you said you play badminton?”

Harry hitched his head toward the game that had just begun to their right – two boys and three girls.

“Me? There? Goodness no! I’d throw up and drown the shuttlecock.”

Harry chuckled and shook his head. The boy had no idea how quick and funny he could be, or, apparently how useful that would be for him socially.

“Okay, no pressure today. What would your parents think about you being with me?”

“Father knows about my intention to approach you and applauds my forwardness. He inquired about you with the police. You passed, by the way. Mother does not know. She would be terrified and spend the week in the sauna sipping tonic.”

“And your uncle?”

“Touch me inappropriately and he’ll slit your throat!”

The boy held a serious face for several moments and then burst into hysterics.

“I think *I* got *you*, that time, Sir. I can’t believe I did that.”

“I will be on the lookout from now on so watch it, *Arab boy*.”

“If anybody else called me that I’d run, hide and make plans about how I could draw and quarter them.”

“But from me?”

“I figured it was a joke – certainly not a slur. How about that? I know you so I knew it wasn’t racist or a put down.

How about that, again?"

"Can you just go with that? Extend the concept out loud."

"Well, I was not offended or afraid because I knew you well enough to know your heart on such matters. So, if I am going to stop being offended and afraid, I need to get to know people's hearts. That is a huge order – *everybody* in the city?"

"Add in the concept of averages – actuarial percentages."

"Okay, well in this case I suppose we would be finding percentages of racist and non-racist hearts among the people of this city. Hmm. You must believe that the vast majority of people in this city would not mean anything racist by that term, which translates to my not needing to expect that the people I come in contact with will respond to me in a racist manner. Even though I can't truly believe it, how is that so far?"

"Excellent. I will add one thing. I believe few people will ever use that term in a derogatory way with you in the first place because all those non-racist people . . ."

"Oh, my turn. Because all those non-racist people . . . probably wouldn't ever use the term in the first place because they understand the racist overtone. I think that just changed the odds."

"Tell me how."

"The average or ratio has to be of good hearts to racist hearts rather than the mere use of the term. So, when somebody who I don't know well enough to be kidding around with, calls me Arab Boy they probably really are meaning it in a racist way. It will be difficult for me to just accept *your* evaluation of the hearts of 'most people in this city', you understand."

"Let's try it from another more personal angle, then. What percent of the kids at school are on your case about being Arab?"

"I don't know. I've had trouble with a few."

"A few, meaning . . .?"

"A dozen or so, really, I suppose. I see where you are going. Six out of 2,500 is a fairly small percent. Way less than one percent."

So, on *average* you can expect 99% of the kids will . . ."

“Treat me well – not act in a racist fashion toward me.”

Harry remained quiet knowing it would take some time to soak in. Presently the boy turned directly toward him and spoke

“I really like your stuff, Harry.”

“If you’d just say that a little louder you can probably get me arrested.”

It was worth chuckles and shrugs.

“Let’s just take a walk over toward the basketball court right there.”

He pointed.

Rajeel become immediately defensive and uneasy.

“I will not ask to be a part of the game. I do not really know the on-floor mechanics of the games – dribbling, passing, guarding.”

“I see. Except for dribbling, passing and guarding you rate right up there with Shaq.”

Another shrug, but that time, almost a smile.

Fate sometimes intervenes at exactly the right moment. As they approached the enclosed playing area, a ball hit the backboard and ricocheted over the high, link fence and landed within a few yards of where the two of them were standing. Harry leaned close to Rajeel’s ear.

“Well, pick it up and let’s see if you can really hit a three pointer.”

The six boys inside stopped, hands on their waists, waiting for the ball’s return. In one smooth motion, Rajeel reached down, picked it up, turned, jumped and shot. SWISH. The amazed boys came to the fence and offered their congratulations urging him to come in and join the game.

Harry looked at his watch and made a pronouncement aimed directly at saving the self-concept of one terrified, five foot five, Arab kid – that is, Rajeel.

“I’m sorry, Rajeel, but we promised to get you home five minutes ago. Maybe next Sunday, fellas.”

Rajeel looked at the players and dumbfounded himself by waving and saying:

“I guess I have to go. Maybe next week, like grandfather said.”

Harry looked as much like an Arab grandfather as any

pasty white aging man of Norwegian descent could. The boys didn't blink, however. Harry hoped that was because they didn't see color where people were concerned. It was likely true. Among them were two blonds, an Italian, a Latino and an African American. He noted what a grand pallet they presented.

The two of them turned and walked back to the bench. Harry picked up his backpack and guided them around the corner of a stand of trees, well out of sight of the players.

Rajeel couldn't contain himself. There was jumping and hooting and arm flailing and shadow boxing.

"I know I couldn't have done that without you there forcing me, but still, that was one of the greatest moments of my life."

Harry responded.

"*Harry? Force* you? Whomever are you speaking about?"

It was met by beaming cheeks.

"Food. I need food," Harry said. "Find us a good spot by a tree where I can prop up my old back. There's a sheet in my backpack that we can spread on the ground to discourage ants and tics."

"And snakes and small rodents," the boy added all quite seriously.

Rajeel pointed and they were soon set up. Harry lifted the goodies from the backpack one by one.

"Egg salad sandwiches, chips, apples, and fried fruit pies. There are two thermoses – coffee and lemonade. Dig in."

"It is a morning of firsts, sir. Me talking to a strange man, then to a group of strange kids, talking percentages of good hearts, putting myself on the line by trying that shot, and now being told to *Dig In* on a picnic in a park."

Harry's heart couldn't decide whether to sink a bit or to be elated. It was part of Harry, so, of course, he focused on the possible up side.

"A very tasty sandwich. Eggs and what else?"

"Sweet pickle relish and mayo. I usually butter the bread in sandwiches, but not on egg salad. I have no idea why that is."

“I’ll try that.”

He held up a potato chip.

“You know I must have been ten or eleven before I knew ‘chips’ were made from potatoes. The same for fries, actually.”

“At my house, around Thanksgiving, you would be surprised that pumpkin pies are made from squash.”

“I love Thanksgiving. At my house, we all quite privately divide holidays up into ‘real’ and ‘American’. *Real* means the traditional Muslim holidays. The *American* means our adopted holidays like Thanksgiving, Fourth of July, Christmas and such. I suppose you see the difference. When I use the two terms I mean no disrespect. I sometimes wonder if my father does. He was raised in strict traditions.”

“How lucky you are to get double the fun – celebrations from two cultures.”

“I suspect he and mother have had differences about which I am allowed to partake in. She is generally much more liberal that way. Mother runs the house and raises me as she sees fit. Father runs most everything else. Our Mosque is filled with wonderful people. Maybe someday you can meet them – we have get-togethers once a month – food, dancing, singing, and an interesting harmony of languages and dialects. Those gatherings typically scare the H–E–double toothpicks out of me, but I go because my parents want me to understand the Arabic traditions. I think that’s a good idea, but it involves interacting with people.”

He put on a shudder and continued, offering an explanation at some level.

“I usually stick to board games with the old men.”

“Do you dance?”

“I can. I don’t.”

“Traditional or Western?”

“Mostly traditional. The kids usually manage a few popular pieces. You should just hear Heavy Metal being played on traditional Arabic instruments. It is cause for lots of laughter from all ages.”

“I think it is a tribute to the musicians that they know the western music well enough to even try.”

“Hey. We are Americans. We know what’s going on.”

“I apologize. That was grossly inappropriate of me. The teachings of one’s youth die hard. When I was young, my culture looked upon African Americans and Japanese as inferior beings. It took a long time for me to overcome the beliefs that had been inflicted on me before I could really think for myself. I even grew up in a very religious family.”

“Muslims take our religion very seriously. I don’t see that in very many of the kids at school.”

“Has your religion been a source of problems for you?”

“Not really for me personally. There have been groups that threaten and harass the Mosque.”

“Well, this conversation has moved well beyond pathological shyness, hasn’t it?”

“Yes. This is so great. I have nobody to talk with about really important issues. My uncle is 22 and uneducated – I have in excess of 40 uncles. Some topics are not for discussion in my home – alternatives to my parents’ beliefs, for example.”

“I think you’ll find that’s pretty universal. Inquisitive teens find themselves talking with each other about things they’d never bring up a home.”

“Sex?”

Harry chuckled at the unexpected comment from his new, ‘pathologically shy’ young friend.

“Well, that of course, but I was thinking about politics, religion, social justice – prejudice, even.”

Rajeel nodded, ready to move on.

They finished lunch, brunch, breakfast – whatever it might have been at 9:30 in the morning.

“When can we talk again?” Rajeel asked.

“Most any time, of course, but I’d like to hear what you learn about language and conversation from observing other boys so you will need some time.”

“There are ball games in the park near where I live every Sunday afternoon. I will begin there – today.”

“How about with the boys at the Mosque. Aren’t there activities there?”

“Yes. But I imagine if I so much as spoke a single word while attending one of them, the roof would collapse and the kids would think the Devil himself had occupied my body.”

“You paint a powerfully unpleasant picture.”

“I noticed that myself. It was good in a way though, did you notice?”

“I believe that escaped me. Go on.”

“I put the problem in me – not them. That is certainly a new and fascinating perspective. Thanks. I have so many new things to think about. How about nine in the morning on Wednesday?”

“Fine. Where?”

“Your apartment will be fine if that will make it easier.”

“Alright. Let me draw out directions. It’s in an alley and can be difficult to find.”

“Oh, I know where it is – the yellow door. I have sort of been stalking you the past two weeks trying to get up the courage to approach you.”

“Interesting. And something about this morning seemed like the right time?”

“Out here in the open, I guess. I figured I could out run you if I panicked.”

“Rajeel, you are an absolute delight. I am so glad you didn’t panic and run away this morning.”

Unexpectedly, tears trickled down the young man’s cheeks. He nodded and worked up a smile.

“Thank you. I better go now.”

He stood and left. Harry watched until he was out of sight. Even the course he walked along a well laid out path was filled with uncertainty. Harry hadn’t asked where he lived. It hadn’t seemed important although from what he had gleaned, it clearly was not there in the less advantaged part of the city.

* * *

At precisely 9:00 a.m. on Wednesday, Harry heard a vehicle outside in the alley. Vehicles virtually never used that alley – it was more like a large communal patio than a thoroughfare. He got up and opened the door just in time to see the rear of a white limo turning the corner onto 47th Boulevard. Rajeel was standing close. There was no smile that morning.

“Rajeel! What has happened to you?”

His right arm was in a sling. His forehead was

bandaged. There were scratches and bruises on his face and arms.

“Sort of had a run-in with that ‘way less than one percent’ we talked about.”

Harry winced.

“Come in, please. Choose your seat – whatever looks comfortable.”

The boy managed a grin.

“Oh, I have heard how the recliner is yours. No problem. I need to stretch out my leg so the couch will be fine. My knee got sprained.”

Once they were settled in, Rajeel began the story.

“Sunday on the way home from the ball field – and you really had a good idea – I learned all kinds of things I have to talk with you about – four kids a little older than I – early twenties, maybe – jumped me. They came up behind me before I realized anybody was there, I was lost in thinking about all the things I had learned. Then I heard the words and taunts begin – ‘Abdul, Bin Laden, camel jockey, rag-head’. I made it appear I was ignoring them and picked up my pace a bit. I was within fifty yards of our limo that was parked on the street just beyond the soccer field I was crossing. One of them grabbed me by my shoulder. They said terrible things to me like go back where you came from – I wanted to say, ‘You mean city hospital a few blocks that way,’ but I didn’t. They called my mother horrible names and sniffed the air making remarks about smelling camel spit. Before I had time to react I was being punched and kicked and thrown to the ground. I believe I lost consciousness early on because I really don’t remember much about the rest of the fray.

“I am told that Abdul – the actual name of our driver – called the police and began driving across the grass toward us. One of the men apparently had a hand gun and shot several times at the car. Abdul was hit in the shoulder. The distraction he caused allowed three police cars to race in behind the thugs and take them into custody. Their hearing is this afternoon and I have to appear. My Father will accompany me, with our Lawyer. You can just imagine the state I’m in. I’ve urinated a dozen times since I got up this morning.”

“Does your family know you came here today?”

“Yes. After seeing the difference in me after our encounter in the park – that is, after we hung together on the grassy slopes – he encouraged me. Tried to give me money for you.”

“I assume your assailants – that is, them gang bangers – will go to jail.”

Rajeel acknowledged the word play with a brief smile.

“That’s what our lawyer and the District Attorney say – as much as several years. The problem is that will not change their behavior – if anything it will stick them in with a group of others who also hate us and it will only grow worse within them. There really needs to be a better way to deal with criminals. How does the government expect people to change when they do nothing to help them? I just don’t understand, I guess.”

“And neither do I, son. I’ve been writing about that very thing for years – a lot of good it’s done.”

“It is probably still better than how it would be handled in some parts of the Middle East.”

“Oh?”

“Father said in some of the remote areas, once the thugs had been caught the father would have been expected to slit their throats in a big ceremony.”

“Ouch!”

“For some reason that word resets my thinking to the things I learned at the ball park. Have you noticed that kids use a large number of contractions? I do not – that is I don’t.

“*I’ve* noticed. *That’s* a great catch. *It’ll* take a good deal of practice to change that in any automatic sense.”

“My Father has taught me the use of contractions is impolite and slovenly. Even so, *I’m* already practicing on my uncle and my mother. They both say *I’m* improving rapidly. *It’ll* just be a matter of time until *I’m* speaking like a native – Oh, I *am* a native, natural born citizen; what do you know? I tend to forget that and every time I do, it irritates me no end.”

“It does what?”

Rajeel smiled.

“It bothers me a whole lot or it really gets under my skin or a new one I learned at the ball game that I believe applies,

'It burns my butt'."

Harry smiled and nodded. Rajeel was an interesting entity. Drop a suggestion, give the lad his head, and away he went. It appeared to represent an immense amount of motivation for a pathologically shy kid.

Rajeel remained silent for a moment.

"I have been thinking about the possibility that because my speech pattern is different from theirs if that may be off-putting enough to make other kids avoid me, and then, when they avoid me that validates my shyness so I avoid them even more – like it adds proof they don't like me. Do you see what I'm trying to say – even if poorly?"

"I see and I think you stated it very well. Tell me this, having found something about yourself that might be – as you called it – off-putting, and if you modify that, what's the chance it might change the way *you* feel about social situations?"

"Wow! That's an expression the boys used often – wow – primarily when a player made an outstanding play or a pretty girl came into view."

Harry nodded.

"Where I was going with *my* 'wow' was what you said about how by changing my language pattern I will have changed the social setting more in my favor. It gives me a lot to think about. It is like if I found out people hated brown eyes, I could wear blue contacts then they wouldn't hate me and I'd have a better chance of getting along."

"Those are interesting observations. See how they float inside your head. Understand that takes on only one concern. There might be more."

"Like?"

"Well, let's see. Many people tend to shy away from people who they see as different or unfriendly or as being some sort of screwball."

"I have no doubt I have the reputation of being unfriendly because I am. That and, I suppose my choice of wardrobe automatically make me different – and, of course I am a darker skinned Arab. Hmm. That, I can't do anything about – I would never want to. I am proud I am Arab. I guess I'm also proud I am a Muslim. But some of those other things I can do something about. How about you go clothes

shopping with me?”

“I think I may have a better idea – that lab partner, does he dress like the other boys?”

“Yes, and his name is Tony, Tony Marciano. I see where you are – you’re – going and it is a bit scary. I call Tony and ask him to go with me to pick out some clothes – maybe for school next semester. I could even say I like how he dresses and I’d like to dress more like him. It will build him up a bit and will force me to interact with him. It will give us a chance to get to know each other and that will give us the chance to see if we might like to be friends. You are a genius, Harry, but of course everybody seems to know that. What else?”

Harry thought as long as the kid does all the work like that, he’d be glad to take credit for being a genius.

“Go home and heal, son. Did the doctor give you medicine?”

“Yeah – catch that – *yeah* without even thinking. Pain medicine and polysporin – it’s an ointment to put on the open abrasions and cuts. From what I overheard at the ol’ ball park, I can make a mint selling the pain pills to other kids – five or ten bucks a pop. Am I good or am I good. I overheard that as well. You know I’d never do that, right, Harry?”

“I don’t know; you’re gittin’ pretty darn street savvy.”

“Very good. I see why the older guys really like you, Harry. I do, too.”

“And I you. Now that we’ve had our love fest, do you need to give Abdul a call?”

“You just watch. By the time I’m out the door, turn to shake your hand, and then turn back around, he’ll be here with the back door already open for me.”

“He’s good.”

“You should see him with camels.”

The boy all but fell off the couch trying to contain his hysterics. Harry had to admit it had been very funny. He wondered if, perhaps, he was creating some sort of monster – that would be Native Arab/American Teenage Monster. It had the ring of a video game, provided he could figure how to spill barrels of blood, let guts flow ankle deep and kill enough enemies to stack up as a fortress wall. He hated those

games.

Perhaps, the most positive part of all that (the camel joke not the video game) was that the boy was beginning to poke fun at himself – his people – and not be offended, enjoy it even. Harry had always figured that was an important feature of true maturity – the ability to enjoy one’s own foibles and poke a little fun at himself.

* * *

Rajeel had come a long way in a month and the old man was proud of him. They talked almost every day. He had returned to the park one Sunday morning on his own. There were only three guys on the basketball court. When he approached, one of them recognized him from before, waved and called out. Although his first instinct had been to flee screaming into the woods he didn’t.

“Hey guys, look who’s here – ‘*Three Point Pete*’. Come on in.”

“You won’t want me to play. I can shoot and I pretty well know the rules, but I don’t how to how make the moves – dribble, guard and such.”

“We’ll teach you. Get your butt in here. It’s downright un-American for a guy your age not to know how to play basketball. How come you don’t know?”

“I was stolen from my parents as an infant by gypsies and kept locked up in the tower of a castle until I made my escape a few months ago.”

The remark got smiles all around.

“A comedian. Forget the why. Shed that shirt or you’ll burn up.”

“We Arabs tend to handle heat rather well, haven’t you heard?”

“No kiddin’. You a real life Arab like Lawrence of Arabia?”

Rajeel decided not to go into the fact that Lawrence was actually a pasty white Englishman.

“Right. Like old Larry.”

“I’m Danny, mostly German. Hank there is mostly Dutch, and Squirt, well, he’s a mongrel and as you can see he was the runt of the litter.”

They offered their hands for shakes all around. Since

Danny had already dubbed him, Pete, they didn't bother asking his name. The feeling of automatic inclusion was fully foreign to him. There wasn't time to dwell on that. It was a first ever for Rajeel, outside, where all the world could see, but he removed his shirt and the instruction began. It went on for almost two hours. By the end of the morning he was playing a credible game of two on two. They soon agreed, by good hearted consensus, that full court jump shots would not be allowed, otherwise 'Pete' would ruin the game.

Rajeel called Harry on his way home to relate a second by second account of his morning – and his new nick name – 'Three Point Pete', which sometimes was just Three Point and other times Pete. He was thrilled by it in any form. Harry was pleased of course.

Rajeel and Tony had been together on several occasions, but their 'chemistry', so to speak, didn't really click. Tony spent his life living the adventures he found in science fiction and fantasy novels and never allowed his inhaler to be out of reach. They got together occasionally and sometimes spoke on the phone. It wasn't that they didn't like each other, they just agreed they didn't have enough in common to enjoy hanging out together for long periods. Also, it was Rajeel's contention that Tony spoke in an even more stilted manner than he did and that was fully unhelpful as he tried to become 'a real guy', as he put it.

Rajeel did, however, underscore one positive from the relationship. "I got a killer new wardrobe out of it, thanks to Tony's help."

On another occasion Rajeel and Harry were discussing friendships.

"I've come to a conclusion – maybe a revelation – about friends. I like to read books with real meat to them – the kinds that make me think. I enjoy games that take intellectual skill – chess and backgammon. I got hooked on sculpture – clay – a few years ago and my teacher says I have a real talent – mom gets me a teacher every time I show interest in anything. I fully expect a 'love making 101 tutor' any day now. I have recently begun actually participating in sports – thanks to you and the park guys."

"I think I missed the revelation, Rajeel."

The boy smiled.

“Probably because I forgot to get to it. I began to sense a problem because I haven’t been able to find anybody who shared all my interests. Then, boom! One day it hit me. I can do different things with different kids. Do you see all the advantages to that?”

“I suppose I see some and I assume you will fill me on what I’ve missed.”

Rajeel went on without really acknowledging Harry’s attempt at humor.

“First, I get to share my interests with other people – not always have to do things by myself. Second, it rapidly expands my circle of friends. Last night in bed I counted eight friends.”

“You had eight friends in your bed last night?”

“I knew you were going to say that as soon as I let that sentence slip out into your world. We have a very good thing you and I. Sometimes I get really jealous thinking you have this kind of thing with other kids, too. I know I shouldn’t, but I do.”

“Let me make you a promise, a guarantee, a lifetime warranty.”

“What?”

“The time will come when your life will be so filled with other people and important activities that you will have no reason to feel that way. When we just have one of something we need or crave it because it becomes unrealistically important to us. When we have a number of those things available to us, no one of them has to fill that need by itself. It may continue to be valued, but we are less dependent on it – we have numerous sources available that help fill and satisfy our needs.”

“I *understand* that, I just don’t *feel* it. What I mean is I can follow your logic, but I think you will always be important to me.”

“Well, I better be or I’ll spread the word that you are, in reality, ‘*Three toed Pete*’.”

It was all easier for Harry, of course. He had weaned and learned to live without dozens of young friends down through the years. That was the normal course of growth. It

didn't mean they wouldn't each always be precious to him – they would just be precious at a distance. If wealth were determined by wonder-filled associations with young people, Harry would be the richest man in the world.

* * *

“You don't know me sir, but I know all about you.”

There at his door stood what Harry suspected was another, unsolicited, *'fix me, Harry'*. That model was probably Italian and seventeen. Rajeel might have been soliciting new friends for the old man so he wouldn't get lonely in the event Rajeel suddenly became the center of the social universe. Harry chuckled to himself. *'Overconfidence'* he wondered.

“Hello, young man. I'm Harry, but I suspect you know that.”

“Yes, Sir. Rajeel has probably told me more about you than he actually knows.”

Harry smiled.

“May I guess that you are his friend, Tony?”

“You may, and you would be correct.”

It could have been Rajeel's bespectacled, slightly bleached clone from six months earlier.

“Will you come in?”

Harry had phrased it as a question because the boy's tentative manner left his intention fully in doubt.

“Yes, sir. I think there is a problem.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, sir. I think I saw a group of young men – early twenties – abducting Rajeel about a half hour ago.”

“And you came to me why – instead of his parents?”

“I tried to raise someone at the house, but even his uncle was gone. I assume the parents are at the college where they teach. I'm not the kind who could suggest such a possibility as this to the police.”

“Do you have any reason to suspect why that might have happened?”

“I do have one, although it is admittedly flimsy.”

Silence.

“Could you share that with me?”

“Oh, yes. Pete, Rajeel likes me to call him that, told me that a month or so ago he testified at a hearing that sent a

group of ruffians to prison – or jail, I'm not certain. Anyway, my supposition is that the abductors might be associates of the felons – taking revenge.”

“I see. You just might be right.”

“I know. There is always some chance that someday I might.”

Harry allowed an unexpected chuckle.

“Was there a vehicle involved?”

“Yes. That was the odd component of the episode. They left in his family's white limousine and Abdul, their driver, was at the wheel – well, I am rather confident it was he – perhaps 77%, maybe 79% sure.”

Harry went on to think out loud.

“There are so many white limos in the city that may not be of much help. Hmm.”

Tony had a tentative suggestion.

“I am thinking that maybe having the license plate number might help.”

“Yes, I am thinking that same thing.”

“Here. I wrote it down on my pad. I always carry a pad. It wasn't that I wouldn't remember it – I remember everything – but I believed it might facilitate passing it on to someone in a position to make actual use of it.”

“Yes, indeed. I will call the police.”

Harry pressed two numbers on his ancient land line phone.

“You keep the police on speed dial?”

“Just one of them. An old friend. Known him since he was your age.”

It was Pete – Pete the cop. Harry had soon passed on the information. An all points – by some newfangled ‘B’ name – was issued immediately.

“I guess we just sit back, chew our fingernails, and wait now,” Harry said. “You are welcome to remain here. I have pop and lemonade.”

“Lemonade sounds good. Fresh or concentrate – I am allergic to most concentrates.”

“This is your lucky day then – fresh it is. Made with real sugar. Is that allowed?”

“Sugar is natural and I do well with all things natural.

Well, except girls. I imagine they would be considered natural.”

“I imagine.”

It was worth a quick smile.

“Rajeel said you might have some ideas for me about girls – not like from a pimp, but like things for me to think about.”

Harry broke out in laughter – a fully unreasonable reaction since he was so worried about Rajeel. He served two lemonades and rescheduled the girl talk for another time.

The yellow door burst open and in rushed Rajeel. His clothing was torn and his previous bruises and cuts sported new bruises and cuts. He gave a quick puzzled glance at Tony and then closed and locked the door. He addressed Harry.

“Thugs kidnapped me and Abdul. They still have him – well, sort of.”

Harry helped him to the couch. He continued.

“One of them was giving Abdul directions one block at a time. I was watching Abdul in the rear-view mirror. Our eyes met. He nodded. I nodded, not entirely sure why. A block east of here he slowed and winked at me, hitching his head as if to direct me to move. I figured I understood. I was being held between two of them in the very back seat. They knew very little about limos so once inside we had left their territory and entered mine. I pressed six buttons all at once to confuse them. One of the buttons raised the bullet proof window between the rear and driver’s compartments. Then I leaned to my left and pushed the door latch forward. That is a security feature that locks all the doors once that door is reclosed. I just jumped out as we went around a corner. Limos have to take them very slowly so I figured it would seem a natural occurrence. I rolled across the pavement and came to a sudden stop against the gutter. Once I understood I was still alive with a semi functional pair of legs, I took off through the crowd on the sidewalk and made my way here. I’m very sure they didn’t see me nor could they follow. The last I saw of the limo, it was dead in the water half way around the corner. The horn was honking so I assume Abdul was safe and functioning trying to gain the attention of the police.”

Tony’s eyes grew big. He scooted himself to the

furthest reaches of the couch, partly to make more room for his friend and partly to separate himself from the world – where’s a good dragon slayer when you need him? Later, he would have to explain the yellow stain on his lap – lemonade, of course!

“You get as comfortable as you can. I’ll get Pete the cop on the line.”

Harry had no sooner turned toward the phone than there was an earth-shaking knock on the door – that of a giant or ogre or hairy green monster Tony was quite certain. He closed his eyes – *that* would certainly dispense it into the netherworld.

The view through the peep hole suggested something less threatening – Pete the cop. Harry opened the door.

“It seems your newest protégée and his driver rounded up the thugs without our help. Nice work, son.” Then on second take he walked toward him; “You look terrible. Did they do that to you?”

“Technically they are only responsive for the upper layer of abrasions. Their cohorts from a month ago get credit for the originals underneath. My goodness I hurt! No offense, guys but I think I’ll just faint now.”

Pete the cop caught him as he keeled over onto his side there on the couch. They tried to make him comfortable. Tony was pleased he could help even if only by providing the pillow for his friend’s head.

Pete called for the EMT’s. Tony crossed himself and clearly offered up a prayer – perhaps for Rajee, but most certainly for his own safety. In all the years of navigating the terrors of his novels, nothing compared to that past half hour of real life.

* * *

Rajeel folded the pages and slipped them into his inner jacket pocket.

“Sometime later, Harry encouraged me to enter a city sponsored writing contest. I offered an account of being a Natural born Arab boy here in the city. It was honest in every way. On the whole, it was far more positive than negative. That pleased both Harry and me. It won first place. There was a banquet. I sat beside the mayor at the head table.

After he said nice things about me and my entry, I stood, gave a short thank you speech, and then read my piece to the gathering of several hundred people. Whenever I questioned the imminent continuation of my conscious state, I just looked out at Harry and everything became comfortable – well, promising, at least.

“The following year at graduation I shared the valedictory award with Tony who had actually become a pretty good friend. I had accepted him as he was and he had accepted me as I was. About Tony, that night of the banquet – he sat next to Harry on his left, and to his right, a very pretty young lady – his date. Well, I didn’t think she was as pretty as the one next to me, but it was a comparison he and I would never discuss.

“I’ll tell you this, folks, Old Harry Halvorsen had a straight up, no nonsense, curl your toes version of the girls talk you wouldn’t believe – just like he lived his life, straight up with no frosting, no nonsense when it came to important things, and curl your toes wonderful everywhere in between.”

He removed two items from a bag and placed them on the pine box: a light-yellow shirt with blousy sleeves and a huge, ten-pound dictionary on the front of which he had pasted a large picture of himself as a teen. He knew it was a private joke between them. So, did the others. That was fine.

He addressed the box:

“Harry, there, may or may not be an afterlife in the religious sense, but know for certain, good man, that a huge part of you will never die in the hearts and souls of all your kids.”

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CHAPTER TEN

Jasper Humperdinck Finkelstein

“I’m not certain I believe this, but here it is in Harry’s own hand, the final contributor to this remarkable gathering is to be Jasper Humperdinck Finkelstein. No offence, but can that be true?”

He looked directly at the only one in the gathering who had not made a presentation.

A Latino man in his early to mid-forties with thick, well groomed, shoulder length, graying hair raised his hand and offered a wonderful smile. Wonderful smiles seemed to be a hallmark of Harry’s boys. He wore a yellow pull over sweater and brown slacks. He stood.

“Guilty, I guess – well, not entirely. Let the story offer the explanation.”

He took but a moment to survey the box, then turned and began. He used no manuscript, the reason gradually became obvious.

* * *

Harry stomped the snow off his boots before entering the timeworn café. It had stood there since FDR was president, gay meant happy, and the dance craze had been the jitterbug. It sat between two, well maintained, four story, brick and cement slab office buildings of like age, just off 46th about a block and a half from Harry’s apartment. The half-glass door, to the left as one entered, and a large, single panel, window, spanned the front. The neon sign designated the place as *Mike and Son’s Goodtime Café* in flowing hot pink cursive. The original Mike was long gone, but it didn’t matter – his son was Mike as was his son. One might sense tradition.

It was bitter cold and the temperature was still dropping. The snow was several inches deep with another several in the forecast – heavy and wet – perfect for snowmen, snowball fights and homemade ice cream. There hadn’t been time to take the shovels to the sidewalks so, just inside the door, the diners used the broom to remove what stomping hadn’t. The bell tinkled above the door signaling the

old man's arrival.

"Harry!" arose the greeting from a half dozen other six a.m. regulars. They raised their coffee mugs and returned to their conversations. He managed a wave as he unwound the long scarf and opened his long, black, wool coat with the standup collar and large shiny buttons. He removed his bright red stocking cap and slipped it into a coat pocket along with his leather gloves.

It was a long narrow room with six ceiling fans wobbling at the end of black pipes from a tin ceiling that had known no paint since Eisenhower. A counter with red upholstered stools ran the front half along the right side with the grill and such behind it. The other side, front to rear, housed a dozen, well worn, four person, dark wood booths – circa 1940. Across from them against the opposite wall toward the rear were a half dozen two person booths. Mike had installed black and white linoleum with a bold geometric design, ten years before. The cafe was clean, but struggled to appear that way.

Hal was the cook, janitor, bookkeeper and owner, inherited from his father twenty years before. The early morning waitress (she would have been offended by the term 'waitperson') was always smiling and wise cracking, Millie. Between her reddish hair with white roots, and cheeks preserved in rouge, it was impossible to pinpoint her age. Harry guessed the two of them had known the same movie stars.

Mike's, as the cafe was referred to, offered the usual diner breakfast fare – Danish, eggs any way, flap jacks Mike's way, hash browns the grills way, bacon, ham and sausage the customer's way. The coffee cup was bottomless – not particularly good, but bottomless. For lunch and supper, it offered burgers, grilled cheese, soup of the day, fries, some sort of lasagna-like surprise, malts, coffee, and pop. A glass display case by the register up close to the door tempted the small fry at eye level with gum and candy as their parents tended to the check.

Like the other early morning denizens, Harry had his regular spot – a double wide booth, three forward from the back wall. Most of the others chose stools at the counter. Harry considered himself a hermit – in the very best sense of

the term – and preferred a bit of physical separation from others. It wasn't that he didn't like people, he just treasured his alone time and the space it offered.

He removed his coat, folded it in half and slid it across the seat ahead of him. The coffee arrived along with a glass of water, and silverware wrapped in a paper napkin.

"You're usual, Harry?"

"Has Doc been in yet?"

"In and gone a half hour ago."

"Then I'll have a Danish, cold, yes to butter, no to cream cheese."

"Fightin' your blood sugar again, huh?"

"Shh. I'm convinced Doc has bugged my booth."

He looked around, and felt around beneath the table playfully.

"Or, the tests he runs might actually be accurate."

It was the same exchange they had had many dozens of times. Harry kidded Millie that she had been born right there in the café and had never been allowed to leave. She would come back with some remark about his age: "You think you're so smart 'cuz you've wrote a hundurd books, but that only means one a year, you know."

She was soon back with a raspberry Danish – the fattest and largest that had been delivered that morning. She knew it was his favorite and she enjoyed spoiling him – even if it killed him. Everybody loved Harry.

As was his custom, he unfolded the single creased pages he had printed off the night before; they contained what he had written the previous day – size 14 font and triple spaced for ease of editing. He donned his reading glasses, twisted out the perfect length of lead from his el-cheap-o, yellow, mechanical pencil, and prepared to see what damage he could inflict on the manuscript.

During the process, he noticed a boy – ten or eleven he guessed – who entered and stood quietly beside the front door. He was dressed for the weather wearing a heavy, brown coat, brown hat with earmuffs and an orange scarf that encircled his neck – holding his collar up and close to his skin. The toes of brown, leather boots showed below his dark colored jeans.

He just stood there. Mike was working the grill so had his back to him and Millie was engaged in measuring coffee into white, paper filters, which she stacked one atop the other next to the coffee maker.

Harry beckoned to the boy with his finger. The boy looked around and then pointed to his chest, mouthing the word, 'Me?' Harry nodded offering his patented smile. Hesitantly, the boy made his way back toward the booth.

"Yes, sir?"

It was a question.

"You look cold."

"I'm dressed warmly."

Harry wondered how many eleven-year-old boys would properly use the adverb *warmly* instead of the adjective *warm* in that phrase.

"Still. Will you join me?"

He motioned to the seat across the table.

"I came to earn money, not spend money, Sir."

"I see. We'll, last I heard Mike doesn't charge for just sitting."

It garnered a brief smile. The boy slid into the bench, hands still in his coat pockets. A commitment to even a marginal relationship had not been indicated.

"I imagine a boy your age likes hot chocolate, right?"

The boy frowned, but nodded.

Harry raised his hand and Millie returned.

"Millie. I want you meet my new friend, Jasper Humperdinck Finkelstein. He says he likes hot chocolate. Could you do anything about that for us?"

The boy broke a huge grin and chuckled. He spoke.

"Sir. I have no money to pay."

Harry looked up into Millie's face.

"Money? You don't take money from shivering, hardworking, handsome young men, do you?"

"Money? What's money?"

"I could work for it. I had hoped to get hired to shovel your sidewalk. It will soon be six inches deep and slippery and I feel certain you wouldn't want to risk having anyone slip and fall and injure himself. I see you have many elderly patrons."

Millie put her hand beside her mouth and, in an aside to

Harry, said, "The young man sounds closer to forty."

It drew another smile from the lad. She left.

"Thank you. I know what you're doing, Sir, but then you know I know what you're doing don't you?"

"I know what I think I'm doing. Not at all sure I know what you think I'm doing. I'm offering a shivering lad something to warm him up – period, the end, finish, finale."

The boy offered a nod and nothing else. Mike approached the booth, hot chocolate in one hand and another Danish on a plate in the other. He looked at Harry.

"Does the young Mr. Finkelstein speak Danish?"

"I think he might if he had the right kind of fuel – perhaps like *that*, whatever it is."

Mike set things on the table. The boy sighed from his toes.

"Are you the owner, Sir? And I can render that in Spanish, but not Danish. Give me two weeks and I will be able to muddle through in that language if you prefer."

"Let's see, Mike said. "I counted four questions, there. My answers would be: I am. I'm sure you can. I believe you could. And, it is not preferred."

The boy scooted out of the booth and stood up straight. He removed his hat revealing long black hair to complement his dark brown eyes and something more than just well-tanned skin. He spoke again.

"As much fun as it is to be called Jasper Humpertinck Finkelstein my birth certificate suggests it is really Miguel – well, Miguel Something Something, but the something's don't seem important just now. Like I told the nice lady, I am looking for work and I think the snowfall may have provided it."

"You know the business end of a shovel, do you?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I guarantee my work or no charge."

"What *do* you charge?"

"Whatever you, as an honest, moral and ethical business man decides it is worth once you inspect the finished product."

Mike looked at Harry.

"I'm thinking he probably just stands there and, using his big words, commands the snow to leave before it gets nouned, verbed, and adjectived to death."

The boy – apparently, Miguel Something Something – smiled and shrugged.

“Tell you what, that sidewalk area out front measures about thirty feet long and ten feet out to the curb. That’s . . .”

“Three hundred square feet or approximately 33 1/3 square yards. I can figure it in meters if you are so inclined.”

“I thought meters were those bright objects that whizz across the night sky.”

The boy intentionally put on a puzzled look.

“Did I miss the sign that said, ‘Only the absurd may enter here’?”

Mike reached out and ruffled Miguel’s hair. Rather than pulling back as many his age would do, he leaned gently into it clearly enjoying the contact.

“Tell you what. You’ve already made me a believer in the quality of your work. I’ll pay you one Danish, as much hot beverage as you like and six dollars and sixty cents to clear it off now and another six sixty-six when Mother Nature lays down the next three inches she has promised by noon.”

“Six sixty-six? That seems an odd amount, sir. May I ask why?”

“You may.”

Mike remained silent. Presently, the boy cracked a smile.

“I get it, I *may* ask and now I need to. *Why, sir?*”

“I just like the sound – six sixty-six.”

“Melodic Linguistics would suggest ‘*four forty-four*’ would be much more pleasing to the human ear.”

“If that sum would also be more pleasing to your wallet I can arrange that.”

Miguel looked back and forth between the men.

“My penchant to share my knowledge often gets me into binds like this. I say, ‘Hooray for six sixty six or, *Hurra por seis sesenta y seis*, if you prefer.”

“Show off. When you finish with Harry – I mean finish eating here with Harry – come up to the register. You’ll need to purchase a new shovel from the hardware store down the street. I’ll give you money. Okay?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll hurry if Harry doesn’t keep engaging me in inquisitive conversation.”

Mike left. Miguel slid back into the booth.

“You do understand that you are one of the most intriguing youngsters I have ever encountered,” Harry said sitting back and looking the boy from end to end, side to side, and back again.”

“It is so hard to disguise. I start out trying, but before I know it there I go with big words and perfect grammar – maybe a few calculations. It’s just a curse.”

He slumped his shoulders, Danish in hand, legitimately looking forlorn.

“You mean disguise the fact you are really a sixty-year-old Harvard Professor on sabbatical, slumming it here in the city doing research on common folks trapped in the social and financial downturn of the early 21st century?”

Miguel doubled over in laughter.

“Where have you been all my life, sir?”

“I assume that during your first ten years of life, while obtaining your Ph.D., I was still struggling to master the times tables.”

“You are . . . I have no idea what you are, Harry, is it?”

“It is and confidentially very few who know me have any idea what I am. I am interested in what you keep failing to disguise.”

“The cross I bear is having an IQ one point higher than Albert Einstein.”

“That would be 164 then, I believe.”

“Goodness, I didn’t expect that. No offence, please.”

“You will learn, if you get to know me, that I never take offense at things.”

“It would be interesting to discuss that sometime. Unfortunately, I do, and it is neither a pleasant nor helpful side of me.”

“Are you willing to talk about yourself?”

“An odd question, don’t you think, Sir?”

“Let’s see: an eleven-year-old boy, shows up out of nowhere, alone, well dressed, in the middle of a blizzard, apparently with no money and looking for work. Then he opens his mouth and sounds like somebody accepting a Nobel Prize in literature.”

“I see. None of that does seem likely, does it?”

“I would say not. I would also say if you are in the midst of some sort of problem or crisis, I’m a good listener, I seldom snitch, and I can provide references if necessary.”

“You make me smile inside every time you say something. I am not used to that so you seem as unlikely to me as I apparently do to you.”

“We seem, then, to have the makings of a fascinating relationship if you decide to pursue it.”

“That suggests you are already committed to pursuing it?” Miguel said offering a tentative off the top of his eyes look.

It was another question the lad had phrased as a statement.

“Indubitably. You know, I think that may the first time I have ever used that word in any conversation outside of something I have written.”

“I’d say you have made some good decisions, then.”

He smiled. He drained his mug, for the first time looking very much like an eleven-year-old boy, as he tipped it back as far as the laws of physics would allow and patted it on the bottom to coax out every last drop. Harry alerted Millie to the fact and it was soon refilled. Miguel thanked her with a nod and reentered the serious conversation.

“About your proposition – getting to know one another better – I have some secrets so it couldn’t be a fully honest relationship.”

“I could live with that if you could. In all honesty, however, if I come to believe you are in or have put yourself in some kind of danger I would very likely be moved to protect you.”

“Then, I will be clever, adroit and cunning in my dealings with you. I have to ask what your motivation is. My past experiences with strange men wanting to get close to me have not all ended well.”

“Oh, my, Miguel. I am so sorry. You haven’t been hurt.”

“Let’s just say I am strong, agile, fast, and can scurry over a fence or wall in the blink of an eye. I’ve been okay. That is really not an ongoing problem for me. I shouldn’t have even brought it up. You are clearly a good person who harbors no ulterior motives.”

“Back to your question of my motive. When I was a

young man, a bit older than you, I needed someone to enter my life and offer support and guidance. Such a person appeared out of the blue and probably saved my life. I believe in passing such things along.”

“Then, thank you for noticing me – out of the blue – so to speak. Please don’t turn this into any dire, life and death, need on my part. Alright?”

“Certainly. Nothing dire.”

The boy, finished at the booth, approached Mike for the money and left through the front door. He returned fifteen minutes later, a substantial, red shovel in one hand and change in the other. Miguel went out front and got to work. Mike held up the change for Harry to see and they exchanged thumbs’ up. It appeared Mike had provided a fifty-dollar bill – enough to test the lad’s honesty for sure.

Harry finally got to work on his manuscript. He had just finished page thirteen when the tinkle above the door caught his attention. He looked up to see Miguel motioning Mike to take a look at the results of his labor. Apparently, it was more than satisfactory. He got a pat on the back at the door and what appeared to be a ten out of the register.

‘Six sixty-six, indeed,’ Harry snorted under his breath. Mike had a good heart. Mike knew, from personal experience many years earlier, that Harry did as well.

Miguel approached Harry, the ten-dollar bill in hand.

“Look here. Ten. He said I did an exceptional job. I did, so I’m pleased he took notice of it. After I cleared the café’s walk I cut a two-foot path past a couple of stores in in both directions. I figured that would give people who couldn’t park right out front some incentives to still come and patronize the establishment.”

“How nice. Those really aren’t work gloves – knitted dress gloves the way the look.”

“They worked fine. I’m going to go see if I can find more proprietors who need my service. If I can earn more, perhaps I will buy some *work gloves* – that’s what you called them – work gloves?”

Harry nodded. Even more questions being raised.

“Mike says I can use his new shovel. This is becoming a stupendous morning for me. Thanks. Will you be here again

tomorrow morning?”

“I just sold a book. I will be able to afford café breakfasts for some time into the future.”

“I don’t understand the context of that so I can’t fully appreciate it. Perhaps we can talk more about it in the morning. I better go now. Thank you again for your kindness and generosity.”

“Any time. You will take good care of yourself, now.”

The boy smiled and nodded.

Harry returned them in kind and the boy scooted out the door. The old man had to wonder again: ‘Thank you for your kindness and generosity’ – perhaps not uttered by an eleven-year-old since Daniel Webster was that age. He chuckled to himself.

* * *

Back at home by ten o’clock, Harry called his friend Pete the police detective.

“Pete. If you have time I might be interested in hearing about any missing boys, elevenish, Latioish, geniusish, well-groomed and expensively dressed – ish, I guess.”

“You just *might* be interested? You know the arrangement – I give you info and you give me a heads up at the appropriate moment – and that doesn’t mean within moments of the end of the world for whomever or whatever.”

“Peter, my man. Have I ever let you down?”

“Of course not. I just feel better when I go through the litany as if it were somehow binding. Where’s the kid from?”

“I’m thinking probably North America.”

“Big help.”

“It’s a much bigger world than that, my friend.”

“I’ll see what’s on the wire and get back to you. You calling Bingo Wednesday night?”

“That’s the plan providing I wake up alive that morning.”

Harry rummaged the kitchen for what he called *no-no food* – chips, nuts, candy and the like – anything prohibited by his doctor. That morning it turned out to be corn chips. They were particularly salty so they demanded a diet cola, also. He was soon set up back at his computer ready to add the morning’s edits to the manuscript, which he had faith was, due to the forces of magic, patiently awaiting him somewhere

inside his computer. Always amazed when it appeared after he managed to click on the appropriately named folder (not always a given), it once again blossomed onto the screen.

He was distracted, unable to keep young Finkelstein out of his thoughts. Obviously, something was wrong. Obviously, a boy of his intellect understood Harry knew something was wrong. He muddled through the pages making the changes, but it became clear early on that one bag of corn chips was just not going to do it. Where were the milk and little white donuts when a guy needed them?

After lunch, he settled into his recliner for a nap – it could last anywhere from fifteen minutes to several hours depending more on how busy his mind was than how tired he was. He was surprised when he found he had slept through to almost three o'clock.

His routine was that after the nap he began writing new words, usually for an extended period of six to eight hours. At about seven he was putting on a pot of coffee to keep him mentally invigorated for the duration. There was a knock at the door. He fully expected to see Pete with a fist full of run-away notices. He wasn't really disappointed – just surprised.

"You don't have to invite me in if you are engaged in something important, but you said any time."

"Well, as I live and breathe, Finkelstein! What could possibly be more important than time with a new friend?"

The boy broke an immediate grin and chuckled in response to the greeting. Assuming that meant he was to go inside, he kicked his boots at each other to remove the snow. Harry handed out a long-handled whiskbroom with which to finish the process. He lad was thorough.

The old man stepped back and motioned him inside. The lad hesitated in the doorway for a long moment looking around. Harry wondered if that had been to plot an escape plan if it were needed. So sad! Regardless, he soon moved inside and Harry closed the door against the cold. As predicted, the snow had stopped by noon.

"Coat rack right there, if you're a user."

Another smile. He was soon stripped to his street clothes – the same brown sweater over a blue shirt with a buttoned-up collar he had been wearing earlier.

“Social or business?” Harry asked indicating the couch with his arm.

He took his usual place in his recliner. The boy smiled for no apparent reason.

“Some of both, I suppose. How has your day gone?”

‘Polite conversation first,’ Harry thought, somewhat amused.

“Very well actually. I was editing a story this morning and as I fitted the changes into the manuscript this afternoon it all seemed to work fine. And yours?”

“Earned a fist full of dollars using Mike’s shovel. He wouldn’t take rent. It was a good sort of task – basically mindless, you know – I had lots of things to think about. What’s our confidentiality arrangement – me to you?”

“Believe it or not, I’ve had to answer similar questions dozens of times.”

“Oh, I believe it. You are the kind that attracts troubled kids to you like a magnet.”

Miguel giggled.

“What?”

“My first inclination was to say, ‘like flies to road kill,’ but saw how that would tend to be oxymoron-ish to the Harry I’m coming to know.”

Again, Harry was amused.

“How have you come to that conclusion – what you are coming to know about me?”

“I have recently had the opportunity to meet many new people. I have become a good judge of folks. I had you picked out in the café this morning. I said to myself if I just wait here that man will find me. He has a kind face and is alert to his surroundings. I am out of place. He will wonder why. Only compassionate souls wonder why or at least follow up on such a wonder.”

“I see. A social analyst and philosopher as well. How about we get down to business or social or whichever seems more pressing. As to confidentiality – things stay between us unless I feel you are in danger or a court of law requires me to answer questions regarding our conversations, so if you are a Russian spy, be careful what you reveal.”

The boy’s quick smile immediately turned serious.

"I am not wanted in my home. I am a burden. The only person who cares about me is the butler – Higgins – and he is in no position to take on a precocious eleven-year-old although I have the idea he would if he could. He will begin drawing social security in the spring, which puts him in his late sixties. He was married once. He doesn't talk about what happened, but he seems sad about it.

"I am the responsibility of my aunt Henrietta. She is the maid, my only relative after my mother died. She does not like children and I drive her batty. We have an arrangement – I don't get in her way and she doesn't get in mine. It means the only rules I have are those Higgins and I agree on – curfew, attending school regularly and the number of naked girls allowed at sleepovers on weekends."

He waited for Harry's reaction, which appeared immediately – a single, open-hand clap and huge smile.

"A sense of humor! I knew you appreciated it, but haven't yet seen much on the production side."

"We are a stoic collection of people at Wentworth Heights. I truly believe the last joke that occurred there was when Mr. Wentworth married Mrs. Wentworth."

"Not a match made in heaven, you say."

"An arrangement between families sort of thing, I am certain. The old rich, high society, love is inconsequential, sort. No children if that adds to my contention."

"And they allow you to live there in their home?"

"House, not home – 18 rooms of house, period."

"Higgins lives in an attic room. Henrietta and I in the basement – we *each* have a room since I turned nine. I appreciate that – so does my aunt."

"May I ask about your mother and father?"

Never knew my father although I have reason to believe he was an astrophysicist. Mother was killed in a freak automobile accident when I was four – car she was riding in slid off a hillside – everyone perished. I have faint memories of her and some pictures. She is more like a shadow from my past than a meaningful part of my life.

"School?"

"I attend a private school for gifted brats like myself. I set the curve – fact not braggadocio."

“Finances?”

“For the school, you mean?”

“Yes, I guess for starters.”

“I’ve asked my aunt once and was told never to ask again. As far as clothes and such, my aunt always seems to have money for what I need. Again, if it’s not from her salary, I don’t know its source. It has only recently become of interest to me.”

“Your last name – I’m not asking what it is. That seems to be one of your closely guarded secrets, but is it your father’s.”

“It is not, according to Henrietta. It is my mother’s maiden name.”

“And Henrietta’s?”

“Something different entirely – she was married briefly as a teen, but something didn’t work out. I may well be genetically predisposed to divorce and the single life.”

“Here I am asking the questions. We need to be talking about what’s on your mind.”

“That’s alright – you needed that background. Your questions have been reasonable.”

He looked at the clock above Harry’s computer.

“I will need to leave by 8:55. Higgins will come for me in the limo. I arranged to be dropped off and picked up a block and a half away to keep all this – private, I guess is the reason.”

“Very well. I accept your reason although you understand that I truly don’t understand.”

“I do. Thank you. It pains me to admit this, but I’m not entirely sure what I need to be talking about. I can continue the way things are at home even though they are immensely uncomfortable. I have already passed the entrance tests for college and I’ll get full scholarships, but I’m putting that off until I’m at least sixteen – do you think that’s a good idea?”

“I do. Even then the age difference will be a continuing problem.”

Miguel nodded.

“I know. Mainly I just want to go live there and get away from the Heights. Right now, the idea of living in a dorm with older, hairy guys that shave, is more than a little

disconcerting.”

“By sixteen Mother Nature will have favored you with most everything you need so you won’t feel quite as out of place.”

“That’s what I figured. Thanks, though.”

“Like you, Miguel, I’m having a hard time understanding what role I can play in all this for you. I hope you understand that like Higgins, I’m in no position to take in a lad your age.”

“Oh, yes, I do – even though I’m sure I could be a huge help to you. I understand.”

There’s his ploy, Harry thought. Seep the possibility into the old man’s brain and just let it simmer for a while. I will have to nip that possibility more forcefully very soon.

“I assume you will be allowed to remain with your aunt as long as you need to.”

“If I don’t mess up in some unbelievable fashion, I imagine.”

“So, in the back of your head you feel that may be a possibility?”

“It did sound that way just now, didn’t it? Hmm?”

“I assume you are fed well and your medical needs are taken care of.”

“Oh, yes. Mr. Wentworth provides very well for both Higgins and my Aunt – and there is Juan, the gardener and handyman. He lives in part of the garden house where the equipment is kept. I often translate things for him that come in the mail.”

“I assume your hair is long because you prefer it that way.”

“You notice interesting things. Don’t read too much into them. Yes. I like long hair. The kids at school say it makes me look older and older is *a/ways* what I need.”

“Because. . .?”

“Because I’m already in classes with fifteen year olds whose major joy in life is dirty jokes that I don’t fully understand. I try Googling them, but it seldom helps much.”

“The picture I am forming goes something like this, Miguel: You have no place that you feel welcome, safe and comfortable. You feel uncertain about the stability of your relationship with the important adults in your life. You find

being smart is a mixed blessing. Interpersonal relationships with the youngsters in your life provide you with little that feels good – more likely produce, anxiety and uncertainty. In terms of family I hear you say it's okay to be an island unto yourself, but I can't believe that. I think there must be great hurt – grief, even – associated with that.”

“You're better than the shrink they used to send me to – *to which they used to send me*. When it got to the place I'd only go kicking and screaming, doc said he thought we should go on hiatus – take a break from each other. I'm quite sure it was more related to the amount of damage I did in his office – Ming Dynasty vases and such.”

“My. A side of you I figured had to be there, but haven't seen yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“Does the term 'anger' register with you?”

Miguel broke a quick grin and shrugged.

“Like I said, you're good. I knew you would be. I was afraid you would be too good and I think I just discovered that, in fact, you are. That presents a problem.”

“Enlighten me, son. Too good? Problem?”

“Like I said way back when, I have some secrets that must remain secrets. I'm thinking you will discover them and then things will become unbearable for me. You are too good, see.”

“Not really although I sense your tremendous discomfort about it. I suppose we could make a deal.”

“Deal?”

“Yes. If you feel there is some benefit for you in talking TO me we can proceed down that path for a while.”

“TO as opposed to . . .?”

“WITH. To is one way and With is back and forth, give and take, questions and answers.”

He nodded and gave it some deliberate thought.

“We can try that. I have heard sometimes criminals want to be caught.”

“If we hadn't just sealed our TO rather than WITH pact, I would ask you if you are a criminal, you understand.”

“Like I killed my mother and buried her under the apple tree at the back of the lot, you mean? No. Nothing like that. I

was taking an entirely different tack. Thanks for taking this time with me this evening. I better get going. Higgins is usually early – over protective you understand.”

He stood and offered his hand for a shake. Harry stood, took the hand and pulled the boy into a full embrace. There was no resistance. The boy tucked his head and laid it against Harry’s chest. He sobbed quietly. Harry brushed his hair with his big hand and just waited to initiate separation until the heaving chest calmed.

Miguel turned keeping his tear dampened cheeks away from view. He put on his coat and cap and wound the orange scarf tightly around his neck and high across his face. He reached for the door knob. Without turning back, he spoke.

“Thank you for everything, Harry. Good-bye.”

He opened the door and let himself out.

Harry was more than a little unsettled. The lad was distraught and may have just said good-bye forever to his most available lifeline.

Harry hurried into his boots, coat, gloves and gray hat with the bill and earmuffs. Tailing his young friends had never been a hallmark of his relationships, but something told him that things had reached the fear filled stage. The least he could do was make certain the boy hooked up with his ride.

He proceeded carefully, utilizing everything about ‘tailing a mark’, that he had learned as a boy from watching the Sam Spade Detective movies at the theater on Saturday afternoon. Through the peep hole, he had determined Miguel turned up the alley toward 46th Boulevard. Once outside he moved in that direction. The boy had a several minute head start. He peeked around the corner looking both ways. There he was heading west on the sidewalk maintaining a relatively slow pace. Oddly, there was no limo in sight. Harry looked up and down the street. There was every other kind of vehicle, but no limo. In his judgment, it had been scary enough to let the boy walk just a block and a half along a street at night in that neighborhood. Something was not as it had been presented.

It wasn’t that he didn’t understand kids lied to him – it was part of a troubled kids MO. He wondered if he’d been had by a very bright young con man. But toward what end? It

was confusing. If he could have just obtained a last name – a genuine last name.

Harry moved from shadowy doorway to shadowy doorway in case the boy looked back. He didn't. Perhaps he had that much trust in him. Perhaps he didn't care what happened. Harry would be patient.

At the corner with the alley that dissected the next block – the 2300 block – Miguel turned in. By that time, Harry was almost half a block behind. He hurried to catch up for fear of losing sight of him. That in fact was what happened. Cautiously, he looked around the corner; there was no boy to be seen. Harry knew the ally – dead in every sense of the word. The backs of long closed buildings butted the alley on both sides. Lights above the doors burned dimly as part of the long-term security plan – to keep the vagrants from accessing them. Also to that end, the windows on the first two floors had been covered with metal sheets. The fire escapes were wired in place several stories above the alley floor.

Harry leaned back against a wall and put his hands on his hips, resting from the quickened pace he had maintained those past few minutes.

“Hmm?”

A faint light came on ever so briefly in a window on the 5th floor. Surely not! The possibility shed doubt on everything the youngster had told him.

* * *

Harry carried the most inexpensive cell phone in existence. It was only for him to use in emergencies, the kind which might befall him while he was away from home – taking his walks and such. Perhaps a half dozen people had that number – certainly no more. It never rang.

It rang!

Harry, still leaning against the building in the alley, removed a glove, reached into his pocket and retrieved it. He recognized the caller.

“Good evening, Pete. It would be really good if you had some useful information. I think I have worked myself into another situation.”

“I have some news. Chances that it will be any good are slim, however. A runaway from southern California – right

age, right nationality, right side of the smarts scale. Missing since mid-October – that’s two months. Ran away from a boarding school. Lost his mother – his only guardian – in an auto accident in June. Now a ward of the court. Not sure how his tuition at the private school for high IQ kids is being financed. He has been enrolled there since preschool. I’ll keep digging. You think it could be him?”

“I should know in a few hours. I’ll check in later tonight, yea or nay.”

He returned his phone to his pocket and his gaze up to the window. It remained dark although it varied in hue as things will do when old eyes stare at something long enough. He moved across the alley hoping to determine which of the six doors might be available for entry. He found they were blank doors that had evidently been added as a precaution against intruders when the building was closed. The way they were set into the wall made it clear they opened out and had concealed hinges. There were no knobs or locks on the outside. Still, Harry walked the alley ready to examine each one.

“Well, well. What could be behind door number three?”

His attention had been drawn to it because the snow at its base showed the unmistakable impression of an arc – the arc the door would make when it was opened across the six inch layer of snow. There were also shoe prints close by.

“Hmm?”

Old Harry not only mouthed words as he typed when he was having difficulty constructing a sentence or paragraph, but he often thought out loud when cogitating important or complex circumstances. It became one of those ‘out loud’ times.

“So, a blank door that is constructed so it is only opened from the inside and yet I believe this one was just opened from the outside. Making the mystery even more interesting is that there is a certified genius on the inside.”

Something caught his eye. He reached out and touched it then returned to the previous door. It did not have that same feature.

“*The Case of the Disappearing Butler*”, he said, adding a very brief rendition of his version of an Irish Jig. It appeared

infrequently, but when it did signified something of great significance.

The heads of two small bolts – quarter inch – protruded through the door near the right frame, in the vicinity of the lock on the inside. They sat half an inch apart. Harry again removed his right glove and again dipped into his pocket, that time surfacing with a quarter. He lay the quarter across the two bolt heads.

“Click!”

The door sprang open – only an inch, but it allowed it to be pulled open all the way. He entered and closed the door behind him.

“It appears that, just perhaps, the boy has read some of my books.”

In the book, he referenced, that same setup with a step down transformer and solenoids had been rigged to allow entrance through a wooden panel in a haunted mansion when the circuit was completed across two bolt heads. That added still another layer of intrigue. Could it be the boy had read his books and set out specifically to find him for some reason? It seemed far too farfetched so Harry put it aside and looked around. He had entered a wide hallway. There were small wattage bulbs hung every thirty feet from extension cord wire. It was draped along the way from nails driven into the wall. He followed it around a corner and eventually up the stairs – up four flights of stairs. On the fifth floor he turned back in the direction of alley where he had witnessed the brief flash of light.

There it was, coming through the crack under the last door – light. The boy must have covered the window immediately upon entering the room, explaining the brief burst of light. Dozens of possibilities whirled through the old man’s head, but there was no reason to postulate about any of them since he felt certain he was about to come upon the answer.

He stopped at the door and took a deep breath. Interestingly, he thought, the pace of his heart beat had picked up – maybe from chasing an eleven-year-old, maybe from climbing the stairs – maybe in anticipation of what he was about to find.

He knocked on the door with some authority. The light

went off beneath it.

“Telegram for señor Jasper Humperdinck Finkelstein, Jr.”

He heard a short-lived giggle from inside the room. There was nothing more.

He knocked again.

“Mr. Finkelstein, I can read it to you if you are unable to come to the door. It is signed, The Headmaster and reads: Jasper. I have been informed that you have missed the 10:00 bed check for the past two months. Please contact me in reference to clean sheets – yea or nay – this week.”

The light came back on. The dead bolt clicked. The knob turned and the door opened a crack. A nose and one eye appeared chest high to the old man.

“Mr. Finkelstein, I presume,” Harry said.

“Call me, Jasper, please. We stand on no formalities in here.”

He opened the door.

“I guess I slipped up, huh?”

“Or, did the criminal – so to speak – want to get caught? I suppose that is fodder for a future conversation.”

“Come into my castle – no bosses, no responsibilities, no assignments, no rules, and up until now, no visitors – oh, and no need for clean sheets.”

“The Case of the Disappearing Butler. I’m happy I could be of service. You’re welcome.”

“You made that connection, did you? I just imagine then that you have a general idea about the why’s and wherefores of or my past several months. No offence, but you are much better than I figured you’d be. I bow to your superiority in this little contest.”

“A contest? Yes, I see. Sort of your edition of, ‘Catch me if you can’?”

“Something like that, I guess. The undertaking has served a wide variety of personal desires, needs and questions and has provided a number of growth producing experiences.”

“Successfully?”

“More or less. Have a seat – the choice is obvious, I suppose, since there is but one chair in the room.”

“Your room intrigues me.”

“I have water from the fire hose in the hall. I tapped into the electricity used to power the security lights. That allows me to have a lamp, a hot plate, and an electric heater. I had plans for a dorm sized refrigerator and a used computer in my near future. I can get wi-fi up here from the coffee shop across the street.”

Harry noted the past tense, ‘had’, perhaps signaling the ‘undertaking’, as he called it, had come to an end in his eyes.

“Books, I see,” Harry said pointing to cardboard boxes filled with them.”

“I managed to get a library card here in the city, based on the one I purloined from my roommate back in California. From there I charmed a librarian out of lots of books, which they were getting rid of – beyond repair. I figured if I were to be found, that might have been the weak link in my plan – the stolen card.”

“The mattress, there in the corner looks comfy.”

“It is. I use coats I scrounged from soup kitchens and the like for covers. As you can tell, my heater keeps a little room this size *toasty* comfortable. I’ve done quite well in the food department obtaining food for me and my ‘sick grandmother’ from food banks. I have found there is one major problem built into being a really nice person; they are suckers – easy marks – for con men.”

“Like yourself.”

“Hmm. Yes. I suppose so, although my cons were never for anything more than personal survival. I think that is different, at least in degree, from the motives of most con-people.”

Harry shrugged not ready to admit agreement with the boy’s premise even though he understood the clear contrast he was drawing.

“Resourceful for sure,” Harry said looking around and thinking the boy had, indeed, created the private castle of every eleven-year-old boys’ dreams.

“Lonely?”

“Sometimes. I have been kept quite busy just surviving so there hasn’t been much down time for contemplating such things.”

“What is your end game, Miguel? What do you want to happen next?”

“It has been more of an ‘in-game’ than looking toward any specific, ‘end-game’. By that I mean my life was going nowhere back at the Academy. I knew more than all my teachers would have if they had been stacked atop each other like a totem pole – and they knew it. I made them extremely uneasy. I’m thinking these past several months have been the best time of their lives since I arrived there at the bottom of the long bank of steps, suitcase in hand, and tears on my cheeks as a five-year-old. I remember I began squaring successive numbers at that moment to keep my mind off the terror I felt inside. I think I came to you to help me define my ‘end-game’ as you phrased it.”

“Why me?”

“I’ve read all your stuff – novels, essays, self-help, articles. You epitomize the perfect caretaker in my mind.”

“But most of that was fiction. A lifer in Alcatraz could have written the same stories.”

“But not the understory.”

“Explain, please.”

“What you write provides information at several levels. There’s the story or topic being discussed or presented on top. Underneath, though, is Harry offering an insightful sort of gentle compassion and love – a universal lesson on how life should be lived. I’ve never experienced that – one on one, I mean. I’ve always wanted that – needed that. I think all kids need that. The adults in your stories always treat children with respect and kindness and put their welfare first. From the time I was eight, I knew I had to meet you. Don’t get me wrong, I have always had people who truly did look out for my welfare, but they never took time to look at my soul and provide for it – my inner needs, my capacities beyond my scores, my potential to become a fine human being, to allow me to love – to match me love for love – back and forth. I knew you could and would do all those things.

“So, when life became just too unbearable I figured the time to meet you had come; so, ‘off I put’, as my nanny used to say. At school I had a credit card to meet my general needs, school supplies, treats, books, clothes and such. I

hacked its account and learned it had an upper limit of \$25,000 so I maxed out its cash value - \$5,000 – and purchased a plane ticket for here. I also got one from here to Mexico City in case things didn't work out. It took no more than ten minutes to do all that at an internet cafe. I knew the card would be cancelled. I have an up to date passport for school trips. I composed a letter of introduction and explanation to show where needed – boarding the plane alone and so on. Nobody even questioned me. There is a letter in somebody's future concerning that, I can tell you. TSA I imagine.”

“So, some large portion of the story you laid on me about your personal history was fabricated – a lie.”

“I prefer to think of it as a creative alternative to reality.”

Harry laughed out loud. It had been offered in all seriousness so Miguel could only manage a quizzical smile. He shrugged, not understanding what had been funny.

“Don't mind me, son. Odd things set me off. Go on.”

“I am a rich brat. Mother's family is loaded. She really did die, but only a few months ago – it was clearly part of the trigger for my leaving my old life behind. She and I were never close. I think I was a constant reminder of my father, who for some reason was an unpleasant memory. I have never known my father but to the best of my knowledge he really is an astrophysicist. I once found an envelope in the wastebasket in mother's room. It had been torn to shreds, but I could make out Jonathan Danvers, PhD, Dept. of Astrophysics. That was all I could reconstruct. The name on my birth certificate is Miguel Hernandez – Hernandez was my mother's last name.”

Harry's cell phone rang – an all-time record, twice in one month.

“I need to take this.”

“Meaning it's about me. That's okay. I'm not going to run. I came here to get your help so I guess at this moment I'm floundering in your care.”

Harry smiled.

“Harry here.”

It was Pete on the other end.

“The kid's name may be Hernandez. The authorities in California have located the man they believe is his naturel

father, a Jonathan Danvers, a Physicist at some space concern in New Mexico. For reasons that are unclear, his wife obtained custody of the child and divorced him just weeks after the boy was born. Went home to mama and daddy apparently. Kids IQ is off the charts. His private school reports he was not an easy student – lots of trouble with other kids and the staff. The Superintendent admits that in retrospect, that was mostly on them and not him. They didn't understand him and didn't make the necessary inquiries to be as helpful as they should have been. They are devastated that he had to run away to make that point. THE END, I guess – well, except that the boy's father has filed the court for custody and he and the boy's maternal grandfather have hired platoons of investigators to find him. In two months, not a shred of luck."

"Thanks, as always. I will get back to you, but the bottom line here is a Bingo."

"Gottcha. That's great!"

"About me, I assume," the boy said.

During the call, Miguel had stretched out on his back on his mattress, arms behind his head. With his baggy white pants, bare feet and chest, it could have been a scene lifted from any old black and white movie that included a Mexican waif.

"Yes. Good news, in fact – at least I hope you will believe it is good news."

The boy sat up cross legged and cocked his head.

"Your father has been located and has filed for custody of you. He and your grandfather have been searching for you almost from the moment you came up missing."

Tears flooded his cheeks and ran down his chest. He looked up at Harry as if in anticipation. The old man held out his arms. He had read the boy's heart. Miguel melted into Harry's embrace and remained a long time, sort of sitting, sort of lying there against his new, old, friend.

Harry thought: I will miss you Jasper Humpferdinck Finkelstein. I have every confidence that uniting with your brilliant, and most likely loving, father will provide an exciting and wonder-filled era in your young life. I'll always be here for you. I love you, son with your over-sized brain and creative

alternatives.

Miguel thought: I will miss you, Harry Halvorsen, by whichever nom de plume. I'll give this thing with my father a reasonable test drive, doing my best to believe it has a real chance to fulfill all my dreams about the father/son relationship. If it doesn't work out, I'll be back. I love you, old man, with your penchant for the absurd and your unqualified, colorblind love of humanity.

* * *

Miguel spread his smile out across the group.

"Like father like son. I'm an astrophysicist with a medical degree – I had to pursue something else until I was old enough to be employed. I found I had two, younger, half-brothers – to this day the delights of my life. My wife and I have committed our lives to the care of troubled, young braniacs, like I was. We have from one to three in our home most of the time – always just boys because even young Einsteins have an uncontrollable instinct for, shall we use Harry's term – hormonal driven hanky panky. Believe me, only from this new, adult, perspective can I even begin to appreciate what I put my former caretakers through as a kid. Cages, whips and chairs often seem the only solution, and that would be me, not the kids, on the stool, begging for mercy in the center of the enclosure.

"Thinking back it's hard to realize that Harry, as a flesh and blood being with his big hands and wonderful hugs, was only in my life for a matter of hours. Of course there were and will always be his books. In our home it is fully predictable that once one of our new charges discovers them on our shelves, he will consume every last one."

He turned a bit toward the pine box, and, one at a time lovingly dropped two small bolts onto it. He continued his thought.

"By way of your books, dear friend, you continue spreading the magic touch of old Harry Halvorsen, day after day, month after month, year after year. We all thank you. What more can be said: Jokester, lover of the absurd, philosopher, author, confidant, wise man, tireless, impeccable model, magnet for the troubled, and absolute genius when it came to the care and nurturing of troubled youngsters. *And,*

from what I've learned here today, the very best source in the known universe of *twist-ok-olate*.”