

Ripples

*A wise old man stumbles onto a needy runaway.
They change each others' lives forever.*



Tom Gnàgey

RIPPLES

By Tom Gnagey

© 2013, 2017

Family of Man Press

///

CHAPTER ONE

Most who didn't know him called the old man crazy. Some, used the term misguided. A few, preferred eccentric. Although he was not given to be offended by anyone for any reason, if pressed, he would have preferred eccentric over the others. To him it suggested that he followed his own path on his way to living according to his own thoughtful convictions. He had come to treasure that precious potential of the human species. Long ago he had learned that regardless of what truly was, folks would think what they would think. At eighty-three, he had enough trouble keeping his own mind straight, so he expended no energy trying to rectify misconceptions about him in the thoughts of others. Quite honestly, neither had he at the more tender age of eight!

Also, long ago, he had become saddened by the realization that most members of his species mindlessly rushed toward the cliff in their eager attempts to become clone-like, nondescript, members of the herd, unwilling to express and follow original thoughts on important matters for fear of being relegated to the other side of the fence. To let others do ones thinking for him, was the single worst sin the old man could conceive.

That, however, was just about the only sadness he permitted himself and the older he grew the less he allowed himself to be troubled by even that.

The old man snugged his long, red, scarf around his neck as he leaned into the swirling, late evening, December, snow on his way home from the little grocery store on the corner. Cities needed more small, family run groceries and cafes, he believed. Pride lived in such cozy spots. He could not feel pride in the larger places detached as they were from family honor and tradition.

As he passed a small, time worn, brick, apartment building, he stumbled over something in his path and fell forward onto the snow

packed sidewalk. His two bags flew from his arms and their contents spread out in front of him.

"I'm so sorry, Sir," came a youngster's voice out of the darkness. He was quickly kneeling beside the old man.

"What did I stumble over?" he asked, clearly confused, as the lad helped him into a sitting position and brushed the snow from his stocking cap and coat.

"My legs, Sir. I'm really sorry. I was sitting back against the iron fence, there. My legs were out onto the sidewalk. I didn't expect anybody out in such weather. I guess I fell asleep."

The old man looked up into the boy's face – pale skin with black, unkempt hair, covered with snow. He looked to be fourteen – perhaps fifteen.

The old man moved his gaze to the grocery strewn area on the ground in front of him.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he said looking back and forth among the objects.

"What? What's beautiful?" the boy asked, puzzled.

"The moon through the snow lighting all the colorful things from my bags – the cranberries, the bananas, the carrots and celery and oranges."

"I would have never thought to see the catastrophe as beautiful but you're right, I suppose. Like a Christmas card from a produce company."

The old man chuckled on for some time as he lifted his arm for a hand up.

"You laughing at me or at what I said?"

"I never laugh at people, other than myself sometimes. It was your entertaining quick wit that activated my chortles."

"Chortles – chuckling through one's words."

"You know the term. Unexpected. I should be ashamed of myself for underestimating you, Son."

"Shall I disassemble the beautiful collage in the snow and return its elements to the bags?"

"You have an interesting way with words."

He nodded into the boy's face. The young man responded.

"Interesting. I like that. It's usually described in more derisive ways – uppity, show off, egg head, know it all."

"It sounds like you let such comments bother you."

"Damn right they bother me. One more piece of proof that I don't fit into this two-bit world. Sorry about the damn. I don't usually swear – except in the presence of my parents."

They repacked the two bags mostly in silence. The old man was not privy to the information required to understand the boy's references about fitting in and swearing and he would not press.

"I'll carry them home for you. It's the least I can do for causing your header into the snow."

"That's very kind. Thank you. I can handle one of them. It seems you have a duffel bag there to carry. I imagine we can whip up some hot chocolate at the other end if you're into such things on a cold, winter, Wisconsin, evening."

"If I'm usually not, I think I may possibly make an exception tonight, Sir."

"You speak with the conviction of broccoli, lad."

The boy laughed out loud – not much but it did qualify.

"Never heard that before," he said smiling.

"Neither have I. That's one of the most magnificent things about being a person – the capacity to think brand new thoughts."

"Magnificent? I must admit I've never thought of people as being magnificent."

Although immediately saddened by the lad's response, the old man again chose not to respond. He didn't tell others how they should believe even about such important matters as the preciousness of the human species. They began walking on.

"Got a name, Kid?"

"Jaz with one Z – short for Jasper. You?"

"Joell with two L's – long for Joel."

Jaz broke a quick smile not expecting the witty response from such an old man.

"Don't often hear the name Jasper these days," Joell said, thinking he was making innocuous small talk.

"Thank goodness!"

"Thank goodness?"

"No kid should be saddled with, Jasper!"

"Really? What would you choose, then?"

Silence followed them the rest of the block as the boy thoughtfully considered the question.

"Jaz seems okay, actually – right even, you know?"

The old man nodded in silence hoping the boy would come to understand that his preference could not have come to be without his parent's original choice.

"We turn here at the alleyway," Joell said pointing.

"Wow! Some mansion!"

"That's not my place. I'd get lost and never find my way out of anything that big. Sadly, a dozen hungry families could be fed for the price of its monthly utility bills. There's a path off to the right about half way down the alley."

The straight talking old man intrigued Jaz. The mysterious young man intrigued Joell. Neither let on. Both felt suddenly comfortable.

The path began as an arched break in the bushes and underbrush that spread along the right side of the alley – strange in the middle of a city, Jaz thought. Just inside the opening was a large lot ringed by a dozen huge pine trees and more underbrush as if stationed there to protect the area from everything unwanted. Immediately the harsh sounds of the city disappeared.

"It's like an oasis of silence," Jaz said, stopping and turning his head as if to experience it more completely.

Joell was silently impressed with the analogy but merely nodded. At the rear of the lot sat a cabin of sorts. Jaz estimated maybe three rooms and a loft above. There was a wide dormer facing front. The lower three feet was traditional wooden siding running horizontally. Above that, clapboard, hung vertically. On the right end was a large, brick, chimney rising from what was obviously a sizable fireplace at ground level. The building's general state of repair could not be confirmed in the shadows cast by the brilliant moonlight although Jaz would have wagered money it was painted dark red tending toward brown. The several windows glowed orange spreading a warm path reflected across the snow to greet them. Speaking of Christmas Cards, Jaz figured the picture sitting there before him would be his all-time choice.

"Quaint. Inviting. Safe."

The boy presented the staccato litany as if intended more for him than Joell.

The old man opened the door and motioned Jaz in ahead of him. The boy looked around and spoke.

"Aren't you afraid I might hurt you, mug you, steal your stuff?"

"Are you planning any of those things?"

"No."

"Then I suppose not."

"You're odd. I don't mean that as a bad thing I hope you understand."

"Well, then, from what meager personal information you've shared with me it would seem we might make a good pair that way."

Jaz smiled without comment.

"My kitchen is that corner," Joell said pointing left across the room to an area replete with cabinets, sink, refrigerator and stove. "Let's stow the grub in the cupboards and fridge and then whip us up a batch of world class hot chocolate, Okay?"

"Sounds good. You're being very kind."

"I've found there is no margin in being any other way."

The boy was not moved to verify the old man's position.

They unwrapped from their heavy coats, suddenly taking on human form. Joell was slender, shrunken somewhat from his teen year's peak at six feet. His long, wispy hair and scraggly beard were a good match in hue to the flakes swirling outside the windows. He donned gold, wire rimmed, half lens, glasses, which accented his bright, blue, eyes.

Jaz was half a head shorter, wide shoulders, with long black hair that seemed a recent stranger to a comb. Set against his pale, smooth, complexion, his brown eyes appeared darker than they were. He shivered and blew into his cupped hands.

"Know how to put a log on the fire?" the old man asked, hitching his head toward the big fireplace.

"Yes, Sir. Had one once."

"You had a log on a fire?"

Jaz smiled. He liked the absurd turns the old man's humor took.

"A fireplace. Had a fireplace, but then you knew that's what I meant, didn't you, Sir?"

"You seem comfortable with my strange approach to humor. Many folks aren't."

"I guess strange has always been pretty familiar – maybe comfortable, even – to me, Sir."

"We have to do something about that 'Sir' thing. I appreciate the respect implied by it but I've done nothing to earn that from you

yet. Like you, I would not have selected Joell with two L's for my name so that's not the best alternative. Most of my life I've been called Doc. Try that on and see if it seems suitable."

"Doc like doctor like physician?" Jaz asked.

"No. Just Doc like Grumpy's brother."

Another smile crossed the boy's face. That one stuck for a moment unlike the others that had come and gone as if never really intended to be there.

"You add a log, then, and warm up those hands. I'll get the hot chocolate underway."

"So, why Doc, Doc?" Jaz asked kneeling before the fireplace and folding and moving to one side the standalone screen.

"They say as a little boy I used words expected from the mouths of professors so I simply became Doc at an early age."

Jaz looked back over his shoulder at the old man.

"You got Doc and I got Egghead. I think you got the best deal – er . . . better deal."

"I'll gladly give you my Doc if that will turn your life around," the old man said continuing to face the wall at the counter.

"You would, wouldn't you?"

Doc remained quiet, delighted with the quandary he had planted in the youngster's mind. Jaz turned back to his task and moved a log from the low stack beside the fireplace onto the fire. The splinters, which graced the log like fearsome whiskers, immediately lit, briefly brightening the room in a single burst of brilliance.

"It feels good," Jaz said extending his hands, palms out, toward the flames.

"The fire?"

"The whole package here."

He replaced the screen and sat back cross-legged staring the gaze of the lost into the flames.

"So, you going to be Doc or Jaz?" the old man asked.

"I'm cool with Jaz. Two Doc's might get confusing."

"How about rethinking that last comment?" Doc suggested.

The question took Jaz by surprise but he complied with some inner enthusiasm.

"Ah! You mean with just the two of us, the Doc being addressed would never be in question."

"Just how bright are you, anyway, young man?"

"Straight 'A' bright with little sweat if that's what you're asking. Often wished I wasn't."

Doc chuckled and shook his head. It had once been his own wish.

"You'll need to come and get your mug. My old hands don't play well when they're both required to be engaged at once."

Jaz hurried to his feet and returned to the kitchen area. Mugs in hand they moved to the rustic sofa, which sat back ten feet from the hearth. Doc placed his mug on the long coffee table, which separated them from the brown stone, wall that housed the huge fireplace.

"So you had one of these at some point in your life?" Doc said pointing.

He thought he'd turn the conversation in that direction in case the boy wanted to talk about such things out of his past. Quite clearly, he didn't.

Instead, he used the celebrated, age old, fill-your-mouth-with-hot-chocolate-so-you-can't-be-expected-to-respond, ploy.

Doc smiled to himself and moved on, pointing around the room.

"I built the place – every board, every nail, every wire, and every pipe."

"It sure turned out great. How long ago?"

"Back when I was a pup – fifteen years ago."

"You remained a pup for a considerable portion of your life, I'd say, then."

Doc smiled.

"I never intended to be anything else. Still am inside this head."

"I think I've determined that. I'm afraid I'm just the opposite – been eighty-eight since I was eight."

"What a shame."

Jaz shrugged. He directed and took back a quick glance at the old man, as he continued sipping, thinking he might have revealed more than he had intended to. All quite unexpectedly a single tear rolled down his cheek. He immediately brushed it away and looked back into the fire.

Doc made no comment, but all quite automatically reached over and patted the boy's leg.

"I suppose I shouldn't have done that. I'm told adults aren't

permitted to touch young people any more. If it was bothersome I certainly apologize."

"No. Not a problem. Being touched in kindness and compassion is foreign to me. It was very nice. Thanks."

With that, he knew for sure that he had revealed more than he had intended. He concentrated on finishing his drink then placed the empty mug on the low table.

"I suppose I should be on my way," he said, looking around the big room.

"On your way to where? Back to sitting in a snow bank in front of that rusty old iron fence?"

Jaz looked into Doc's face but said nothing. Doc continued.

"I will not pry, Son, but clearly you have no place to go. My couch is yours for as long as you need it."

"I really don't get you, Doc."

"Good! I've always cherished the mysterious air that has followed me through life."

"I'm serious!"

"So am I. Like I said, I don't pry but I'm a good listener if that ever sounds like a useful path to try. It sounds like fun to me – just the two of us batching it here."

"I don't know. I'm not much for taking charity."

"Who said anything about charity? I need wood chopped and snow shoveled and dishes washed and groceries carried."

"But you'd do all of those things for yourself if there wasn't somebody else to help."

"You seem to have lots of ways to build walls between yourself and others, son."

"It's the only safe way. People hurt you."

"I'm sorry that's been your lot. Mine has been all quite different."

"So it seems."

"There's another mug's worth of hot chocolate on the stove if you want it. Will need to be heated some, I imagine."

"Thanks. Yes. I'll share it with you."

"One's my limit. Goodness! It just occurred to me that you probably need a whole lot more than a drink. You have any problem with a sandwich and chips?"

"I suppose not."

The boy's hunger easily overpowered his characteristic reluctance.

They stood and walked together back to the kitchen corner. Doc opened the refrigerator and leaned down reciting its contents.

"Ham, cheese, sliced turkey, whole wheat and rye, butter, eggs, and Mayo. Sausage and bacon in the freezer."

Jaz made no move on the food physically or verbally.

Without standing back up the old man turned his head toward the boy.

"Do you want me to guess or can you give me a little help here, Son?"

"Sorry. It was me being broccoli, again, I guess."

They shared a grin.

"Ham and cheese on rye with Mayo sounds great."

"Go to it then. What's mine is yours tonight."

"I'll . . ."

The hurried comment from Jaz trailed off to a stop before it launched. He looked at Doc.

"I was going to say I'll pay you back but that presents two immediate problems."

"Two?"

"One, I'm flat broke and two I doubt if you'd accept it."

"I'll take your word for number one and acknowledge your insight where number two is concerned. I like you Jaz."

"I like you, too, Doc."

The boy hesitated as he spread the sandwich makings out on the counter. Then he turned to Doc.

"I've seldom said that to anybody."

"That?"

"That I like them."

"Because?"

"Because I don't often find it is true."

"Or, you don't want to find it is true."

The boy's response was delayed.

"You can't understand."

"You're right, of course. I'd like to if you ever decide to share things."

Jaz nodded. They both understood it meant he was merely acknowledging the offer and not that he was accepting it.

Doc stirred the suddenly steaming hot chocolate, watching furtively while Jaz constructed the sandwich of all sandwiches. Bread, Mayo, slices of ham, slices of cheese, bread (Mayoed on both sides), cheese, ham, topped off by a third slice of bread with Mayo.

"May I use the big knife?"

"So long as it's for cutting the sandwich."

Jaz grinned, cut the sandwich on the diagonal, rinsed the knife under the faucet, and returned it to its place in the wooden rack.

"Plates in that cabinet," Doc said pointing. "Napkins in that drawer."

He filled the boy's mug and they returned to the couch – well, Doc returned to the couch; Jaz opted for a seat on the floor near the fire from where he could enjoy both the warmth and see Doc.

"Can I take off my shoes?"

"I assume a lad of your age can probably take off his shoes."

Jaz held a long smile looking into Doc's face.

"I'll rephrase. May I take off my shoes?"

"Of course. Loosen up, young man. Be yourself."

"I am being myself, I'm afraid. I don't much like it either."

"I didn't mean to imply I didn't like it. Just think of this as a no fault zone. Nobody makes mistakes here. Nobody embarrasses themselves here. Everybody tries whatever he wants to try here. No fouls are ever called here."

"Even better than Never Never Land," Jaz said with a nod indicating that he understood.

The fleeting, furrows in his brow, however, suggested that although he understood the old man's intention, he didn't necessarily understand anything else about it.

He removed his shoes and socks and placed them close to the fire to dry. He kneaded his feet.

Doc was a patient man. He loved challenges almost as much as he loved the human race. Challenges provided purpose for his life. Such opportunities had, understandably, been coming along less and less frequently as he found himself remaining at home more and more. He was wise enough to understand that his time with the boy would be limited – by circumstances, by family, by authorities, perhaps by the boy himself. In whatever time they would have together, he would help the boy grow and sort through his issues.

CHAPTER TWO

The snow continued throughout the night. By morning the drifts had swirled a good way up the first-floor windows.

As had been his habit for most of his years, Doc was up at six and showered by six fifteen. He dressed and descended the steep steps to the main room. Jaz was not on the couch. His shoes were not beside the fireplace. He was nowhere to be found.

"Way too short a friendship," Doc said out loud as he shook his head and walked to the front door. He peered outside through the little window to check the conditions.

It would be a morning's work for him to shovel a path to the alley – or would it? In a second take, he wiped the moisture from the small window in the door and looked out to see the boy, snow shovel in hand, looking back on his work from the opening into the alley. The path was two shovel widths wide and right down to the cobblestones. He had carved an eighteen-inch-deep canyon through the still darkness of the morning.

It put a smile on Doc's face and no small amount of relief in his heart. He took the act as the boy's signature on their deal – shelter and grub for a little work. The conversations, if they came, would come free.

He went to the kitchen area and began fixing breakfast. He put on coffee. Four eggs scrambled rather than the usual one. A dozen strips of bacon rather than two. Slices of bread set in the toaster awaiting meal time. He poured two glasses of orange juice and set plates and silverware out on the small round, pine, table. He added four more strips of bacon as he saw how they were shriveling in the sizzle.

As if on cue, Jaz entered the front door as Doc spread the bacon to drip dry on paper towels.

"I didn't know boys your age ever arose this early," Doc said as Jaz stomped his shoes free of snow at the door and removed his wraps.

"I've always been an early riser. Like to get my chores out of the way first thing. It smells wonderful in here. Whatcha got?"

He moved to the cabinets and nodded his approval.

"Best snow path this old place has ever known from what I could see through the window," Doc said.

"Thanks. I like physical work. It's supposed to build muscles. Never seems to do that for me. I'm strong, just no beach boy muscles ever sprout."

"Seldom do 'til a guy turns fifteen."

"Really? I wish I'd have known that back when I turned twelve."

"Have a seat. Everything's ready."

Jaz just sat there, making no move to fill his plate.

Sensing the problem, Doc had a suggestion.

"How about if I take what I want and then the rest is yours? More where this came from. I forget about how to judge the size of a young man's appetite."

Jaz seemed put at ease as the pans were passed to him and he eagerly scraped them clean onto his dish. He ate as if starved. Doc winced.

"What?" Jaz asked again with the furrowed brow.

"I was just waiting for you to come up for air so I could ask if you'd like more toast or juice."

"Yes. That would be great. Thank you."

The 'or' had clearly been removed from the equation. Doc was overjoyed. It had been some time since he had shared his table with anybody – a year or more since with a youngster. He was feeling younger by the minute.

That was not necessarily a good thing. The last time those youthful feelings overtook him he had been prompted to take a spin on a young man's skate board. The upshot had been torn ligaments in his shoulder and a deeply bruised posterior. He insisted it hadn't been the fall that damaged him. It was the landing!

Doc returned with the toast and drink and took his seat, nursing his mug of coffee.

"I assumed you wouldn't want coffee," he said.

"Good assuming. I'm a juice guy – juice or milk, depending."

"I was thinking that after breakfast you could hang what clothes you have in the closet by the front door. I have an iron if you want to use it."

"That's probably not such a good idea."

He said no more and Doc didn't press. It had given him the answer he was looking for – the boy assumed that eventually a quick get-away would probably be in order. Somebody was looking for him. That should be a good thing. Somebody cared and wanted him to be safe. There was no guarantee it was a good thing, however.

"After breakfast, I'll help with the dishes then I could really use a shower."

"Shower's in the bathroom upstairs off my bed room. Make yourself at home."

Jaz nodded as he slicked his plate clean with the last scrap of toast.

"That was great. Thanks. I make stupendous pancakes. I'll cook in the morning."

So, his plan included at least one more sleep over. Doc relaxed a bit.

As they stood there, side by side at the sink doing up the dishes, two things became apparent to Doc. The boy was careful, methodical, and well-practiced in the art of doing dishes. Second, he really did need a shower!

"You have clean clothes to change into?"

"You might say I have cleaner clothes to change into. What I mean is no, not really. They are all pretty rank."

"We can do a load of washing after you're out of the shower, then."

Make that two loads. Jaz arrived back down stairs sporting a large, blue, bath towel secured around his waist and another draped over his head sopping what it could from his still dripping hair. He dragged his duffle bag to the washer in the small utility/mud room at the rear of the house and unzipped its several compartments. Doc watched, adjusting the dials and providing soap and such.

He seemed to have one filthy blanket, four changes of outfits, an extra pair of tennies, and a half dozen books. From other bulges Doc surmised there were several flashlights as well. There was a narrow, foot long, hard, leather case at one end.

By nine, the laundry was done and dried. Jaz carefully rolled up three of the outfits – smoothing them to as wrinkle free as possible – and replaced them into his bag. The fourth he immodestly donned as he continued to talk with Doc.

"You get snows like this every December up here?" he asked.

"Usually. Yes. Lots of snow. I can't remember a Christmas without it."

"Nice. I like snow. Last night it was really beautiful while it was coming down. I sat over at the window and watched it for a long time after you went upstairs."

He stopped and looked Doc in the face.

"This is really cool of you to let me stay here like this. Nice, I mean. You have to promise you'll tell me when I've overstayed my welcome or if I put a crimp in your style. It may take a day or so before I complete the next step in my plan."

"I guess I'm glad to hear you have a plan," Doc said his tone clearly asking for more.

It didn't come and Jaz shifted his eyes away from him. He dragged the duffle bag back to its spot behind the sofa.

"You're a musician?" Doc asked moving the screen in preparation for adding a log.

Jaz took it from him and continued the process as Doc stepped back and watched.

"How could you know that?"

"The clarinet case in your bag."

"Good eyes for an old guy – no offense."

"You're in the no fault zone, remember."

"Oh. Yeah. Never been in one before. You'll need to be patient with me."

"I figure your music must be very important to you if you brought your instrument along on this – whatever this is you're on."

"For eight years, it's been my life you could say."

"Your choice?"

"Not at first. Sort of now, I suppose."

"I'd love to hear you play sometime."

"Sometime, maybe. You play?"

"Actually, I do. Most every day in fact. French horn."

"Really. I admire French Hornists. A very difficult instrument. Played long?"

"Took it up when I was fifty."

"So, you've only been playing thirty some years, then? That was intended to be humorous."

"It was. Shall I put it on the calendar?"

"Not sure what you mean."

"It was intended to be humorous – as if it were the first time you'd ever attempted humor – worthy of a place where it will be remembered."

"Ah! I see. I'm thick headed sometimes."

"You always this hard on yourself?"

"Hard on or realistic about? There is a significant difference, you know."

"Tough minded, I see that."

"I've been told conversations with me are often difficult," Jaz said as if providing an out for the old man – testing the waters perhaps.

"Wonderful! Conversations, which don't require thought, are worse than no conversations at all."

"Really! You think that, too?"

"Not always made me popular with my peers, but yes, I love working on ideas."

"Me too. I never really knew anybody else who thought like that. I keep hoping when I get to college that will change."

"I take it the folks at home couldn't meet your needs for intellectual stimulation."

"Time for a new topic."

"Sorry. I didn't intend to step on any toes."

"No problem. It's my choice. Do I get to hear you play?"

"Sometime, maybe."

"That was my line," Jaz said grinning.

"I know."

It was worth a smile between them.

There was a knock on the door.

"That will be the Christmas Tree," Doc said.

Jaz set the screen in place and followed the old man to the door.

"Hey, Jake."

"Hi, Doc. Got you a great one this year. All balled up for transplanting, like usual. Expect you there by five."

"You can count on it."

Jake and his helper dollied the small tree through the door and set it in place beside the fireplace. The delivery men left. Jaz had questions.

"Strangest looking Christmas tree I've ever seen. Why the dirt and gunny sacks around the bottom?"

"It's a living tree. After I've . . . we've . . . enjoyed our time with it, it will be planted out at Harington Hills."

"And that would be . . .?"

"A home for older folks who can't take care of themselves. I've built a virtual forest for them over the past twenty years or so. They take great joy in it."

"Sounds like you do, too."

Doc nodded.

Jaz continued.

"I guess that's why it's only five feet tall – younger the transplant the less chance it'll die."

"Or, the greater chance it will live."

"I get your point – I'm the negative guy and you're the positive one."

"I hope your condition isn't intractable."

"I wouldn't get my hopes up if that's where you're going with this. It's generally acknowledged that I'm willingly mired in my misery."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm good with it."

"Then I'm even more sorry."

They stood back and looked the tree over.

"Are you open for suggestions?" Jaz asked at last.

"Always. I delight in suggestions. Doesn't mean I always take them, but sure. Fire!"

"What if we bring in that wooden crate from the utility room and set the tree up on top of it? That'll raise it up a good two feet. Then we can drape a tablecloth or sheet or some such thing around the base to the floor – cover the ball and the crate."

"Sounds great. That will definitely make the tree the star of the room this season."

Jaz was soon back with the crate – e a good deal heavier than he had anticipated. His continued effort to carry it without a rest stop had become a matter of principle.

"One problem here," he said after positioning the crate where he thought it should sit. "I'm not sure the two of us can lift the tree up onto the box. Dry dirt typically weighs seven pounds a gallon and I'd estimate there must be fifteen to twenty gallons in that ball. That's somewhere between 105 and 140 pounds plus the weight of the tree."

"You know the weight of a gallon of dirt? Nobody knows the weight of a gallon of dirt!"

Jaz grinned.

"I got lots of useless info stashed up here."

He pointed to his head.

"Once I hear it I just can't shake it."

"I have a possible solution to the problem," Doc said pulling at his beard. "How about you?"

Jaz stood back and thought assuming the problem referred to lifting the tree and his ability to remember things.

"Does this mental exercise come with any clues?" he asked.

"Back to the washing board. How's that?"

"Clever. Your play on words is directing me to re-configure things with reference to the laundry room. Oh! I got it. The planks in there. I'll need some help."

In the short time, he'd known him, Doc had seen the boy's mood move from passively polite, through grateful helpfulness, to what at that moment was approaching pure joy. He wondered how often he had let himself experience that.

"I'm right behind you, kid."

The two, eight-foot-long, well weathered, two by tens were soon positioned with one end on the top edge of the box and the other on the floor.

"Help me walk the tree over to the bottom of the ramp," Jaz said.

That deed was soon accomplished and together they carefully walked it up the ramp by gently rocking it back and forth. It took some time.

"Hey!" Jaz said with more excitement than either he or Doc had anticipated. "Look what we've done! There it sits. Isn't that a better height?"

"I agree that it's perfect although I prefer not having conclusions forced upon me."

"I don't understand. I'm sorry. I don't understand how I did

that."

Doc smiled and put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Here's the deal. When you asked, 'Isn't that a better height,' you forced me to either agree or disagree with your conclusion. That could have put me in a bind if I really hadn't agreed but didn't want to offend you. Next time try something like, 'I think that's great! What do you think?' It may only seem like a shade of difference but it allows me the more comfortable freedom of stating my idea. Your way really requires – forces – my agreement with your take on it. It doesn't allow for my opinion."

"I'd never considered that option. Thanks. I've probably been making people uncomfortable all my life. Wow! Thanks. Interesting. At other times and in other places I've beat on guys for suggesting things like that to me."

Doc chose not to pursue the comment.

"There are sheets and tablecloths in that trunk under the window, there. See what catches your fancy."

Jaz knelt in front of it, raised the lid and carefully examined the contents.

"Red or white do you think?" he asked.

"Your call this year," Doc said. He was certainly not given to making a big deal out of such a small detail.

"Red then. I feel red."

After numerous adjustments and readjustments, the cloth was in place, pleasantly draped with swirling ridges and valleys. The final arrangement showed more sensitively to proportion and artistic sense than one would expect from a lad his age.

"So, do you have decorations?"

"Only in my head. I always make new ones each year. On New Year's Eve I burn them in the fireplace, making way for new ideas, directions, and pleasures in the coming year."

"You are a philosophical treasure trove," Doc.

The old man smiled and shook his head.

"And you are a constant source of amazing phrases. I have to wonder if you have considered writing as a career or pastime."

"You just did that comfortable thing, didn't you? Instead of saying, 'I think you should become a writer, don't you?' you phrased it the no-pressure way – 'I have to wonder if . . . blah, blah, blah!'"

"You do pickup on things fast."

"For better or worse."

"I don't suppose you want to elaborate on that?"

"Maybe. Sometime. We'll see, said the broccoli to the freshly brewed coffee. How do we make the ornaments and stuff?"

Doc let the coffee comment go for the moment.

"I can run through some options I've used. You can pick and choose or come up with new ideas. I like to make paper chains to drape around the branches. Sometimes I make stars out of colored straws. I like to cut and paste three dimensional figures and put glitter on them – bells, pine trees, santas, cabins."

"How about pine cones. There must be a gazillion of them out in your yard – out in your yard buried under two feet of snow. . . . I wonder if there are some still hanging on the lower branches? Can I . . . May I go out and take a look?"

"You're not a prisoner, remember. Be my guest. Take some brown grocery bags. I'm sure you'll find cones in abundance."

Jaz bundled up and left.

Doc found the boy's wallet on the floor near the fireplace. It had fallen from his pocket. He picked it up and placed it on the coffee table. The old man knew it probably held answers to the myriad of questions that swirled in his head about the boy. Still, he didn't look inside.

Fifteen minutes later Jaz returned, red cheeked and smiling.

"Got two bags. All sizes. A few are still green with their flaps pulled tight. Some are huge and dry and all opened up."

He dumped them onto the floor in front of the hearth, then tugged impatiently as he removed his gloves and coat, relegating them to the floor.

"I was thinking that gluing some glitter along the edges of the open flaps would be pretty. If you have paint we could – what else – paint some of them. And if you have any ribbon we could use that to make bows on top, then hang them from the branches with string."

"Sounds fine – cool, as somebody I know might say."

Jaz grinned up at him.

"I'm not sure I have ribbon. I do have several dishtowels with ribbon-like stripes – red, yellow, and green. Maybe those could be cut and used."

"Cut up your good towels? Really?"

"Good towels. Good ribbons. I see no difference."

Jaz sat back on his legs.

"I had a teacher once who kept trying to get me to think outside the box, as she called it. To think from new, nontraditional, perspectives. I have to wonder if you ever actually thought from INside the box, Doc."

The old man chuckled. He also wondered about the boy's 'me' reference where it most typically would have been 'us'. A tutor perhaps. He didn't pursue it.

"If you'll allow an old man an anecdote."

"Sure. I love to hear about the olden days."

"When I was five – so the story goes – I talked my parents into letting me design my own Halloween costume. It was absolutely great but, inexplicably to me, was not allowed to leave my house. When the time came to go trick or treating I appeared in the living room stark naked with a huge 'L' painted on my chest. Unlike my parents, I imagine you will need no explanation."

"You were going as a nudeL – a noodle. That's fantastic but I suppose it only amplifies my question about if you ever do think within the box."

"There are times for in and times for out. 'In' is for clear communication. 'Out' is for searching the possibilities of this wonder-filled human being that we are."

"I tend to put people off with my overly ample vocabulary. I take inappropriate, impish, delight in perplexing them. I understand it presents a hindrance to clear communication. Most folks can't understand – or don't want to hear – my ideas to begin with so I figure it doesn't really matter if I use words they can't understand."

"It sounds like you have some ongoing issues about all that."

"Does it, now?"

The boy grinned into Doc's face.

"Where will we find that ribbon making material?"

He looked around playfully, holding out his open hands, as if waiting for it to appear. In the process, he spotted his wallet on the table. He felt his rear pocket. His face paled and he looked at Doc, more than the hint of panic evident.

"It must have slipped out of your pocket while you were on the floor."

Doc's comment was met with silence – wide-eyed silence. The look was something short of terror but clearly suggested great

discomfort.

"I didn't look inside if that's your concern, Jaz."

"You didn't?"

"No. It is not mine to look into."

More silence.

"Thank you, I guess. Not sure what to say. This awkward exchange makes me look blatantly guilty of some-thing I suppose."

"Not to me. You lost your billfold. I found it and put it there for you. End of exchange."

"Myself, I'd have been all over a lost billfold like Pooh Bear over honey."

"I do like honey," Doc said, smiling.

"You really don't resemble Pooh, however. How did you keep yourself from peeking?"

"It's the pact I keep with mankind."

"What?"

"I agree to treat others the way I want to be treated and never ask of another anything I wouldn't be willing to do for him if and when I could."

"Sounds like it's a one-way pact. I know that at least I didn't sign onto it."

"Honest, helpful, compassionate, thoughtful relationships have to begin with someone. I figure I'm as good a starting place as any."

"Better, probably."

"The towels I mentioned are in the bottom drawer of the cabinet next to the stove, by the way. You'll find scissors in the silverware drawer."

///

CHAPTER THREE

They were finishing the dishes from lunch. The hot dogs, pork & beans, and chips hadn't dirtied many.

"I suppose we should practice for later on," Doc said a twinkle in his eye.

"Practice? For later on? We? I don't get it."

"An esoteric offering, you say?"

"Esoteric to the Nth power."

Both smiled. Neither made any effort to disguise their delight with the rare opportunity to engage in such silly, if highbrow, by-play.

Doc dried his hands and tossed the towel to Jaz as they began moving toward the couch. It had been a tiring morning. The old man suddenly realized he had not measured his effort appropriately. It was, he estimated, the only downside to having a youngster around.

Jaz sat on the floor and poked at the fire with a poker, suddenly having a fleeting 'Ah Ha!' experience relative to how the tool got its name. Doc took his usual place at the far end of the couch.

"Jake gives me a Christmas tree each year. In return I play carols at his tree-lot a time or two in the early evenings during the week before Christmas. On New Year's afternoon, he helps me set the tree into the ground out at the home. It's been our arrangement for a quarter of a century."

"And by 'we' practicing you're including me in the carol playing thing?"

"Only if you choose to, of course."

Jaz looked into the fire for a long moment then turned his head and met Doc's face full on. He nodded.

"I'd like that. I'd really like that – providing you're any good."

He delivered the slur wrapped in a smile. The tone, however, had a serious ring to it.

"I'd like that, too, regardless of whether you're any good or not."

"You got me. I tend to be arrogant and think of my rep first. Dr. Derwood says I work overtime at being arrogant in order to keep people at a distance. Woops!"

"No woops, here remember. Dr. Derwood is still your private territory. Let's see if we can find a mutually satisfactory key in which to fa, la, la, the tree shoppers."

The boy's face broke a slight smile below his furrowed brow. It was an expression that said, 'I really don't understand but it just may hold wonderful possibilities'. He skipped the nod, necessary to confirm that he fully trusted the underlying intent.

Jaz stood.

"Where's your horn? I'll get it for you. You seem tired."

"Again, you are unexpectedly perceptive. Thank you. It's upstairs under the dormer in front."

Jaz was soon back and gently placed the case beside Doc. Then he positioned two kitchen chairs facing each other between the table and the back of the couch.

"One of my music teachers used to say, 'Never sit where you are comfortable while playing or your technique will become sloppy'. I think he was right."

Doc's lacquer spotted, slightly dented, pawn shop, acquisition paled in comparison to the lustrous ebony, golden keyed, clarinet with ivory insets the boy assembled. Each noted the other's instrument but neither commented. Each determined an important thing from the other. Doc, that Jaz had money in his corner. Jaz, that Doc truly had no use for the fancy, showy, trappings of life.

"How about Silent Night?" Doc suggested.

"Okay. How about you play lead and I'll improvise a walking background. It's such a slow, monotonous piece, I think it needs some Jazzing up, if you'll pardon the pun."

"Pardon it. I welcome it. Very good, in fact."

"You pick a key and I'll find it," Jaz said attempting to contain his smile.

Each was impressed by the other's skill.

"In your eight years, you have certainly surpassed my twenty-five," Doc said beaming.

"I must admit you're a dozen times better than I expected," Jaz

confessed.

"Suppose we can contain our big heads now and work on several more pieces?" Doc asked, tongue in cheek.

"Let's try some close two-part harmony on Deck the Halls," Jaz suggested. "It's lively and lends itself well to such an arrangement."

"You take lead first go 'round," Doc said. "Then we'll switch for the second time through."

"Fine."

Jaz offered several bars to help Doc find the key. They played. At the end, Doc couldn't resist adding the universally known, 'Dum, da, da, dum, dum - Dum Dum!'

"You ruined it!" Jaz said with some emotion.

"No. I made it mine."

"Sorry. Like I said. I tend to always know better than anybody else how things should be."

Doc explained.

"If I don't, 'Dum dum,' a few times this evening, folks won't believe it's me."

"I see. What to me was an unexpected demeaning of the piece, is to them your eagerly anticipated signature."

"You caught the essence exactly. My, you do use words beautifully, Jaz."

"Thanks, I guess. It comes with no real effort on my part so I suppose I can't take any credit for it. It's like some people are handsome or beautiful. It was none of their doing. It came as original equipment. I hate it when a person acts all uppity because they know they are better looking than the rest of us."

"And here I thought you and I both held our own pretty well in the looks department," Doc said, mugging as if for a camera.

"I know. You could care less how you look . . . or how I look for that matter. Interesting! But I'm about to turn fifteen. Looks matter."

"I know they usually do. However, I for one was always grateful that I was a plain looking teen."

"That I really don't understand."

"When a girl expressed interest in me, I knew it was because she liked me, not just because she wanted to be seen on the arm of a handsome dude."

Jaz nodded and tucked it away for later reflection.

"You have lots of girlfriends as a teenager?"

"I suppose we'd need to agree on what 'lots' means in order to get specific, but I had girlfriends most every time I wanted a girlfriend."

Silence.

"Aren't you going to ask about my love life?" Jaz said at last.

"I will always treasure any things you want to share with me about yourself or your ideas, but I will never pry. From the first five minutes our lives crossed, your vibrations have made it clear that I am to keep my distance where your personal life is concerned."

"I'm sure that's probably the right take on it. It's how I am. But, you're saying you won't mind if maybe I say stuff, sometimes."

"And once again the lad assumes his secret identity as Broccoli Boy!"

Jaz laughed out loud, that time nodding.

"I will ask one thing, if I'm permitted," Doc said. "You referred to me as coffee – contrasting it to you being broccoli."

"Since no grammarian in the English-speaking world would consider that a question, I suppose your spotless record of not prying continues unblemished."

"I love to hear you talk, young man."

Jaz grinned.

"Broccoli is bland, lifeless; it just lays there passively, smelling awful, waiting to be acted upon. Coffee, on the other hand, actively spreads its wonderful aroma from the moment the can is opened and magnifies it while perking. It provides pep – a caffeine jump – to those who consume and enjoy it. There's no doubt about it, Doc is coffee and Jaz is broccoli."

"Is, you understand, refers only to the present. It necessarily portends nothing about the future."

"That's very close to being a suggestion for me to change myself all quite completely."

"Is it, now?"

"Considering the source I suppose it is more a plea for me to at least consider some new options about the way I go about living my life."

Doc's smile provided the answer.

They practiced until three. Scratch that. They enjoyed playing

together until suddenly surprised that it had so quickly become three o'clock.

"Three o'clock. My nap time. Thirty minutes on the couch. Often don't sleep. Too many important things to think about. But my doc insists I go through the motions at least."

With his horn secured inside its time scarred case, he slipped out of his loafers and lay down, adjusting the pillow behind his head.

"You sick?"

"I'm eighty-three, Son. There is seldom anything really 'well' about eighty-three."

"You evaded my question."

"You noticed. Will you play for me? Something that actually challenges your talents and skills. Do you know Rhapsody in Blue? It's one of my favorite pieces."

Without comment Jaz began. From the commanding touch of the first note it was a majestic and sensitive performance, flawless in every respect. Doc didn't sleep; his closed eyes did moisten, however. What was this remarkable, young, ragamuffin's story?

When he finished, Jaz quietly disassembled his instrument and placed it back in its case. He stretched out - hands behind his head - on the large, thick, braided rug, which swirled its blue and brown tones between the hearth and the couch. The warmth, comfort, and new found safety, soon allowed sleep, there, a few feet from his curiously comfortable new friend.

* * *

"Hey, lazy bones," Doc said, beginning to tempt the boy back to life. "Time for supper if we're going to make our appointment this evening."

Jaz turned over onto his side so he could see Doc beyond the sofa, where he was working at the table. He stretched.

"I must have fallen asleep. Sorry you had to cook alone. Remember, breakfast is on me in the morning."

He sat up and rubbed his eyes like a small child, then stood and made his way to the table.

"Smells good. Chicken noodle soup for sure."

"And grilled cheese sandwiches. I know the traditional lore says it should be tomato soup but I'm fresh out. Milk or juice?"

"Milk with sandwiches."

"Me, too. Milk with sandwiches. Coffee with sweets. Cola

with pizza and Mexican."

"You make pizza or order in?"

"Either – both. Never sure which word is more meaning-ful in that situation."

"I'd vote for 'both'."

"I, as well, after some consideration."

"What kind of pizza?"

"Spinach Plus."

"Yuck!"

"Are you yucking at the spinach or the plus?"

"The spinach."

"So, you're willing to pass on the plus possibilities in deference to your apparent dislike of spinach."

"It would seem so. Perhaps I first need to consider the plus part."

Jaz smiled.

The old man chuckled.

"It's a compromise with my doctor's orders. He says if there is to be any pizza at all it must be veggie based. So, I base mine in spinach and then add a smidgen of sausage and mushrooms and sprinkles of a half dozen kinds of cheese."

"I just might like that plus and I'll never tell your doctor."

"Pizza it will be, then, tomorrow at this time – if you plan to be here tomorrow at this time."

"For Pizza Plus I'll make sure I'm still here."

He broke a prolonged smile.

Jaz attacked the soup with all the hunched down, slurping, noodle inhaling, sandwich dipping, gusto expected of a fifteen-year-old. It gave Doc hope that there just might be a real boy in there somewhere, after all.

At the tree lot Jaz hung to the background watching and listening as people of all ages approached Doc and administered lingering hugs and words of love. He felt a strange mixture of joy and sadness – an element of jealousy, even. These were clearly Doc's people. Jaz was just a colorful leaf in the wind – there, appreciated for the moment, but soon relegated to the gutter. He had the sudden urge to move on. He had the sudden urge to remain forever.

On several occasions during the evening, Doc introduced Jaz to the ever-changing crowd. Interesting to Jaz, it seemed that Doc's

endorsement, as it were, made him the immediate and legitimate object for hugs and greetings as well – sincere hugs and greetings from total strangers. Where was this place? What kind of people embraced total strangers? He found himself hugging back and wishing a few Merry Christmases and Happy Holidays.

The comfort was discomfoting – disquieting was perhaps a more honestly descriptive term. The feeling grew as the evening progressed.

At seven, Doc declared the concert over and the instruments were stowed safely in their cases. They began the ten-block trek back to Doc's cabin. Jaz slipped his case inside his coat.

"Well, I for one had a great evening," Doc said carefully not requiring agreement from the boy. "It was so nice having you here tonight. I don't suppose you're willing to commit to next year."

Jaz smiled into the darkness but did not respond to any part of Doc's remark.

Instead, he said, "You have a strange lot of people in this city."

"Strange in what way?"

"The hugging and smiley faces and good wishes, all of which seemed oddly sincere."

"Oddly?"

"Unfamiliarly may better convey my meaning."

"Those folks have known this old face for most of their lives. They see me as harmless and huggable – like a big, old, well worn, Teddy Bear."

"I've never known people like that – demonstrative in positive ways."

"I'm sorry if you were made uncomfortable by it."

"It was a strange mixture of discomfort and pleasure. I can't say I didn't like it – enjoy it even. I just can't let myself get used to it. It's not how most people I've met behave. It presents a scary kind of vulnerability."

"Here's an old adage for you that I just made up:"

Jaz grinned and turned his head to look into Doc's face, which was briefly illuminated under a street lamp.

"He who willingly hugs first, receives the most first hugs, willingly."

"You're saying the people in my life have been unfriendly and unkind because I have been unfriendly and unkind first."

"I just stated the adage. It's like an inkblot. You get to interpret it."

"I thought I just did."

Jaz smiled and continued.

"I imagine you have been characterized as sneaky somewhere along the line."

"Somewhere. Perhaps," Doc said smiling.

It began snowing – light flakes that floated more or less directly toward the ground in the, still, evening, air.

"The night becomes brighter when it's snowing gently. You ever notice that?" Jaz said reaching out to catch flakes on his glove. He turned his hand one way and the other as if to prove his contention by positioning them to reflect light from the moon and street lamps.

"I have indeed. Like little white smiles brightening the world."

"A suitable smile simile."

"An astute and articulate alliteration."

"We really are a pair of odd people, you know? Woops! Sorry about the 'you know?' thing."

"Since I can agree fully – and proudly, I might add – there was no discomfort generated."

"May I ask you something?" Jaz said at last.

"Of course, you can ask me anything provided you allow me the privilege of declining to answer."

Jaz shook his head, then nodded thoughtfully, indicating his continued amazement at the old man as well as his appreciation of the stipulation.

"Are you, like you are to me, toward everybody, or is this just an act, a game, a special face you're putting on for my benefit for some reason?"

"If that sentence could actually be diagramed by anyone I suppose you could do it. My answer is, of course, that I really hate you, kid. You make me terribly uncomfortable, you're a constant pest, and I wish you out of my life immediately if not sooner. I . . ."

Jaz interrupted.

"I get the point. You really do like me. Not many people do, so you can probably understand my uncertainty – my confusion."

"People can't like what they can't see, Jaz, but people are often suspicious of what they can't see."

"Your message is pretty much the same as what I've been

getting from Dr. Derwood. I find it more agreeable when presented in your low-key manner. From him it sounds like psychobabble. From you, like the wisdom of the ages."

Doc offered no response but did indicate with his hand that they were coming upon the alley where they needed to turn.

The warmth rushed out to greet them as Doc opened the front door. The house didn't depend on the fireplace entirely but the feel of wood heat was somehow more inviting than gas. Jaz hung his wraps and immediately put on two new logs. He opened his clarinet case on the table and carefully cleaned the inside of each section with an absorbent, cloth, swab designed for the process.

"You take good care of your things. I've noticed," Doc said as he stood close, watching.

He reached his arm out and placed it around the boy's shoulders. At the touch, Jaz tensed visibly, but Doc gave no sense it had been noticed and persisted as they continued chatting. Presently, the boy relaxed and eventually even inched a bit closer to the old man. In all honesty, he probably prolonged the task well beyond the amount of time actually required.

"Hot chocolate or mulled cider?" Doc asked once the case was closed and set on the floor beside the duffle bag.

"I don't know about mulled cider."

"Heated apple cider with cinnamon and a touch of sorghum."

"Sounds great. Let's do that if it's okay. Of course, it's okay or you wouldn't have asked for my preference. How can I help?"

"I'm beginning to look forward to these short conversations you have with yourself every so often."

Jaz smiled.

"You should hear the ones that go in inside my head."

"I'd love to. Anytime, you know."

Jaz averted his eyes and nodded. They moved to the kitchen.

"A jug of cider under the sink," Doc said.

He placed a large pan on the stove and assembled the other ingredients.

"Fill the pan up about three quarters of the way. Whatever we don't drink tonight can be easily reheated if you should get the urge for more later on."

"How much sorghum?"

Jaz was clearly into the activity.

"Three dollops."

"I've heard of dollops but don't know how to measure them."

"The strange wooden handle with the grooved ball at one end. In that drawer. Wet it, shake it, and then just sink the ball into the sorghum, lift it out and spin slowly. Then patiently let it drip itself into the cider. Then back for the next."

"Do I stir it in then?"

"Won't combine much until the mixture is good and warm. Then stir. Here, add three shakes of cinnamon."

"Only three?"

"Yes. Cinnamon is one of those things it's easy to get way too much of fast."

"Sort of like vanilla, I guess. It smells so good. I once got caught taking a big swig right from the bottle. I could taste the awful stuff for a week. That just about matched the length of time before I could sit down again."

"Some warmth was administered to the young behind, you say?"

"Depends how you define 'some'. New topic."

Doc obliged.

"Warm cider is best when served in over-sized mugs, I've always thought. Up there on the top shelf of the corner cabinet."

"You want the Santa or the Frosty mug? Seems cruel to be pouring hot liquid into Frosty."

"Let me deal with the snowman, then," Doc said. "He and I have an arrangement, not unlike ours."

"Ours? How so?"

"I promise him I'll never give him anything I don't believe he can handle."

"Your life is like one big . . . metaphoric simile."

"Wonderful, Son. Do you suppose that phrase has ever been uttered before? I sincerely doubt it. Wonderful. Wonderful! I just might have had that put on my tombstone if I weren't going to be cremated."

"Really? Cremated? Yuck, if you'll pardon my reaction."

"Nothing you probably need to be concerning yourself about at fifteen. By the time you're my age you'll probably only be considered early middle age."

"Do you worry about dying?"

"I think about it. I've planned for it. But, no, I don't worry about it. I learned early in life not to worry about things over which I have no control."

"Let me rephrase my question. Aren't you bothered by the state of being dead?"

"Same general answer, Jaz. What will be will be at that point? I'd much rather spend my time thinking about today and tomorrow, and remembering back on my wonder-filled life. I figure I still have lots of helpful deeds in these old bones. No time for worry about the unfathomable.

"I've asked that my ashes be worked into the soil under the trees out at the home – so what's left of me will become a part of the pines I've left behind. Life never really ceases; it just changes form."

Jaz shook his head. It may have been in awe. It may have been in disbelief. Most likely it was in sadness about what he believed he had and didn't have going for himself. In a fully unintentional flash he pictured the old man lying dead on the couch. He turned to hide the tear.

///

CHAPTER FOUR

Doc awoke to the unmistakable aroma of pancakes – flap jacks as they had been called in his boyhood home. He was relieved on two counts. The lad was still there and he had kept his word about breakfast. He donned his robe and slippers and went down stairs.

Most chefs – most short order cooks, even – go about their culinary tasks fully clothed. Jaz, on the other hand, seemed all quite comfortable working there clad only in his black, silk, boxers.

"Good morning," Doc said as he reached the bottom step and stretched.

"Hey. Good morning. Got pancakes and bacon going here. I was going to wait 'til they were ready and then come up and wake you. My plan was to be dressed at that time. Hope my state of undress doesn't offend you."

"I cannot be offended."

"Really? I'm offended all the time. Why not you? I don't understand but then I'm coming to expect that around here. Have a seat. Coffee's ready. Another few minutes on the bacon. Got the syrup heating. I hate cold syrup, don't you? Scratch that. I hate cold syrup, period."

The lad seemed hyper – perhaps just extremely happy. He beamed as he delivered a mug of steaming coffee.

"So? About taking offence?" he continued as he returned to the stove to further mangle the bacon."

"A great lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, was once quoted as saying something like, 'I cannot be offended because I simply refuse to accept it'."

"Not sure I understand – and I don't say that very often."

"Because of its truth or because of your pride?"

Jaz grinned.

"You see things nobody else sees about me. That's scary as hell – sorry. It's also somehow nice – being able to let myself be vulnerable and not really feel threatened."

"Are you intentionally ignoring my question or just ruminating?"

"Ruminating. Occasionally because it is the truth – when I really don't understand, like now. More typically because I don't want to expose my ignorance. The image thing – rep, you know. Of course, you know or you wouldn't have phrased the question that way. Back to the topic."

"If I say to a coal miner, 'Your fingernails are always dirty,' do you think he will take offense?"

"Probably not. He and everybody else expect his nails to be dirty. Might even wear it as a badge of honor."

"If I told a debutant at her coming out party that her gown was ugly, do you suppose she might take offense?"

"Oh, Yeah! I'd bet on it. I think I see where this is going. If you don't accept the fact that there may be some unpleasing truth in a statement, then it can't be a put down – it can't offend you. Being offended becomes an interpretation by the target rather than an intention of the speaker."

"That's what the grand lady meant, I think. One person can, indeed, set out to offend another but unless that second person is willing to believe it and be bothered by it, the would-be offender is doomed to failure before he begins.

"On occasion, children direct derisive comments at me as I walk the streets. 'Where'd you get those classy duds, old man?' 'Couldn't find your razor this morning, old man?' 'I got a snail here that's looking to beat your butt in the hundred-yard dash, old man.'

"I'm old – a fact. My clothes are different from what the youngsters are used to – a fact. I travel at a slow and sometimes unsteady pace – a fact. I choose not to shave – a fact. I'm not going to take offense at any of those things. I understand about children trying to impress their buddies. I feel bad for them – that their homes have taught them to dis-value their fellowman so much that they can say such things, but I am not offended – just saddened, I suppose.

"I have found, Jaz, that intentionally offensive remarks are

often thinly veiled attempts at avoiding or covering up the speaker's own felt inadequacy or jealousy."

"Really? How so?"

The bacon and pancakes were delivered to the table and Jaz sat down opposite Doc. The two shared a chuckle as Jaz picked up a napkin and tried to tuck it into his nonexistent shirt collar. Doc continued as he filled his plate.

"When another kid calls you 'Brainiac', or whatever, is it usually a bright kid?"

"Never, now that I come to think of it. I see. By making fun of – putting down – my intelligence a less smart kid feels like he is somehow leveling the playing field. Making intelligence seem unimportant or unacceptable even."

"I think you have it – as usual."

"So, instead of getting angry at them I should . . .?"

"The exact question you need to answer . . . Brainiac."

"You give little quarter, Doc."

"In my experience, I take to heart most seriously and permanently those things I have discovered for myself. Often it is not so with things thrust upon me by someone else."

"So, I need to think that through on my own, you're saying."

"I'm saying in my experience that seems to usually be best."

"I should be recording our conversations," Jaz said.

"I think you are. I think we both are."

"Both. I don't get it. More juice?"

"No thanks. A coffee warm up would be appreciated if you're offering to expend energy on my behalf."

"This is so great! But I still don't get it."

"Virtually every time you open your mouth or give me one of your several patented looks, you're teaching me things."

"No, I'm not! Sorry. I also tend to be argumentative. I should have asked 'how 'or 'what do you mean?' I think I just allowed myself to take offence at your comment. Stop that, now, Jaz. Stop that!"

He slapped his own face, only partly in play.

They exchanged a smile.

"Remind us to talk about the futility of punishment sometime," Doc said in response.

"Noted!"

"You do make exceptional pancakes, young man. Will you

share your secret?"

"A tad of vanilla and a double tad of hot maple syrup in the batter after the baking powder has done its bubbling thing and just before it hits the griddle. I learned it from our cook when I was just a kid. Woops! . . . I know. No woppses here."

It was one of his better woopses, Doc thought. The last phrase had been offered directly into Doc's face rather than at the floor or out the window or into the fire.

After breakfast Jaz showered and dressed, presently descending the stairs two at a time, looking way too neat for his age, Doc thought.

"Your turn up there, Doc. Might want to wait for more hot water. I tend to take long showers when privacy allows."

Among other things the comment suggested privacy was not a common circumstance for him. One would think it would be – should be – at home. A boarding school, perhaps – military maybe? Doc shuddered at the thought.

"I'll drain the coffee pot while I wait."

"You supposed to be drinking so much coffee?" Jaz asked as he lingered with the tipped pot coaxing out the good to the last, Maxwell House, drop.

"Shhh. Another of those things we don't share with my doctor. It reminds me, though; that small vial of pills on the window sill over the sink. Would you be so kind as to bring it here? I am usually reminded to take it seeing it there when I fix my breakfast."

"Which one, the digitalis or the nitroglycerin?"

"The digitalis."

"You have heart problems!"

"Like I said, Jaz, I'm 83. Things begin going downhill. It's expected. Fascinating, even, to observe the progression."

"You are absolutely the most . . . I don't know if there even is a word to describe you."

"Create one then. I love to create new words. They don't fit into general conversation, of course, but I'm always tickled when a particularly good one pops to mind."

"Like?"

"Like, Luvyith."

"Whaty-ith?"

"See. You just did it. What a wonderful word."

"I'll repeat it then. Whaty-ith is luvyith?"

"Its stem is love, which I changed to luv for ease of spelling and pronunciation. I utilize the 'ith' to imply a process or motive. I have replaced the word 'gift' with 'luyith' in my personal vocabulary. It changes the emphasis from the object itself to the love filled motive of the giver. Lots of people return Christmas gifts, for instance, because they don't like what they got – the object – the thing. When you characterize a present as a 'luyith', there can be nothing to return because all that is important is the love that motivated the act of giving. Luyith! It never takes more than one Luyith to make your point, you see."

"Cool. That is really cool. Profound, mind-blowing; shall I continue?"

"It would be you who is in charge of that."

"This is so much good stuff all at once. I don't want to miss any of it."

"And neither do I."

"Which takes us back to my original question that somehow spawned all of this," Jaz said leaning forward, elbows on the table. "What could you possibly really learn from me – from what I say and do?"

"Well, on the abstract level, you renew my faith in the human spirit – youth, a searching mind, a desire for personal growth. More specifically you help me remember how important it is to laugh and smile and be kind and feel compassion and allow another his space when he needs it – to share my wisdom, such as it may be."

"But you do all those things anyway – without me hanging around."

"But your presence here helps me put those things into a new perspective."

"I don't understand. A lot of that going around these past few days, by the way."

"Am I allowed another short anecdote? Of course, I am. The boy said as much yesterday."

Jaz grinned at Doc's playful imitation of his own, Jaz to Jaz, mini-conversations. He cleared the table and motioned them to their spots on the couch and hearth.

"My wife and I had many foster sons back in the olden days – as I think you put it. One of them – a short term stay with us, age

fifteen – would ask if he and I could sit by the fireplace at night after everyone else had retired. It became our nightly ritual. Probably no more than two dozen words would pass between us during that half hour.

"Years later, in his annual letter to us, he commented that one of the most important things in his entire life had been those wonderful conversations he and I had by the fireplace at night.

"To me they had been 'sit and be close' times. To him they had been 'wonderful conversations'. You see. His later comment brought a different perspective for me. It's often hard to understand the unique perspectives others are experiencing at any moment.

"Take last night, for example. I had come to just take for granted the hugs and kind words I receive from the folks around here. Your perspective helped me renew the wondrous side of it all. This morning I am not taking such things for granted. I see them again for the precious aspect of my life that they are. So, you see, you helped me re-learn a very important lesson and I thank you for that."

"I think there may have been some fancy foot work going on in all of that, but I guess I get the basic message. You're, welcome, by the way, and thank you, too, of course."

Doc nodded.

Jaz switched gears.

"So, what's on our schedule for today?"

Doc smiled at the boys 'our' reference.

"Tuesdays I visit out at Harington Hills. I'm sure my friends there would appreciate your young and cheerful presence."

"I seldom think of myself in either of those ways. I've always felt lots of pressure to act my IQ instead of acting my age. As to cheerful, nobody in my life would use that adjective to describe me."

"I'm in your life and I just used it."

"I mean my real life. This is all like a momentary fantasy."

"Regardless, I know you will be welcomed with open arms – literally and figuratively. If you're not feeling up to a barrage of hugs you won't want to come along."

"Oddly, I'm okay with that. I've thought a lot about the hugs from last night. They were pretty cool. It's like a way of connecting with people I've never really ever experienced before."

Doc's heart sank but he took solace in the boy's emerging perspective. He let him continue uninterrupted.

“I’ve hugged girls, you understand. I like hugging girls but that’s strictly so I can feel them pressed up against me, you know. It really isn’t about caring. It’s all about sexual feelings. You don’t mind if I say, sex, do you.”

“I was married for almost thirty-five years, son. I know about sex. The term is all quite legitimate.”

Jaz nodded and looked out the window.

“So, how do we get out to the old folks’ home? Is it far from here?”

“Bus. I use the bus to get places that are too far for me to walk.”

“Buses are cool. I came here on a Greyhound. Ooo . . .”

He stopped short of a full blown Ooops.

“I’m sure you surmised as much.”

“The tag on your duffle bag gave me my first clue.”

“I guess I’m not very accomplished at being sneaky – not out in this world at least.”

There he went again characterizing ‘his’ world as being so different. The idea of a juvenile correction facility briefly crossed Doc’s mind.

“When do we leave? I’ll risk being smothered by a few buxom elder citizens.”

“There’s always a free meal if I get there near lunch time. It’s an hour’s ride. We need to catch the 10:30 bus at the corner where we first met.”

“On second thought, maybe I better stay here.”

It was an abrupt turnabout. Doc thought he had a right to pry since it concerned him.

“What’s up?”

“I don’t have a dime I can put toward a fare.”

“Well, I have a senior pass and that entitles me to bring along one, non-senior, aid. If my conscious gets the better of me for it, I’ll put a buck in the meter later on.”

“I’ll give you a hand on and off and fend off all the little old ladies that want to ravish you along the way. Will that count?”

“I’d think it should, but where did you get the idea I’d not want to be ravished? I’m old, not dead, kid!”

It produced a prolonged series of chuckles.

“I have to admit that I’ve wondered about old guys and sex,”

Jaz said. “When it stops being a need and when it stops being possible? I’m not asking, mind you. I’m just stating a . . . whatever it is. A wonder, I guess.”

“I’ll just say this,” Doc began having no intention of getting into a latter days birds and bees discussion with a fifteen year old boy. “Old age seldom takes what you worry it’s going to, and often takes what you never expected.”

“That really didn’t clear anything up, you know.”

“I had a speech teacher in college who said to always leave your audience wanting more.”

“I’ll give you an A+ on that, then,” Jaz said, grinning.

“How about you go shower and get dressed,” Jaz suggested. “I’ll do the dishes and clean up the kitchen.”

Doc chuckled himself up the stairs, delighted that the boy so obviously felt comfortable there with him.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Doc began descending the stairs to the raucous, high pitched, whine of the vacuum cleaner. Clearly the kitchen clean-up had assumed greater proportions. He stopped half way down and watched the energy and enthusiasm displayed there before him. He chuckled as he wondered if the boy did windows.

Silence resumed at about the same moment Doc’s feet touched down on the first floor.

“Hey, Doc. Found the vacuum. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Well, I really prefer filthy carpet but I’ll do my best to live with what you’ve done to it. Thank you. It was a very kind gesture.”

“Like the boy who gave himself a wedgie said, “I’m just trying to hold up my end.”

“He’s clever as well as neat and thorough. Was that witticism new in the moment or was it a retread?”

“New, actually. Things like that just burst forth full bloom from who knows where. I often don’t share them. Humor based in absurdity is frequently not appreciated – not even understood by many folks.”

“It’s a malady I prefer to call dim-witted,” Doc said, chuckling at his own little funny.

“Like that. Yes! Yea, Doc!”

“You will undoubtedly rue the moment you made puns legitimate between us,” Doc said, smiling and patting Jaz on the back.

Jaz leaned back into his hand. The boy had clearly grown up without experiencing the physical expression of affection. Doc worked the patting into a gentle, swirling, back rub and neck massage. It lasted but a minute – a minute to make up for almost fifteen years of deprivation. Doc had to wonder if the boy had been afforded affection of any kind.

///

CHAPTER FIVE

Transit Authority bus seats are not noted for their comfort. Neither noticed. They were soon engaged in conversation about important topics.

“So, that punishment thing,” Jaz said. “I took note and remembered to bring it up later like you suggested.”

“I may be presuming, here, son, but I get the idea that between the two of us you may be the expert on that topic.”

Jaz raised his eyebrows and sank into the seat.

“Had more than my share I suppose. I’m not sure how to apply it to your assertion that it’s a futile undertaking.”

“What has been your lingering reaction to it over the years?”

“Lingering? Meaning as I think back on it?”

Doc nodded and explained further.

“The feelings it engendered. The effect it had on your behavior. What it taught you about how you will go about encouraging behavior change in your children.”

“For starters, it made me hate those who punished me. If I had the proverbial nickel for every hour I’ve spent plotting my revenge, we could be taking a limo at this moment. More than ever stopping a behavior, it merely made me become more careful – more clandestine – where and when I engaged in it.

“I still took cookies from the cookie jar, just not when I could be seen and never so many at one time that it would be noticed. I even took them when I didn’t like them – revenge behavior, undoubtedly. Using those same strategies, I still stole money from my mother’s purse after being beaten for it. I still hung with kids my parents thought were undesirables – in fact, I probably hung with them because my parents thought they were undesirables. I learned to lie quite effectively about my whereabouts. I learned a few bucks spread

in the right places could buy ironclad alibis. I moved my Playboys and Hustlers from under my mattress to a safer spot in the recess on the top of one of my bookcases.”

“So, punishment suppressed your behavior when the punisher was present but didn’t make it cease.”

“Yes. That’s right. An epiphany, here, Doc. If punishment doesn’t work, why is it continued to be used so universally?”

“The ten-thousand-dollar question. It’s stumped me for the past seventy years. Ignorance pure and simple, I suppose. The evidence has been in for a hundred generations. I tend to believe it actually comes down to two things. First, ignorance of the facts, like I said. Second, absolute laziness on the part of those who are in charge of behavior management. It’s easier to punish than to learn how to teach a new behavior or response pattern or to help another person think through the long-term ramifications of misbehavior and create positive alternatives.”

“Interesting. I’ll need to get a bibliography of relevant data sources.”

“Bottom shelf, right, in the bookcase in my bedroom. Help yourself.”

“You ever write a book, Doc?”

“You mean a novel?”

“I mean an anything.”

“A few very dry pieces when I was young and still believed I could save the world by ranting and raving at people. I have thought about putting some stories between covers. My days just seem too full. Perhaps that’s my excuse or way of avoiding the ultimate commitment.”

“Ultimate commitment?”

“Taking that pen in hand and writing the first word. My wife wrote children’s stories and she used to kid me about it, cautioning me against picking up a pencil when I was in a creative mood or I would be hooked for life.”

“What would you have written about?”

“Living life, I suppose.”

“Like bringing our conversations to life with characters, I guess.”

Doc smiled.

“I guess. Yes. That’s the essence of writing.”

“I have to admit I’ve written some stories,” Jaz said.

“You make it sound like it is a sin to write.”

“Perhaps it is in my home.”

“I see. There is the assumption of some other direction for your life. Music, I’ll guess.”

“Now, who’s the perceptive one?”

“Do I get a gold star?”

“If I had one. My stuff is all anger driven. I doubt if anybody really wants to read that sort of desperate, depressing, driviel.”

“Perhaps it is worth the writing just so you can examine the feelings it reveals.”

“Maybe. Hadn’t considered that. Listen to myself and learn, huh? Interesting.”

Doc made no comment. Jaz continued.

“When I write, I never seem to be able to stop. My stuff just goes on and on and on. There is never a logical place to stop because life goes on – so many loose ends to tie up and each one seems to lead to others. Even if I kill off a character, which I probably do too often and with too much enthusiastic gory detail, the stories of those around him continue on.”

“Consider this. If I were to write a novel, I would use that very truth to the story’s advantage. I would always leave the reader with several unanswered questions to whet their imaginations and spark their creative juices. It moves the reader from passive recipient to active participant. It gives him credit for being an intelligent person. I believe writers too often forget that.”

“Like those conversations, you mentioned. You said you dislike ones that don’t prod you to think and analyze.”

“I said that, did I? Pretty good stuff for an old guy.”

They smiled and nodded. Doc continued.

“Yes. It would be like that, I guess.”

“I may just give it a serious try someday,” Jaz said. “I really do love to write. I’m spinning tales in my head all the time.”

Quiet arrived all quite comfortably and remained for several blocks. Doc spoke.

“May I hear about your music?”

“I enjoy that, also. I realize I have a true gift, there. It comes easily – most things do for me, though. Not the social stuff, I should say. I’m pretty much universally disliked among my peers and parent

figures. But when I'm inside my music I forget about that. Music is technique and feelings not relationships and problems. Music lifts my soul. It frees me from cares and pressures. Mingling with people always ends up making me hate them and myself."

"Always?"

"Clearly not, I guess, thinking of this particular moment. Fascinating!"

Jaz patted Doc's knee and offered a flickering smile.

"Am I hearing you saying that your music is encouraging, your writing is depressing, and your social contacts are destructive?"

The boy thought before answering.

"Both music and writing give meaning to my life. I'd say it's more like music gives wings to my positive possibilities whereas writing struggles with the problems I see everywhere else in my life – in my social world. Does that make any sense?"

"It does to me but what really matters is if it does for you."

Jaz sat back and folded his arms. He thought on in silence for several miles before speaking again.

"There is something I don't fathom."

"Just one thing?" Doc said kidding him, adding a gentle elbow to his ribs.

It produced the intended smile and nod.

"I probably shouldn't have made light of it," Doc said. "I apologize."

"No. That's the crux of my dilemma. When I talk with you it's like we are searching together for the goodness in me. When I'm talking with Dr. Derwood – a psychiatrist, as if you haven't already ascertained that – it is like he is trying to prove to me what a terrible, troubled, person I am. It's like he begins every session by asking me, 'What terrible things have you done or thought this week?' Not in those words, of course."

"Remember our talk about perceptions?"

"Yes. The kid and the fire place talks. What?"

"That's my point. What?"

More silence.

"Are you saying that maybe I am approaching my sessions with Derwood from some kind of a skewed perspective?"

"Did you want to go to him?"

"Dad and his man had to drag me kicking, screaming, and

biting. I was ten.”

“And our talks.”

“There is no force. Nothing is required of me. I only say what I want to say. I only talk when I want to talk. You only pursue topics I have approved of ahead of time – so to speak. You, in essence, ask my permission. You never force issues on me. My father isn’t paying you huge fees to talk with me, to be my friend if you will.”

“You and I have become . . . blanks. You and Dr. Derwood have become . . . blanks.”

“You and I have become . . . friends, pals, fellow searchers. Dr. Derwood and I have become . . . adversaries, foes. Actually, I have made him out to be my adversary. I’ve defined the relationship that way. Maybe he could help me if I’d let him. Wow! That’s a terrible and wonderful revelation. It’s like I’ve wasted four years of my life with him.”

They traveled on for several more miles in silence. Jaz reached over and took the old man’s hand in both of his.

“I love you, you know, Doc, Joell with two Ls, my dear friend.”

“There is no greater gift than love. Thank you.”

Before he could say more, Jaz continued.

“You don’t have to tell me that you love me. It was obvious from our first mug of hot chocolate. I didn’t understand why or how it came about or how you could love me, but I knew. It’s the main reason I have stuck around – to try and figure that out. I’ve always believed – known – that I was just the opposite – fully unlovable. My whole life proved it. You threatened my self-image – my security I suppose. I almost left that first night; in fact, at midnight I was into my coat and standing at the front door. Being loved – loveable – was strangely uncomfortable. If I ran away, I thought I’d never have to face it – come to grips with that possibility. But, it and you were just too intriguing.”

“I’m so glad you didn’t leave.”

“Me, too.”

“You will have to eventually.”

“New topic. Is that the home up there on the hill?”

“It is indeed. And there’s my evergreen forest on the lawn out front.”

“I see it. What a legacy. Like the Johnny Appleseed of pine

cones.”

Doc chuckled.

“I must say I’ve never characterized it in quite that way, Jaz.”

“Then, there’s me. I have left nothing. If I died today, there would be nothing to suggest I ever even lived.”

“I for one will never forget your private performance of Rhapsody in Blue. That will live on in me. The folks who enjoyed your music at the tree lot will remember it forever. One’s legacy does not have to be of brick and mortar. It can be ethereal.”

“I’ve not done very well in either realm.”

“If that’s an evaluation upon which you will launch the search for positive changes then I applaud you. If it is merely a way to wallow in your past inadequacy and grow your guilt about it, then I suggest you go back to the drawing board.”

“I’m pretty sure that suddenly it’s mostly the first. I’ll work hard to remove aspects of the second.”

They left the bus. Jaz exaggerated his helpfulness during Doc’s exit – just in case his ‘aid’ status was being questioned for the return trip.

“Do you know old people?” Doc asked as they started up the long, gently curving, ramp to the front door.

“Apparently, I don’t really know anybody but that was not what you were getting at. No. Not really. No grandparents or older aunts or uncles. You’re my full and total experience – not typical, I’m thinking.”

“This could be an eye opener, then. Stick close and follow my lead. Remember you can’t be offended and keep multiple perspectives in mind. Don’t make promises you won’t be able to keep.”

“You sound like a platoon leader.”

They were given a grand greeting.

“Hello. I’m Henry. Do you know where Ida is?”

“No, Sir. I don’t,” Jaz said looking at Doc for support.

Doc gave him the thumbs up and then lifted an index finger as if hushing him for some coming event.

“Hello. I’m Henry. Do you know where Ida is?”

“No Sir. I don’t.”

The phrase repeated over and over. They moved on.

“Hey, Doc. Good to see you.”

“Jaz. This is my good friend Jessie. He drove the last steam engine powered train into this city.”

“I pulled twenty-one coaches and four sleepers that day. Twenty-one coaches, four sleepers and three baggage cars.”

They continued to move on through the gathering.

“Doc. Who’s your handsome young sidekick?”

“This is Jaz, Carol. He’s staying with me for a little while.”

“What kind of a name is Jaz. I don’t like Jaz at all.”

She turned and walked away shaking her head.

“This is Colonel Baldwin, Jaz. World War II.”

Jaz came to attention and snapped a brisk salute, holding it until it was returned. Its immediacy and precision suggested more than playacting.

“At ease, private and get your hair cut.”

The lunch bell rang and the group of would be greeters turned their backs and hurried off in its direction. A middle-aged woman approached them.

“Hi Jane,” Doc said offering a warm, long, hug. “I’d like you to meet my young friend, Jaz.”

“Short for Jasper,” the boy added as if to avoid another name derogating incident.

“Interesting. Do boys named Jaz accept hugs from strange old women?”

“Oh, yes ma’am – to the hug that is; never in agreement with the old woman part.”

“He’s a charmer, Doc. Is he single?”

Jaz liked her immediately.

“Come enjoy lunch with us. Cold cuts, potato salad, hot veggies, Jello, and chocolate mousse.”

“How’s William?” Doc asked.

“I thought you knew. He passed on Thursday night. He went peacefully.”

“I didn’t know. Come on Jaz. Need to get in line before the Colonel hogs all the salad.”

Jaz was visibly troubled. It was partly about the news of the death of a man he had never known. It was partly about the cavalier manner in which Doc and Jane spoke of it.

“So, you about ready to check in out here?” Jane asked of Doc.

“Check in so I can stay just long enough to check out? Not a

chance. You know that. As long as I can open a can and remember to turn off the burners I'll be taking care of myself."

"Looks like you have some good help, now."

"Jaz? Yes. For as long as he cares to stay. He is a fine companion and you should hear him play the clarinet."

"Don't have a clarinet but we do have that old grand piano in the corner of the dining room. Do you happen to play?"

"I pick around a bit."

"Eat first then give us a few bars of anything if you will. The residents will be delighted whether they recognize it or not – well, except for Mrs. Puckett. She's like Mikey – she hates everything."

Jaz missed the reference to the 1970s-cereal commercial but he nodded and smiled.

After lunch Jane announced that the young man with Doc had agreed to play a few selections for them on the piano. The residents responded with applause and all turned toward him. Doc nodded in his direction and Jaz made his way to the piano. He began with a straight forward, though lively rendition of, When the Saints Go Marching In. Most everybody joined in, clapping in time and singing the parts they remembered. Some stood and moved to the rhythm. He was on a roll. He tried, Old Folks at Home, and immediately figured it had been an inappropriate choice. His repertoire of old time songs was limited. It clearly offended no one – except Mrs. P.

"Play something high class," the Colonial urged.

Jaz looked at Doc. Doc shrugged his shoulders and nodded as if to say, 'Why not if you got it?'

The boy cracked his knuckles, placed his fingers, and closed his eyes. It was the gentle strains of Clair d'loon that soon filled the room. It received a standing ovation.

"More! More!"

Jaz set his hands again. That time it was the lively and technically difficult, Cumuna. Again, the applause. Jazz closed the keyboard and took a single bow before returning to where Doc was standing, applauding with the rest.

"My goodness son," he said. "You have more secrets like that one?"

Jaz blew it off with a shrug.

"I must have taken lessons at some point in my life."

He flashed a full-face grin that highlighted his cheek bones and

dimples and revealed a handsome, immediately appealing, mien that had really not been evident before. The Grandfather clock struck one and the room cleared as if a fire drill had been called.

“What?” Jaz asked looking around.

“Time for their favorite soap. Not even an appearance by Lawrence Welk descending from heaven would keep them from their program.”

Jane approached. Doc had a short whispered conversation with her. Then he took out his wallet and soon handed over a freshly penned check.

“I need to make sure the hole for the tree will be big enough. It’s larger than usual this year. I’ll be right back,” he said.

Jaz was suddenly alone with Jane.

“He’s quite a man, our Doc,” Jaz said straining to make conversation.

“Ours? I thought he was yours. You’re not his grandson or great grandson or some such relative?”

“No. Just a stray he picked up to nurse back to health.”

“He’s done lots of that in his day. You’re in good hands. I wish you the best, son.”

“I know it’s absolutely none of my business but at fifteen my nosiness just won’t be contained.”

“The check, you mean?”

Jaz nodded wondering how she knew.

“Doc picks up the tab for the funeral expenses for our indigent residents. The check was for William. He had been suffering terribly with Alzheimer’s. It’s such a blessing he could pass. Every moment of his life was so terribly frightening for him – remembering nothing as was his plight. And, I didn’t tell you any of that.”

“Any of what?”

It was a lame comeback but seemed to delight Jane so Jaz felt okay about it.

“I should go find Doc before he falls into the hole,” Jaz said, bowing slightly and moving off in the general direction the old man had taken.

“Thank you. Do come back,” Jane called after him.

They reconnected on the window enclosed sun porch that overlooked the long, gently sloping, front lawn, which was home to Doc’s forest.

“How can a hole be dug into this frozen earth?” Jaz asked.

“Starts with holes from a power auger and ends up the old-fashioned way – shovels and sweat. It’s down there; the spot with the sheet of plywood over it. The Colonel assures me it will take the new tree.”

Doc pointed side to side indicating the view.

“It’s a beautiful spot out there,” he said.

“It is that,” Jaz agreed. “Beautiful enough to spend eternity in, I’m told.”

Doc smiled and nodded. Jaz moved closer and put his arm around the old man’s waist. He waited patiently for him to finish whatever private thoughts he was having. He couldn’t remember ever having initiated such an unselfish gesture before. It seemed right and filled him with an almost overpowering new feeling. He wondered if it might be love.

CHAPTER SIX

It was two thirty when they reentered the cabin. Jaz was energized. Doc was tired. The boy sensed the journey had been wearing on his old friend. He helped him off with his coat.

“How about the rest of that mulled cider before your nap? Got enough left for half a mug each.”

“That sounds good. I gather you’re offering to fix it?”

“Yes. Let me get that heating and then I’ll add a couple of logs. It’ll all be ready in a jiff.”

Doc took a seat on the couch and surveyed the tree.

“The tree looks magnificent, Jaz. I think it needed your special touches to make it stand out from past years.”

“It’s the first Christmas tree I’ve ever been allowed to help decorate.”

“You from a Jewish family?”

“No. A snobbish, rich, overly competitive, non-church going family that claims to be Christian.”

“And that somehow effects Christmas tree decorating.”

“You offered that as a statement but I’m sure deep down it has to be a question.”

“You got me.”

“Mother hires a home decorating service that comes in and does the whole house – entry hall to servants’ quarters. You see, here at your place, a Christmas Tree is about fun and joy and sharing. At my house, it’s about making it more beautiful than the ones at the Carltons or the Henshaws.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too. Probably *more* sorry now that I’ve actually got to

help. I'll make it like it is here when I have my own family."

Again, Doc's heart went out to the boy, but he didn't comment. Jaz continued.

"We need a star thingy for on top. Be thinking how we can do that."

"Foil, maybe?"

"Interesting. Yes. I can see that. Too flimsy by itself. Cardboard backing or center maybe. I'll get started on it after we're finished drinking – that didn't come out exactly right. It does bring up a point, though. You don't seem to keep any liquor in the place."

"You've looked?"

"Only in passing. I haven't launched a search or anything."

"I don't drink. That's the plain and simple answer."

"Okay then, and that's my plain and simple response."

They sipped their cider in silence for a long time. Eventually Jaz spoke.

"This is one of those questions you don't have to answer."

Doc smiled.

"I'm listening."

"You have spoken about a wife and foster sons. Do you have any children of your own?"

"None ever came our way."

"You wanted some?"

"Oh, my, yes. Doris came from a big family and hoped for lots of babies. It just wasn't to be for us."

"So, you took in kids to care for."

"Perhaps it's a 'so'. Perhaps not. We never fooled ourselves into believing they were ours. They were with us for a while and then moved on in their lives."

"Hard to give them up at the end?"

"There are two answers to that question, Jaz. You always miss the folks you grow to love but you also want what's best for them. We always did what we could to make sure they were moving on to situations that would allow them great joy and possibilities for growth."

"Your wife was a writer you said."

Doc nodded but said nothing. Jaz took that as a sign to move away from the topic.

"While you take your nap, I'll begin working on that star,

Okay?"

"Sounds good. If I should fall asleep, please wake me by four. If I nap longer than that I don't sleep well at night."

"I got your back on that."

It sounded very military to Doc but then he actually knew very little military. He was soon asleep.

He awakened forty-five minutes later. Jaz was standing on a chair, affixing his star to the top of the tree. Doc smiled but kept his amusement to himself. It was a six-pointed star – a Star of David. He would just think of it as an ecumenical holiday tree. 'How delightful,' he thought.

"Nice touch," Doc said sitting up.

"Is it too big?"

"How can a beautiful piece of work like that be too big?"

"You're a very sweet person, Doc. It's easy to understand why everybody loves you. You're really happy aren't you – I mean deep down forever happy inside you."

"I am."

"That's the most commanding response I've heard from you. I mean definite, no doubt about it, absolutely believable."

"Wow. I conveyed that in just two words, three letters?"

"It was as much the tone and your face as the words."

Doc smiled not going to explain further or defend anything.

"I don't understand about happiness. I'm sure you've gotten that idea. I can't remember a time I was really happy for very long. Well, I can't say that anymore. Wow! This gets more and more remarkable. Right now I am happy about things here – you and me, this place, playing at the tree-lot, visiting the old folks and making them happy, helping out around here. I'm not happy about much else though and it's all that I'll eventually have to go back to. I may have been better off never having had this glimpse at how things could have been."

"Are you up to a game of sorts?"

"I guess."

It was delivered with a tinge of reluctance. He continued to rearrange things on the tree.

"List for me several things you have grown up thinking would make you happy if they would only come your way."

"A mind game, I assume."

“In the best sense of the term.”

“Okay. Well, when I was ten I remember I wanted an air rifle. I was sure that would make me happy. I got it. It didn’t. When I was eleven, I wanted my room done over in a cowboy theme. I was sure that would make me happy. It didn’t. When I was twelve I just wanted to get away from my family. They sent me to a boarding school. That didn’t make me happy either. At thirteen I wanted the most expensive game box on the market – with all the trimmings as you might say. It, too, was a big happiness disappointment. Two weeks ago I decided to run away, partially, at least, seeking happiness. It was the most terrible, frightening, experience of my life, until I met you.”

“And here I thought it was I who met you,” Doc added hoping to lighten the moment. “I’m sorry you had to go through such a bad time.”

“It was my choice.”

“No. It sounds to me your choice was to go in search of a happier life. That just didn’t materialize.”

“Until I landed here.”

“But here, Jaz is not your life. Can we continue the mind game?”

Jaz nodded. He returned the chair to the table. He took a seat at the other end of the couch.

“Think back about the things you listed that have made you happy here.”

“Okay. Let’s see. Our relationship – you and me; this place – this atmosphere, really; playing for the families at the tree lot; visiting the old folks, and making them happy; helping out around here; learning and – taking you at your word – teaching, I guess.”

“Contrast your two lists.”

“Contrast how? Oh, my. You sly old fox. My God!”

“I assume there may be some revelation in all of that somewhere,” Doc said hoping to establish some degree of immediate focus.

“At home, it was stuff – gun, decorations, boarding school, game box, and lots more suddenly come to mind. Here it has nothing to do with stuff. It’s . . . what? Being helpful, maybe. Brightening other people’s lives. Lovyiths. Happiness is all about Lovyiths!”

The tears began streaming down his face. He made no move to conceal them or push them away. He looked into Doc’s face – lost

and alone. Doc hitched his head inviting him close. Jaz scooted toward Doc and laid his head on his old friend's shoulder. Doc's big arm reached out and pulled him close. The boy sobbed. Doc sighed. He understood the revelation was only the beginning, but what a fine beginning.

* * *

Making the pizza had been great fun. There were jokes and puns and silliness and puns and stories and puns and times remembered and puns. It had begun when Doc realized he had no fresh spinach on which to base his famous Spinach Plus Pizza. They considered cabbage, lettuce and even celery before Jaz suggested pineapple. In the end, it was a very tasty creation. How a boy could put away that much gut wrenching, grease soaked, highly spiced food remained a mystery to Doc.

"There is Maalox in the cabinet above the sink in the bathroom down here," Doc said just as an item of information.

They had the dishes done up in no time.

"So, how do you typically spend your evenings around here?"

"I'm not sure there is a typical evening. Tonight, we need to begin wrapping presents for the kids at the shelter."

"Which shelter?"

"There is a place that takes in mothers and children who have no place to go. They are often fleeing an abusive home situation. It's about six blocks West of where we first met."

"Okay, then. Where are the presents and point me at the paper."

"Follow me. I have them stashed in my closet upstairs."

Jaz moved five large boxes of toys and books downstairs near the table. Doc followed with several sacks of wrapping paper and tape.

"How much stuff you got here?"

"I never know until it all gets wrapped."

"When did you buy all this stuff?"

"I get one or two things every time I go to the store during the year. Usually things that have been marked down. Makes my Christmas Fund go farther . . . or is that further?"

"When will you take it to the shelter?"

"Christmas Eve. We have several days left if we don't get it all done this evening. Wrapping always takes longer than I think it

will. What's been your experience?"

"I have no experience. I've never wrapped a present before in my whole life, but I'm usually a quick study."

Doc proceeded to give a quick lesson in gift wrapping 101. The boy had been right. He was a quick study. His packages were beautiful. On the back of the cards they wrote the gender and age of a child for whom the gift would be appropriate. That way the mothers could add the names on the inside.

An hour into the endeavor Jaz had a comment.

"This is hard work. I love doing it, don't get me wrong, but it's hard work trying to make each one look different from all the rest."

"Let's take a break and make some eggnog," Doc suggested.

"I thought you didn't drink and I can't imagine you allowing me to, under your roof."

"Eggnog is not necessarily alcoholic. Mine is not."

"I assume it takes eggs."

"I follow a recipe. It's taped to the inside of that cupboard door. Eggs, milk, vanilla, sugar – see the list of ingredients there?"

"Yes. This should give me the sugar rush of the century. I'll have a hundred packages wrapped by bed time. Let's do it!"

Fifteen minutes later they were enjoying eggnog and semi-stale cake donuts. Jaz chose to sit close to Doc on the sofa. They sipped and nibbled and watched the fire. It was mostly a quiet time.

"This is like those wonderful conversations you had with that foster son," Jaz said. "I can understand how they became so important to him."

There was more silence. Jaz kept their cups topped off and made humorous attempts at trying to break the week-old donuts in half.

"I need to know more about your brand of happiness. My runaway sobbing back their sort of cut that conversation short. I know I don't need to but I want to thank you for holding me like you did. Can you believe that in all my fifteen years I can't ever remember being held like that? I don't say that to receive your pity. I guess I just said it to highlight what an important event it was in my life."

"Then I want you to know what an honor it was to share those minutes with you."

Jaz nodded. Nothing more needed to be said.

"About my brand of happiness, as you put it. Let me begin

somewhat abstractly. I will explain later, as you want. For me that deep down forever happiness you referred to is simply establishing a positive social and personal philosophy of life and then every single day, living up to it. Doing that results in a sense of integrity.”

“Sounds pretty concrete to me. I need to know more about positive philosophies, I guess. If you could journey through my psyche you’d find it devoid of anything remotely positive.”

“That isn’t true of course.”

“Are you contradicting me?”

“Sure sounds like it to me.”

“I’ll give you a pass then until I hear more.”

It had not been strictly a playful exchange on the boy’s part.

“A positive philosophy of living tells one what helpful things he is going to do in order to improve the lot of mankind. It is based on the assumption that nowhere in the known universe is there any being more intelligent and precious than the human being. From that follows the duty to help preserve that species, improve that species, and in all ways possible make the members of that species safe, productive, and happy.”

“Overload! Virtually nothing you just said is a part of me or anybody I’ve ever come in contact with. That suggests at least two things to me. One, that you really are an odd ball and two, I now understand why so few people seem to really be happy.”

“I wear your first point as a badge of honor. I have never wanted to be just like everybody else. I think for myself. I never set out to do harm to anyone but I also never set out to conform for the sake of being accepted by anyone or any group.”

“We are so much alike and yet so very different,” Jaz said cocking his head to think. “I mean neither of us has as our goal to fit in for the sake of fitting in. Both of us keep to our beliefs. The big difference seems to be that my beliefs are mostly harmful to the human species and yours are helpful. I’ve always hated people – the human species, in your terms, I suppose. It has always been so hurtful to me. Tell me something, here.”

“In the entire known universe, Jaz, no other species can love like we can or plan for a positive, fruitful, future – our own and that of generations we will never live to know. No other species can show compassion and empathy and acceptance of differences the way we can. No other species can contemplate its eventual death thereby

understanding how precious life is. No other species can understand the damage we have done to our planet and contemplate ways of fixing that – renewing it for our children and our childrens' children.”

“You seem to be ignoring the fact that no other species has ever invented such horrific ways of killing off enemies or holding to hatred generation after generation.”

“I don’t deny nor ignore those things. But, I believe that unlike the other animals with which we share this planet, Man can rise above those basic, always self-defeating, characteristics. We can allow our positive, creative, constructive, side to surface and guide our lives if we will just choose to. No other being has the ability to make that choice. True, many people do not choose to be guided by the positive, altruistic possibilities they possess but just knowing that we have them gives me perennial hope for our species.”

“Hearing that, how could anyone ever go back to being selfish and destructive and uncaring – just living at the fully self-centered level of the lower animals?”

“How it happens I’m not completely certain. That it does happen, is one of those horrific facts of life. Without love based, positive philosophies guiding us, there is only one possible endgame – the self-destruction of the human race and the planet it rides on. And, it may not come in that order.”

“Doesn’t that realization depress you?”

“The fact that we have potential to create a wonderful way of life for all humanity, gives me hope. Hope trumps depression every time.”

“But hope without action seems futile.”

“I agree. Think back to the second part of my explanation about my brand of happiness.”

“The part about living up to the positive, proactive, philosophy every single day.”

“That’s the action component. And yes, all the good intentions in the world will never make one whit of a difference if they are not acted upon regularly.”

“So, one more time, very simply, the source of your happiness is . . .?”

“Being able to go to bed each night knowing I’ve done something to make the world a better place. To know that I have used my resources to benefit all of us and not just me. To remember how

my smile lit smiles on other faces and how my kind words of greeting fostered a chorus of similarly uplifting encounters throughout my realm.”

“Wow! It seems so simple. Be nice and helpful and compassionate to others. Make them at least as much of a focus in your life as you make yourself.”

“I have never heard it put more succinctly – more beautifully, Jaz.”

“Sometime we’re going to have to talk about guilt because right now I’m buried under fifteen years of it.”

“Here’s another old adage – one I actually didn’t make up: At any given moment each person does the only thing he can do considering all the forces impinging upon him. It is not offered as an excuse but an explanation. You did what you did for whatever reasons. You now have new forces impinging on you so you can change the direction of your actions.”

“New forces meaning the wisdom of Doc.”

“New forces meaning those discovered by Jaz during his quest for the meaning of life.”

“Is that what this is? Maybe so. What a cool revelation. All the wisdom sitting inside that head of yours could have done me no good if I hadn’t been seeking after it or at least willingly listened. And here I thought I was just running away to punish my parents.”

The boy put another log on the fire and returned to sit beside Doc.

“This is really embarrassing but will you hold me close like you did? I suppose that’s a very selfish request.”

“Oh no. It is never selfish to allow someone else to spread his love in your direction.”

“I love you, Doc.”

“I love you, Jaz.”

///

CHAPTER SEVEN

Doc retired at ten. Jaz was still in high gear and wished to continue wrapping things.

The next morning when Doc entered the main room down stairs he found Jaz asleep on the floor in front of the fireplace. He also found every last gift, wrapped and tagged. It was like a colorful mountain leaning up against the back of the couch.

Wednesday was waffle morning so, after spreading a blanket over Jaz, Doc went about stirring up a triple batch. He heated the iron and put a dozen sausage paddies in the skillet.

He was feeling weak. During the night, he had required a nitro tablet to calm an angina attack. They had been coming more frequently. It was less that and more the inconvenience of remaining weak for a day or so afterward that truly irked the old man. What would be, would be, in the old ticker department.

The mixture of kitchen aromas woke Jaz.

"I stink," were his words of greeting that morning.

"You have time for a shower before breakfast?" Doc said, taking the boy at his word.

Jaz nodded and mounted the steps two at a time. He and his blue towels were back in ten minutes. Breakfast was on the table.

"I always wondered how waffles got indented that way. An ingenious device. What do you call it?"

"A waffle iron and every part of it becomes flesh searing hot – just a word of caution."

Jaz continued drying his hair and then sat down at the table.

"I finished the packages. I suppose you saw. It was maybe the best night of my life. Every time I picked up a new toy or book I imagined the kid who was going to get it. I get dozens of Christmas

presents – thousands of dollars' worth, every year. I felt sad to think that a single toy truck or doll or Dr. Seuss book would have to take the place of all that for these kids. But then I remembered things you've said and decided to feel good that they were at least going to have something they wouldn't have had otherwise – knowing somebody really cared about them."

"I'm pleased you had a good evening, Jaz. And, I appreciate all your efforts."

"Oh, it wasn't like effort, you know. It was like . . . I'm not sure what, but it certainly was not effort. How are we going to get them all to a place ten blocks from here?"

"One of the volunteers will come and pick them up Christmas Eve morning."

"You don't give them out yourself?"

"Goodness no. Some years I do go and watch from a corner. Seeing happy children is a wondrous thing."

"It sounds like they don't know it was you who gave them the gifts."

"Does it?"

"I need more than that evasive answer. An explanation, maybe?"

"My father had a theory about charity. He said if the giver received credit for it, it could not be a true act of charity; it was in that case more like a ploy to be thanked or recognized or to be the star of it all. I agree with his take. Where there is any advantage for the giver – aside from the good feelings involved in the act – then it cannot be characterized as true charity."

"Do you take some pleasure in continually turning my world upside down?"

"Does it seem that way?"

"There he goes again, folks, exhibiting his mastery of forcing the lad to think things through for himself."

"What I hope for you, Son, is that you will willingly examine a wide variety of options and experience the awesome personal growth that can open up because of it."

Jaz stuffed his mouth and thought. Doc brought more waffles and set two more making. The boy spoke, thoughtfully.

"You can't always make your giving anonymous," he said at last.

"That's true. I understand that. But often you can."

Jaz was not ready to let go of the concept.

"Like what you're doing for me. I have to know it is you who is doing it."

"I never thought of making a good friend as charity, Jaz."

"You twist the most straight forward ideas in impish ways, you know and I'm going to leave the, 'you know,' right there because I believe I deserve a response."

"Options, my boy. Options. I present them for your evaluation – perhaps for your future use. I don't force my ideas on people but I do believe they are due to hear previously unconsidered options."

"You're like a waffle, Doc. I just can't decide if you're more like the depressions or the humps."

"Now, you have my attention," Doc said putting down his fork and folding his hands at his chin.

"You're like the depressions because you hold so many fascinating ideas – like the delicious syrup inside the little square indentations. You're like the humps because in my experience, at least, you stand way above most other people in how you go about living a helpful, love-based, life."

"You draw interesting analogies. I'm not agreeing or disagreeing with the conclusions you have drawn – that is strictly your business – but I will remind you that analogies are not necessarily either/or in nature."

"Can we agree – either/or – that these waffles really taste great?"

Doc smiled and nodded. He picked up his fork and took a bite. His full out expression of ecstasy gave Jaz his answer – total agreement about the waffles – either/or!

Doc changed the subject.

"I have a phone over there, you know. It has the capacity to make long distance calls – just in case that need should ever arise."

"Not too subtle, old guy. New topic."

"I'll agree to a new topic if you'll agree to keep the concept of differing perspectives in mind."

Jaz frowned and considered the proposal with obvious sincerity. He understood that Doc was suggesting he needed to reexamine his take on both his parents' perspectives about him and his about them.

"I can make that deal. Can't thank you for it, at this point, at least, but I can make it."

Jaz finished the waffles down to the last strangely shaped kidney like structure that Doc delivered to his plate."

The boy rotated his plate slowly.

"A moon, an arch, a boomerang, a smile, an ear, a frown, and finally, a third of a waffle. Does that make this a non-waffle because it isn't complete?"

"Are you and I non-people just because we are not yet complete?"

It moved Jaz to consider a new idea.

"It brings up the possibility of devising a whole series of gradients of the idea, person, depending on their level of development toward becoming the perpetual sources of Lovyiths."

"What we need are more ways to divide mankind."

"That was sarcasm, I take it."

"Not maliciously delivered, but yes, sarcasm, I suppose."

"Let's get the dishes done and move on to the rest of the day," Jaz said, his sheer enthusiasm wearing down the old man.

"Wednesdays are usually my rest up from Tuesdays time. Not much fun for a boy your age, I'll guess."

"I brought books to read. I can handle some down time. If I get restless I can go for a walk and explore your city."

If he had intentions of leaving anytime soon it was certainly not evident from his conversation. Doc was patient and loved having the boy around but was becoming concerned about his apparent growing willingness to nest there with him until able to draw social security.

"I'm going to need to move the packages so I can get to some clean duds from my bag. Where do you suggest?"

"Let's see how many we can get back into the boxes the toys were in. We can set them by the door. If we need more you can run down to the grocery. They save boxes for me."

"Sure. Probably best if I wait to make that run until after I get dressed."

"Probably. I'd hate for your skin to become a match to the blue of that towel. By the way I have a new stick of deodorant in my medicine cabinet in my bathroom if you feel the need."

"I did come off without mine. Sorry if I stink. Not been using

it long. Just forgot it."

"Not a problem, as some of you young folks say."

"I think the expression usually is, 'No problem'."

"I stand corrected."

"And you appreciate it. Most folks hate being corrected. I know I do – did – whatever."

"Corrections are often taken as put downs. Just redefine them as means for personal growth and the problem disappears."

"You can just ramble on through your wisdom for days at a time, can't you?"

"I hope in my almost 84 years that I've learned some things that are worth passing on for others to consider. Goodness knows I made enough mistakes along the way to acquiring them."

"Almost eighty-four you say."

"December twenty third."

"That's tomorrow."

"It is? My goodness this year has flown by, but then so have the last eighty-three, I suppose."

"We have to have a party," Jaz said.

"I'm not big on parties, Son. Maybe you and I can drink an eggnog toast to it tomorrow evening. That will be a wonderful party in my book."

"I don't have anything to give you for a present."

"And we didn't have any ornaments to put on the tree," Doc said looking at the boy over his glasses.

"Ah!"

The conversation ended.

As if it were some great Chinese puzzle, Jaz took it as a personal challenge – the fitting of all the gifts back into the boxes from which they had come. In the end, he had five left over. Doc furnished two paper bags from the grocery and the deed was done.

Jaz moved them to the appointed spot by the door, selected an assortment of clothes from his bag, and got dressed. Doc picked up a book and made himself comfortable on the couch. Jaz spoke as he prepared to poke life back into the fire.

"Can we talk about being dead?"

It seemed not so much an odd question but an odd way to phrase it. Doc smiled.

"I probably have less to say on that topic than most but of

course we can. Be more specific."

"What happens?"

"Oh. Just a little question."

Jaz smiled. Doc continued.

"All any of us can do is speculate. My best guess is that everything is over. Lots of folks, many of them brighter than I, believe differently."

"You're not into souls, then?"

"I have often wished I was. It would have, at several points in my life, offered me great comfort. The idea of reuniting with my wife in some spiritual hereafter is a remarkably intriguing and comforting concept. It just doesn't make sense to me. I'm a brick and mortar guy when it comes to such things, I guess. I believe in what I can see and feel or otherwise determine behaves according the laws of science. Blind faith, as it is often called, is just not possible for me. Like I said, I have tried but it doesn't work. I never deny anyone else their faith, however, so long as it is not hurtful."

"Does that make you an atheist?"

"More likely an agnostic since I'm seldom willing to close such doors completely. I keep an open mind – if only a narrow slit."

Jaz had more information.

"Agnostic comes from the Greek meaning unknown or unknowable and is often referenced to the existence or nonexistence of a god or some supreme, intelligent, force in the universe. I always thought it was just a fence riding belief used by people unwilling to commit one way or the other. The way you explain it, it seems different. Like you believe the odds are really against there being a god but you aren't willing to bet the farm on it. You acknowledge that you don't possess all the knowledge necessary to make such a judgment."

"I suppose that sums it up. Yes. An interesting configuration, even."

"Like where you are 99% atheist and 1% theist, I'm just the opposite, I guess. 99% theist and maybe 1% atheist. Growing up I have never been presented with the non-theistic alternative. It's my parent's belief that I just accepted without any real consideration. I was told there was a God and if I didn't behave myself he'd send me to hell. I'm sure that if my parents really believe what they taught me they are all quite certain I'm headed for the fiery afterlife."

"I'm sorry that has been your relationship with them."

"Why are you such a good guy if you don't believe in hell? You could just go out and take whatever you wanted and never have to worry about getting eternally punished."

"What is my basic belief about the human species?"

"That you think human beings are the most precious beings anywhere in the known universe."

"And what do I believe needs to happen for the human species?"

"That it needs to develop to its full potential and live on in safety and happiness."

"Basically, yes. Now, if I don't believe the species is going to get any help from a god in its struggle to survive and live on productively in safety and happiness, who's left to care for it.?"

"Ah! The old boy's Socratic method turns on light bulb above young boy's head."

Doc smiled. Jaz sat nodding for some time before he attempted his response.

"So, in many ways it is more important for atheists and agnostics to be good and caring people than it is for theists – in terms of the saving the human species thing."

"Maybe. Maybe not. True, for many theists their basic motivation is not to improve the lot of mankind just because it is the right thing to do."

Jaz interrupted.

"I think I see where you're going. Lots of people are 'good' first of all just to win themselves a place in heaven – a purely selfish approach, you'd say. The actual part about helping improve things for mankind in general is strictly secondary for."

"For some, yes. For many, I believe the two motives probably go hand in hand."

"You may be too kind about that. I'll get back to you on it."

He switched gears, slightly.

"Isn't it . . . what? . . . disappointing and frightening, I guess, to think that when you die it's all over?"

"I didn't say everything was all over. Just the life of this old physical body. We talked about legacies. Writers live on in their books; artists in their paintings; builders in their edifices. Those can all be traced to the person who created them, but there are other ways

to live on.

"When a ripple washes ashore in a pond you can't probably know what initiated it – what happened to cause that ripple but you know something did. We all leave ripples behind, Jaz. I try to start lots of ripples every day. I've indicated to you that each day I do what I can to improve some small aspect of life for mankind. Some days it is no more than smiles and quick, 'Good mornings,' to the people I pass on the way to and from the store. Ripples. Smiles engender smiles. Kind words engender more kind words. The ripples are soon disengaged from their source. Other days I am able – privileged – to do more. Ripples, Jaz. Ripples"

"Like these days we are having together – doing more I mean."

Doc smiled.

"Yes. Like that. Thank you."

"Thank you?"

"For the privilege of knowing you, Son. For the opportunity of sharing a few of the things my 83 years have proved to me help make life grand – make it worth living."

"Yes. Ripples?"

"Ripples. Who knows where they will travel now that they are in your care."

They sat in silence for some time. Jaz turned around from where he was sitting on the hearth so his back was to the fire.

"If I could only carry two things away from here, what would you hope they'd be?"

The quickness of Doc's response told Jaz he had no reservations about what they would be.

"That the greatest gift is love-based giving of ones self, and that the only truly meaningful mission in life is helping others grow in positive ways."

"More than money and stuff and fame and power, you're saying."

"Those things, yes, and more. You'll recognize them as they come up in your life."

"I pretty much figured that. I've been on a real roller coaster about that this past week."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Back home I figured the most important thing in life would be spending lots of private time with girls. At the beginning of this

adventure, I was on a tear thinking that getting away from home would be the greatest thing. Punishing my parents with it was an added extra. Then when my funds ran out I thought just surviving would be the greatest thing. Not being terrified all the time would have been a nice thing as well.

"Now, I'm questioning all of those things. I think I like myself and my future more now than I ever have in my life. I don't understand that because I'll have to return to the same old unbearable situation."

"The same?"

Jaz grew quiet and turned back toward the fire. It wasn't that he didn't immediately understand; since he had changed in several dramatic ways and since he was a part of things back home that mix would be different than before. It was that he wondered just how things would change and what he could do to guide it all in positive directions. It suddenly felt like a huge burden.

They had never listened to him before so why would they begin now? He turned back and asked that very question of Doc.

"Jaz, I'll share with you a secret I learned from my father. He told me that when trying to get a point across or change someone's mind or perspective, delivering sermons was usually futile; the use of force even more futile; and arguing did nothing but compel the other person to believe even more strongly in the position he held originally."

"That's the secret?"

"No. That's the warm up. Modeling is the secret. People believe what they see, far more than what they are told. You go home and demonstrate the new and improved you, and they will believe without you needing to say a word. It may take a while but they will see and come to believe. Just be determined not to blow your cool during the process. Remember, they may not have liked how you behaved but they were familiar with it. They could probably predict it. That which is familiar – good or bad – is often given up most reluctantly."

"You're suggesting I need strength I'm not sure I have."

"You will surprise yourself in that way. I promise you that you will."

"You see that, do you?"

Doc delivered a single, emphatic, nod in the boy's direction. Jaz mimicked it, believably.

"You make it sound like the conflict is just between you and your parents."

"It's all there is when I'm at home. I'm an only kid – 'the only brat', as my father usually introduces me."

"Ouch!"

"Yeah."

"You spoke of a boarding school."

"Geekville Academy."

"Not really of course."

"A pseudo-military school for gifted and talented brats. Like I said, Geekville."

"You didn't get along well there either."

"Could have. Didn't. Should have."

"It sounds like an intellectual exercise designed to remove yourself from the program."

"Almost. That characterization is short of the mark."

"I see. Well, no. I don't see, of course."

"I've spent my life embarrassing my parents. I've always been too small to defend myself against fists and knees. So, I've used what powers I do have."

"And your approach has solved the main problem of course."

Jaz looked Doc in the face for a long moment.

"It was never my goal to fix things. I knew I couldn't do that. It was just to get back at them."

"And the more you tried that the more severe their reaction, I imagine."

"Escalation, you're saying."

"Escalation is almost always the end product of revenge motivated acts."

"I know that up here."

Jaz pointed to his head.

"I just can't convince my down here."

He pointed to his gut.

"There is someone I want you to meet. Are you up for a trek through the snow?"

"Sure, but I thought you needed to rest today."

"I can rest the rest of my life. This seems more important."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Outside they were met by a gray sky – not the overcast blandly curtained gray of dreary Spring days, but a windblown sea of large, dark, tumbling clouds crowding together as if each was fighting to force its considerable bulk to the front of the line as the mass moved slowly eastward. They foretold a major snow storm in the hours ahead. Nonetheless, Doc and Jaz trudged back in the direction of the grocery store. Then, a few blocks beyond.

“This is the way to the Shelter you spoke of – the one the gifts are for.”

“His name is Johnny. He’s ten. You and he need to talk.”

“About what?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re not making sense.”

“That will be your job. To make sense out of it.”

“I have a bad feeling.”

“I have a good feeling.”

They turned up a sidewalk to a large, old, three story house. Doc stopped them half way to the porch.

“Just stand still for a moment so their cameras can see that we are friendlies.”

“Friendlies?”

“It is a safe house for abused wives and children. Sometimes the abusive men try to gain access and remove them. If the face on their monitor is not known to be friendly a call is placed to the police.”

“What an awful way to have to live,” Jaz said standing as if at attention.

A bell rang.

“Our signal that we may approach the door,” Doc said urging Jaz on ahead of him.

“I still don’t get it.”

“If you got it we wouldn’t be here, Son.”

The door opened and an ample, red headed, middle aged, woman reached out and administered a bear hug to Doc.

“Maude, this is my new friend, Jaz. He’s staying with me for a while.”

There was a second hug.

“Any friend of Doc’s is welcome here. Come in and take your wraps off. Looks like we’re in for a storm. TV says maybe another foot before morning. Any special reason for the unannounced visit?”

“Jaz would like to spend some time with Johnny – the ten-year-old Johnny in case there are others.”

“He’ll love having a visitor, Jaz. He’ll be shy at the outset but he has good reason not to trust folks.”

Jaz began to feel a kinship. His questions became all quite secondary to his rapidly peeking interest.

“I’ll need to get his mother’s okay but that will be no problem.”

Maude left the entry hall and was soon back accompanied by a frail, pale looking woman with black eyes and her left arm in a sling.

“Betty, you know Doc. This is his friend, Jaz. Jaz would like to spend some time with Johnny this morning if that’s okay.”

Betty looked into Doc’s face. He nodded. Her face brightened and she reached out to take the boy’s hand. She led him up the wooden staircase and out of sight. Doc remained behind and was soon politely sipping – with obvious trepidation – at a cup of Maud’s notoriously terrible coffee.

“These grounds from last week or the week before, Maudie?” he joked.

She reached across the table and patted his hand.

“You know we have to count all our pennies here,” she said. “Coffee’s not high on our priority list.”

* * *

Upstairs, Betty introduced the boys. Johnny moved away to a window seat in a far corner. He chose to focus his gaze outside.

“Jaz is Doc’s friend,” she said.

The tight frown eased on Johnny’s face although it was not replaced with anything resembling a smile.

“Okay if I stay a few minutes?” Jaz asked.

Johnny nodded and looked him over out of the corners of his eyes. Jaz made himself comfortable on the large rug at the center of the room. The mother left. He crossed his legs beneath him and looked at the boy.

“I imagine you wonder what kind of name, Jaz is, huh?”

Johnny nodded.

“It’s a nickname, really. Short for Jasper. I never liked Jasper so I decided on Jaz instead. I wouldn’t have had to do that I suppose if I had a solid name like John.”

“I hate it!”

“Sorry. May I ask why?”

“My dad’s name.”

Jaz decided not to pursue his reason. It seemed obvious.

“Well, then. Let’s find you a really great nickname.”

Johnny got up and took a seat on the rug mimicking Jaz, though keeping his distance. The boy’s right hand was bandaged. Jaz didn’t ask. He turned a bit so he could face the younger boy more directly.

“Got any ideas? Ever have a nickname?”

“Dad calls me devil boy.”

“Well, I don’t happen to like that one very much. Do you?”

Johnny shook his head and looked at the floor.

“So what do you like to do? Maybe that’ll give us some ideas.”

“I like to draw and shoot baskets.”

“I got it, then!” Jaz said enthusiastically. “How about Hoops? That seems just right for a basketball playing dude.”

Johnny smiled and looked Jaz in the face for the first time. He nodded.

“I like that. Hoops. Jaz and Hoops. Jaz and Hoops. Are you my friend?”

“I want to be your friend. I’m just visiting Doc so it’s not like I’ll be around for a long time but while I’m here I’d really like to be your friend.”

“My dad hits us.”

It took Jaz by surprise. He felt sick inside thinking that was the first – the most important thing – the little boy had to share with his new friend. Jaz nodded not knowing what he was going to say but he opened his mouth and began.

“My dad hits me, too. A pretty bad thing, right?”

Johnny nodded and held out his bandaged hand.

“He burned me with his cigarette.”

“I’m so sorry. I don’t know what to say.”

“That’s okay. Nobody knows what to say. Dad says it’s ‘cause I’m a bad kid. That if I’d just be good he wouldn’t have to do stuff to me. He’s always drunk when he does it. He never tells me what he means by bad . . . or good.”

It seemed a litany of the things a social worker’s questions might have set in his mind.

“My dad doesn’t need to be drunk to hit me. I never know when it’s coming.”

“I’m sorry. That must be real hard for ya.”

Jaz nodded.

“So, you like to draw, you say. Got any paper? I like to draw, too.”

“On the table. I’ll get some. Crayons or pencil? I like pencil the best.”

“Let’s make it pencils, then.”

“We can draw on the floor,” Johnny said pointing.

“Sounds good.”

They were soon bellied down, paper on the hard wood floor ahead of them just off the rug.

“So, what shall we draw?” Jaz asked.

“I’ll draw about you and you draw about me.”

The kid sounded like Dr. Derwood but he wouldn’t get into that. They each drew in silence for several minutes.

“Now what?” Jaz asked.

“I’ll guess what you drew and then you can guess about what I drew.”

Jaz slipped his drawing across the floor to Johnny.

“That’s me, Hoops, playing ball with some other guys. I like it. Can I color it?”

“It’s all yours.”

“Now it’s your turn to guess mine,” Johnny said.

He handed it to Jaz and then sat back on his legs.

It was a stick figure with some trees and maybe snow banks. The figure had no face. There was a small house at the very front, right. A small moon graced the shaded sky at the rear.

“There’s no face on the person. How can I tell if it’s me?”

“It’s the back of your head.”

“I see. It looks like I’m walking away during a snow storm.”

Johnny shook his head and offered a short-lived frown.

“It’s Jaz running away from home.”

“You think that’s what I’m really doing or is that what you think I should do?”

“You’ve already done ran away.”

“What makes you think that?”

“You’re with Doc. Maudie says he’s like a magnet when it comes to attractin’ runaways.”

“I see. So it happens a lot for Doc, does it?”

“That’s what Maudie says and you kin always trust Maudie.”

“Where do you think the Jaz in this picture is going, if he’s running away?”

“To some place safe and warm where there ain’t no beer and there ain’t no dads.”

“Sort of like this place, I imagine,” Jaz said looking around.

“No. Someplace for ever and ever. A far, far, away place for ever and ever.”

It suddenly all rushed in on Jaz and tears began to flow. Johnny noticed but didn’t comment. Tears were commonplace in his world. It was an outpouring of a lifetime of sadness never expressed. Doc had peeled back the protective coat of anger. Johnny had made the sadness legitimate. He scooted so his back was against the window seat. He drew up his knees and cradled his head in his crossed arms. He sobbed.

Presently he felt Johnny’s young arm around his neck, then his bony body pressing close along side and his head laid against his shoulder. He felt the little boy’s chest heaving quietly, almost in rhythm with his own. He reached out and pulled him close. They sat there together for many minutes.

Friendships are forged in a variety of ways. Some grow gradually. Others come in a flash. Although their hours together would be limited, the memory of their meeting that morning would represent a bond they would carry with them forever.

* * *

The walk home had mostly been in silence. Back inside the cabin Jaz built up the fire and spoke softly as Doc sat down heavily in

his usual place. Jaz thought out loud.

“Johnny’s dad is never going change. Will he and his mother go back to him?”

“Sadly, they usually do.”

“And they usually get beat up again?”

“Sadly, yes, I’m afraid.”

“There is nothing fair or just about that.”

“I know. Those who look for fair in life are often disappointed.”

“I doubt if my father will never change either. I can take it but Johnny’s frail and terrified. Can’t he be taken away from the family?”

“Taken away from his mother?”

“I see the problem. Why won’t she leave the man?”

“How would she support herself and Johnny? She doesn’t even have a high school diploma. And if she were to leave, chances are he would find them and who knows what terrible thing he might do then.”

“You’re saying they don’t have any good alternative.”

Doc shrugged. Jaz had answered his own question.

“What kind of a society do we live in that allows such things to go on?”

Again, it didn’t require an answer. He just sat there near the hearth looking into the flames, remaining silent for many minutes. Presently he turned and faced Doc.

“I may have a solution for the problem.”

Doc turned his book over onto his knee clearly ready to listen – surprised yet not really surprised.

“Every city has safe houses I imagine,” he began. It had really been an initial question.

Doc nodded.

“And they receive support from regular people I imagine rather than city governments.”

“Most of their support is usually from private sources, correct.”

“And some of the supporters in every city are successful business people, right?”

“Yes. I’m sure that’s a reasonable assumption.”

“Successful business people hire help, right.”

“Again, a reasonable assumption at least for some of them –

maybe most of them.”

Jaz moved to sit beside Doc on the couch. He turned to face him his bent right leg up on the couch.

“Here’s what we do. We get businesses in this city to hire moms from other cities so they can safely escape from their horrible situations. The other cities do the same for the mothers here. They move and become free and learn a trade and the kids are safe forever.”

“A fascinating idea. One with wonderful potential. Why don’t you give Maudie a call and run it by her. She’s been in the field for thirty years. She’ll know the right, hard, questions to pose. If she sees its potential, we’ll get her Board of Directors together and you can meet with them.”

“Okay then. What’s her number?”

“It’s unlisted. To play exactly by the rules I’ll need to dial, Okay?”

“Of course. I understand how important it must be to keep that number secret.”

The boy’s conversation with Maude lasted twenty minutes. He hung up. Doc had been listening to the Jaz side of the conversation.

“Sounded positive from here,” he said, waiting to be filled in by the excited boy.

“She says most of the board members will be there for some kind of an end of the year meeting at three this afternoon. She invited us to be there and says we can have ten minutes to make our presentation.”

“Maude moves fast when she smells a good thing. One change, however. This is your deal, Jaz. I’m just not up to another outing today. You don’t need me anyway. It’s your plan.”

“But I think of us as a team.”

“I’m flattered to be included. I’ll do what I can to help but this is your ball. If you want to do it, you’ll need to run with it. I do have an old friend in Peoria, Illinois who runs a large bakery. I’ll give him a call and see if he might be willing to participate. I’ll be thinking who else I might be able to engage.”

Jaz bit at his lower lip and began swaying back and forth.

“You can do this, Jaz,” Doc said assuming he was getting nervous about it.

“It’s not that. My father owns a chain of dry cleaning stores

in ten states. It's how he got so rich. Ironic. He gets filthy rich from the cleaning business. His business manager is a really good friend of mine and the brother of my man, Elbert."

"Your man?"

"Like a guy nanny, I guess you would say. Except for the unmagnificent months I spent at the Geek Academy he's been there for me everyday of my life. Changed my diapers, cared for my skinned knees and other assorted cuts and bruises – did the birds and bees talks, and drives me on my dates. I used to feel guilty because I figured I just might love him and couldn't say the same for sure about my parents."

"After fifteen years, I assume the feeling goes both ways" Doc said.

"I know what you're saying."

"You do? I guess I figured you would. He loves you."

"No. What you were saying was that he was probably hurting terribly because I ran away and he doesn't know how I'm doing. You think I should contact him and let him know I'm okay."

"Oh. Is that what I was saying? Might it instead be what you were thinking?"

"Okay so I'm feeling guilty as hell – sorry. I think I can kill the two proverbial birds with one stone now. I'll call him but I don't want my Father to be able to trace it. I got a discount store cell phone before I left in case I needed to call home. It can't be traced."

"Two birds you say?"

"I'll let Elbert know I'm okay and have him work things out with his brother – about the moms and kids needing a place to live and a job."

"That sounds like the grandest sacrificing of two helpless little birds I've ever encountered."

"It is a gosh awful saying, isn't it? And, in that case the 'isn't it' is justified because it was merely offering my agreement with your implied position."

"You don't have to justify yourself to me, Jaz."

"It seems I feel I have to. I've always had to."

"I'm sorry."

"I know you are. Really, I do know that I don't have to with you. It's just a deeply engrained habit" – a survival mechanism as it were."

“I’m about to pry, Jaz, so be prepared to tell me to back off.”

“Go ahead. I owe you answers, I know.”

“You owe me nothing but that discussion would take us in a different direction. Your beatings. They are frequent and unprovoked, is that what I am to believe?”

“That’s how they were when I was little. I finally woke up to the fact that if I was going to get them anyway, I might as well do things to deserve them. It was suddenly like I was in control of things for the first time in my life.”

“You mean you could make your father beat you anytime you wanted to?”

“Put that way it sounds ridiculous, of course,” Jaz said looking Doc in the face and nodding in a deliberate fashion.

“Do you have a handle on your Father’s motivation for hurting you – in the early years, I guess, I mean?”

“He wants me to be perfect, plus a bit more. When I’m not, he ‘motivates’ me with his fists.”

“And your mother?”

“Two birds of a feather – appropriate analogy for such foul behavior.”

Jaz flashed a quick smile, sobering immediately.

Doc looked at him over his glasses acknowledging the pun, such as it was, while keeping his focus serious.

“She slaps me but never more. She leaves that for dear old dad.”

“I assume you try to avoid them.”

“You better believe it.”

“Elbert?”

“He is not allowed to interfere with the disciplining or he’ll get canned. I remember pleading with him on one occasion not to try and do anything because I couldn’t imagine life without him. He promised and has never lifted a hand in my defense since. If my Father is ever found dead in a dark alley – and if I didn’t do it – it would be Elbert.”

“Your time at school away from home must be very precious to you.”

“At school? I’ve always been home tutored, except for the disastrous semester at the academy.”

“And you left there because?”

“Because I carefully calculated every possible way to be as big

a pain in the ass as I could be.”

“It was that bad there that you wanted to get expelled.”

“Actually, it wasn’t so bad. I could have liked it probably. I’ve made myself think it was terrible, but it really had lots of possibilities.”

“I guess I don’t get it then.”

“It was my parents’ grand plan – send me there to straighten me out – punish me. I couldn’t let any plan of theirs work, you see. It ran against everything I stand for.”

“Which is?”

“Keep my parents as miserable as possible. To point out to them at every possible moment what terrible parents they have been, and proving it to them by turning out the way I have.”

“And how is that working?”

“I’m just convincing them that I am the problem – incorrigible is the word my mother likes best. I won’t repeat my father’s term.”

“Any ideas why they so desperately need you to be perfect?”

“I’ve always figured they thought that would prove they are perfect as well. I’m alive because my Father knocked-up my mother before they were married. I suppose in their minds it probably takes a lot to overcome that sinful beginning. I suppose I’m a constant reminder of their imperfection. Perfect son reflects perfect parents. Imperfect son reminds them of their own imperfection.”

“My. That suggests you've done a great deal of thinking about it.”

“Just all the time – well, all the time I've not been thinking about how to hurt them.”

“In a word, how do you feel about them?”

“It takes three words; I hate them!”

“So, if a man were to go after you mother with a knife with the clear intention of killing her you would . . .”

Jaz stood and began pacing.

“I hate it when you do things like this. Of course, I’d try and protect her. And save the next question, Socrates: Who do we defend most automatically? Those we love. You’ve kept me in a perpetual state of confusion ever since you dragged me home – like you’ve done with a billion other runaways, to hear people talk.”

There was obvious anger in the boy’s short lived tirade.

“First things first, I guess. You just said, ‘I hate blank when

you do things like that.” You said you hated what?”

“IT. What you do to me. How you twist my head . . . Oh. My. God!”

Doc sat in silence while Jaz worked through his revelation. It took several minutes.

“With you I understand that my dislike is not of you but of what you sometimes ask of me, what you say to me, the questions that you set forth for me to answer and the answers that I find. With my parents, I bypass the words and behaviors and go directly to hating them – the people not their behavior.”

Again, Doc chose silence.

After a few more minutes, Jaz took a seat beside Doc, sighed, and leaned over draping a huge, long, hug around his old friend’s neck. There were no tears, which meant they were still to come – the emotional confrontation he needed to have with himself would be delayed.

“I need to make a call. My phone is in my bag.”

“Go up and use my room if you want privacy.”

“Down here will be fine.”

He dug out the phone and sucked in a deep breath before plunking in the number. The opening line caught Doc completely off guard.

“Father. This is Jasper. I want you and Mother to know I’m safe and being well taken care of. . . . For once in our lives will you please just listen? There will be lots of time for you to yell and beat on me when I get home. . . . I’m not going to tell you that because I don’t want you to get my friend in trouble over it. . . . You can’t. The phone can’t be traced. . . . May I speak now, please, Father?”

“. . . We will deal with the running away thing later. If you will give me a genuine chance about it, I’m sure you will see that it has done me a world of good – something I’m sure will please you. . . . That wasn’t what I had in mind but I will give you my perspective on it later. . . . I have a favor to ask. . . . No, it isn’t for me. . . .”

He went on to describe what he had found at the Safe House and the terrible consequences awaiting the mothers and children when they returned to the only place they had – the man who repeatedly injured them. His words were both eloquent and clearly from the heart. He painted horrific, if realistic, pictures of what he had seen – the mother’s blackened eyes, fractured arm, and broken spirit; the six

cigarette burns in Johnny's palm and the strap marks across his back. He then shared his proposal in great detail outlining exactly what he needed for his father's company to do immediately. He closed his appeal with . . .

“There will just have to be a community service award in this for you, you know.”

He then listened for some time. His expression suggested it was informational listening rather than a lip-zipped acceptance of his Father's ranting and raving. Doc was intrigued. The conversation ended.

“I love you father. Tell mother, too. Please make sure Elbert knows I'm okay.”

CHAPTER NINE

“Very little of that conversation – beginning with the recipient – seemed to take the form I figured it would,” Doc said.

“Yeah. How about that? Once he got over being his outraged parent-self and started being his shrewd businessman-self, we had a fruitful conversation. It’s probably the first fruitful conversation he and I have ever had. ‘Thank you, God for Johnny.’ The short of it is that he will participate and grow the residence exchange plan into as many cities as we need – limited by where his stores are, of course. Come to find out he’s on the board of directors of a Family Shelter. I never knew that. I can’t imagine that. Talk about compartmentalization – a fairly self-explanatory Freudian term I’m sure you are familiar with.”

Doc made his Peoria call with similar success though on a smaller scale. Jaz had been listening in on the conversation and nodded his excitement at every positive turn he could determine.

“How about we celebrate with lunch?” Jaz said when Doc hung up. “I, for one, am starved.”

“Is it that time already? Sure. Let’s go see what we have in the larder. I need to begin a shopping list for us.”

“I saw a can in the cupboard labeled corn beef hash. Never heard of it.”

“Then you are in for a titillating taste treat. Get out the big iron skillet. Actually, there should be two cans. Open them both.”

The deeds were done.

“Yew! Yuck! This stuff smells awful.”

“Just the opposite of vanilla, I guess.”

“What? Oh. Vanilla smells wonderful but tastes terrible. Hash, which smells terrible, will taste wonderful, you’re saying.”

Doc nodded.

“Form the contents of each can into a little nest with just a thin layer of hash on the bottom in the center. Find the large lid.”

Doc broke an egg into each nest and sprinkled several tablespoons of water about.

“Put on the lid and don’t take it off. It will hold in the steam, heat the hash, and poach the eggs. Fruit goes good with hash. What do we have?”

“Some pineapple left over from the pizza.”

“Divide it into saucers. I’ll set the table. You know, toast and marmalade go great with hash as well. You search the fridge for the spread and I’ll start the toast.”

Ten minutes later they were eating.

“So, you seem to have some heated personal thoughts about me and runaways in general,” Doc said out of the blue, in reference to the belligerent tone in the boy’s voice earlier.

“I’ve been thinking of you as just my old guy. When people started making reference to other kids you’ve had in your life I suddenly felt less special – jealous, I suppose. Not your foster kids way back when, but the runaways. For all I know there was another boy sitting right here eating corned beef hash across the table from you last week. I don’t like that idea. It’s dumb but that is my honest feeling. I wish it weren’t, but it is.”

“So, should I get all jealous of Elbert because he’s had all those years with you and I’m only going to have a few days?”

“Perspective, huh?” Jaz said, understanding immediately.

Doc nodded.

“It would be absolutely wonderful to have you here with me for years and years but that would be selfish. It wouldn’t be in your best interest or that of your family and loved ones.”

Jaz nodded. Everything about his response brimmed over with reluctance, however.

“And I’d like to be here with you for years and years but that wouldn’t be fair to you and the next herd of runaways. You meet lots of them – us – do you?”

“Not taking time to define lots, several a year, now.”

“That few? It sounded like you ran us in and out of here like pigs going to market.”

“Oh. No. Thank goodness!”

“Too much work, I suppose.”

“Well, maybe, but my reference was to how sad it would be if there were that many youngsters who needed my attention.”

“You think differently from anybody I’ve ever met. You seem to live your life – willingly rearrange your life – to accommodate those in need, like me at this very moment. That’s really not normal. It’s not like most people. You heard my closer on the phone with my Father. Holding out the carrot of some award for his selfless help with our project. That’s how most people operate, I believe. They first ask, ‘What’s going to be in it for me?’ and if nothing that seems important for them jumps out, they just look the other direction and go on their way.

“Unlike most people, you consider the wise, humanity-friendly, move in every case. It must be fantastic to have so many wise ideas – so much wisdom – stored in ones gray matter.”

“Wisdom is strictly pragmatic, Jaz. Seemingly wise ideas are only wisdom when they work. Never forget that.”

“Where does wisdom come from? Is it innate like verbal abilities or spatial skills – a subdivision of intelligence?”

“A wise man once said – and I’m sorry I can’t footnote it – that wisdom springs from making lots of mistakes and learning something important from every one of them. I have to assume that studying the wisdom of the ages can’t hurt.”

Jaz nodded.

“I’ve made more than my share of mistakes. I’m just now beginning to learn from them. Do delayed responses like that count?”

“I’m quite sure they do. The test will be how well you avoid making those same errors in your future.”

“Now THAT was wise! I’ll do the dishes. You seem tired. Maybe you need an early nap today. I need to gather my thoughts for the meeting at three. And going by myself is no problem. I can handle it. This way I get to live the excitement twice.”

“Twice?”

“Yes. Once at the meeting when I wow them with the idea and the fact we already have the ball rolling, and second when I come home and share it all with you.”

“I will eagerly await my turn at being wowed.”

“I’m not really sure if one can await anything eagerly while they are asleep,” Jaz said with a grin.

“You are probably correct. Let me rephrase. Once I awaken, I will eagerly await your report.”

“We are an odd pair, Doc. You have to admit that!”

“Odd and proud of it! I’m proud of you and your plan, too, son. I’m sure there will be some legal ramifications that have to be worked out but John Withers is a whiz at such things. He’s on the Board of Directors.”

“My Father has a dozen legal beagles on his staff. It sounded like all his powers would be at our disposal. He never does anything half-way – except raise his son, perhaps.”

“It sounded like you may have put a chink in the old ways there as well. It shouldn’t be the child’s responsibility to fix things, but it sounds like the problem may well go two ways.”

“It does. I never deserved those early beatings and I’m not sure I’m Christian enough to ever forgive them for that, but, like you implied, I became a big part of it all during the past four years. I will change my behavior but, still, I’m never going to be perfect-plus for them. That, and how they react to that fact, I have no control over. We’ll just have to take the realignment of things one day at a time.”

“It sounds like a good mind set for the time being – a good way to approach your return.”

Jaz sighed, furrowed his brow, and looked Doc straight in the face.

“He said, ‘Thank you’.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When I told Father, I loved him. He said, ‘Thank you’. It was a disappointing response but at the same time I can’t remember another time when he ever said that to me. I’m not at all sure what it means or how I really feel about it.”

“Time will tell, I imagine.”

“That was awfully close to being a trite expression, Doc. I expect more from you.”

“Trite is merely that which is reasonable, being overworked. It doesn’t change the truth of it.”

“Sometimes I can’t tell the difference between you being wise and you screwing with my head.”

“And you are sure there is a difference?”

“Now I know you’re screwing with me.”

“Indeed. I promise that I’ll never do that unless I make it

perfectly clear to you – well, somewhat clear, at least, at some point in your life, that is, probably.”

“Sounds like the tentative young Broccoli Boy has rubbed off on you.”

It was worth a chuckle between them. It grew their bond as they smiled into one another’s eyes.

“I haven’t heard Master Broccoli lately.”

“He’s hibernating in my duffle bag. Can awaken at a moment’s notice. He is like my security vegetable, you might say.”

Again, they laughed.

“I think I will take a nap. Are there any things we need to discuss before I succumb to arms of Morpheus?”

“No. Maybe after I’ve had time to do some thinking. You’ll be awake before I leave. Morpheus was a guy, you know. I’m not sure about you succumbing to his arms. Now, if he has a gorgeous younger sister I just might close my own eyes.”

“Now who’s screwing with whose mind?”

Jaz grinned his wonderful grin, then had a thought.

“What should I wear? You know what I have.”

“Wear something that makes you feel like yourself, free and confident and genuine.”

“I guess that would be what I’m wearing right now – jeans and a long sleeved, red, shirt.”

“You look nice. It will be fine.”

“Do we need to iron the shirt? It has wrinkles.”

“So, do I but I’m not climbing up on that ironing board for anybody!”

Jaz giggled. Doc continued.

“Fifteen-year-old boys are not expected to be pressed and spotless.”

“They are at my house.”

“I think we have established that your house is not the ideal setting for a boy your age.”

“Thank you for that. You’ve never really come right out and said that.”

“Consider it said – loud and clear.”

Doc was soon asleep on the couch. Jaz took a pad from the desk drawer and laid it on the table. He paced. Every so often he stopped and jotted something on the paper. From time to time he

returned to the table and marked out something he had previously written. Eventually he sat and rewrote the page. It was an outline of what he was going to say. With his quick mind, he would not need the notes but he wanted to run them by Doc before he left for the meeting.

Fifty minutes into Doc's nap, which the boy knew was not to exceed an hour, Jaz put on a fresh pot of coffee. He figured the aroma would rouse his old friend and it would be nice for him to wake up to a fresh, steaming, cup on such a blustery winter day. Snowflakes had begun floating about outside. Nothing heavy, but they were huge. Somewhere Jaz remembered learning that large snowflakes foretell a long siege of snow.

He lay down on his side on the rug facing the fire. He would add a log before he left. That seemed like a struggle for Doc. He'd wait for him to awaken. Log fixing tended to be noisy – at least the way Jaz went about it. He thought back over the past few days – how life was before, at, and since the moment he tripped the old man and scattered his groceries across the moon lit, snow covered, sidewalk.

At the moment that had happened, he had been at the low point of his life – hungry, cold, depressed, and penniless. He had been eating snow for liquid and was at the point of opening his bag and putting on a second layer of clothing. He knew he should be looking for a sheltered place to stay the night, but he couldn't make himself move. It was a dark, 'what's the use,' moment in his young life.

Back home the worst things were the beatings but they got over with. How could this get over with? He had been scared often in his life but he had never felt helpless – not in the long term sense of the word. He had always believed in himself and his abilities. Elbert had nurtured that and helped him prove it to himself time and time again. That aspect of him never seemed obvious to his parents.

He wondered if he fell asleep there in the snow if he would die like the old candle selling lady in a Christmas story he had once read. He was on the verge of welcoming that when Doc's foot kicked his calf and jolted him back into the real world.

Doc was different from anyone Jaz had ever known. He saw the best in others. His parent saw the worst. He trusted. His parents suspected. He loved life. His parents struggled to cope. Doc gave. They took. He helped. They ignored. Doc was soft spoken. His parents screamed even when there seemed to be no reason for it. Doc helped Jaz think things through – only occasionally making

suggestions. His parents preached and made constant demands. Doc was open minded and welcomed suggestions and even criticism. They were closed minded and he would rue the day he shot a suggestion in their direction. Doc was altruistic. They took advantage for their own gain. Doc was genuine – what you saw was what you got. They were all show, living or dying on the approval and envy of others.

Jaz had another epiphany, of sorts. Although he had long ago rejected his parents' approach to living, he really had never opened his arms to accept a Doc-like side of the ledger. Truth be told, he didn't really know there was a Doc's side of the ledger. He had lived his life in a no man's land somewhere between hating the way of life he saw modeled in his home, and a vast abyss of nothingness, which stretched out behind him, offering no reasonable alternatives; yet he knew they had to be there.

Even the academy didn't present the alternative Jaz knew had to exist. There, as at home, life was structured in a negative manner – disobey and get punished. The list of rules – seventy-six of them – was essentially a list of all the things he was not allowed to do and specified punishments for his disobeying them.

Doc had few don'ts in his life. His approach was 99% do's. His outlook was based on what he believed he should be doing – not what he should not be doing. He didn't think in terms of punishment; he thought in terms of fixing – fixing people and things that weren't functioning well. He wanted to arrange the world now and forever more so all people could be happy, productive, and safe. He believed in compassion, and helpfulness, and love. More than any way of life, any set of rules, any list of expectations Jaz had run across, Doc's approach to living made the most sense. Neighbors helping neighbors right around the planet.

The most important moment in his life had been that moment when Doc, literally and figuratively, stumbled into it. Jaz wondered if it had been fate, luck, or coincidence, and even spent a moment considering if it might have some element of Divine intervention attached to it.

He rolled over and propped his head up with his hand, observing Doc sleeping there and waiting for him to smell the coffee. Like vanilla it smelled wonderful. Like vanilla, it had a revolting taste. He smiled recalling that the hash really wasn't half bad. Clearly, he didn't savor it like Doc did, but it was okay. He watched Doc

breathe and wondered where he might be at that very minute if the old man hadn't happened along. Maybe starving. Maybe breaking into stores for food. Certainly, not planning his return home. Probably dead.

He remembered having the fleeting fantasy that when his parents learned he had frozen to death on a side street in a Wisconsin city they would at last feel bad and live out their lives in the most horrendous kind of guilt and grief and loneliness. He took great solace in that scenario. In fact, it had been the weak smile that thought engendered that was interrupted by Doc's fall.

However, it all came about – most likely dumb luck, he decided – he felt fortunate, more fortunate than he deserved.

Doc sniffed before he opened his eyes. Jaz lay there smiling and watching. Doc's eyes opened and Jaz got to his feet.

“Something smells a whole lot like fresh coffee,” Doc said looking into the boy's eyes as he was offered a hand up. “What a fantastic way to be awakened. He doesn't have a sister, by the way. Just brothers.”

“He who?”

“Morpheus.”

“Oh. Well, my fully satisfying fantasy still says differently and I will choose to go with the scantily clad female version.”

“Good for you. I wish you liked coffee so we could share a cup.”

“I'll try one if it's really important to you.”

“No. Probably best if you don't acquire a taste for it anyway. Sharing a cup of coffee with a good friend is just a very special time for an old guy.”

“Tell you what. We'll establish a new tradition. Old guy with coffee. Young guy with milk – in a mug even. I can cherish that. How about you?”

“Absolutely!”

Doc wouldn't share the fact that such an arrangement had been invented by and 'cherished' with many dozens of 'young guys' before Jaz. Each one had been absolutely special and that was all that counted. A hundred young faces flashed across his memory while Jaz made things ready at the table. He could still see each face clearly and feel the lasting love between them. What more could one possibly hope for from 84 years of life?

As they sipped, Jaz practiced his presentation on Doc. Doc nodded supportively along the way.

“So. What do you think?”

“I wouldn’t change a word – well, maybe one thing.”

“Yes. What? Please.”

“You might consider replacing the reference to, ‘my father,’ with the man’s name and cite him as an acquaintance. It could be difficult to explain you being here and him being there. Not a major problem if you feel more comfortable the way it is. Just maybe smoother without raising questions you don’t want to answer right now.”

“Excellent. It wasn’t really good in another way, also, but I couldn’t see a way around it.”

“And that was?”

“Holding up my Father as the good guy in this tended to turn the spotlight on me in an inappropriate way. Like I was taking some credit for what my father was doing. You provided a very neat way out. Thanks. I’m not very good at that kind of thing yet.”

“Give yourself seventy more years and then come back and tell me about it.”

It was funny – the absurdity. It was sad – the implied eventual loss. It was how it was – the inevitable cycle of life as Doc had put it.

Jaz focused on the challenges ahead of him.

Doc focused on the never-ending ripples.

///

CHAPTER TEN

When Jaz returned from the meeting, Doc had supper waiting. His ten minutes had grown into over an hour as the board members expressed their enthusiasm. They had questions and suggestions. Jaz was flying high.

"After supper, I'll go out and shovel. I have tons of energy to work off. There's been another ten inches come down. I love snow – never thought I'd hear myself saying that, but then in an odd sort of way it's been a wonderful blessing. And, in case you're wondering you ARE the 'odd' in the odd sort of way."

He giggled. Doc smiled and passed him the oven warm buttermilk biscuits.

"I like honey on mine," Doc said pointing to the covered honey bowl. They're still really hot inside."

Jaz became sober.

"They had to take Johnny to the emergency room this noon. The palm his dad burned with a cigarette as punishment – burned in six places – got infected. The ER doctor said that if it had been let go it could have cost him his hand. I am so angry at that man. I'd like to do despicable things to him including a very slow castration with a dull spoon and the indelicate insertion of a hot poker."

"And that sort of anger helps whom, how?"

The answer seemed immediately obvious to Jaz – nobody, in no way – so he felt no need to respond to the question. He did want to pursue the concept of anger and hurtful behavior.

"My Father always seems so angry at me while he's beating me. It is as if he has an on-off button for love. He must. Certainly, no parent could purposefully hurt his own child so badly if he loved him at the moment. I've had my fantasies about hurting him – I mean really hurting him – but I can't conceive of ever striking or harming a

child – particularly my own. Maybe my thinking that there is actual love inside him for me is just childish, wishful, thinking. He's never kissed me or hugged me. I've never seen him demonstrate affection to my mother – not when I've been around, at least. And there have been no more children – separate bedrooms probably haven't facilitated that. I'm rambling. Perhaps my point is that I think he blames me for coming to life after his premarital indiscretion with mother."

Jaz put down his biscuit and looked Doc in the face.

"I'm going to guess that you don't allow yourself to get angry because it offers no positive contribution. I'm also going to guess that in all of your dealings with all of the kids in your life that you never once struck one of them."

"And your guesses would be correct."

"They weren't really guesses, of course. They were the natural extrapolation of what I've grown to know about you. So, let's begin with anger. I have a lot of it."

"No. You have it often, Jaz. You don't have a lot of it. Your phrasing makes it appear to be a substance that you house somewhere within you – the anger substance. Anger is not a thing it is a reaction accompanied or driven by destructive emotions."

"Okay. I'll give you that, and admit I've had it characterized in the wrong way. It has probably been easier – more acceptable to me – to blame a substance, as you put it, that I have no control over than to blame my emotions, which I am expected to have at least some control over. The basic issue remains. How does one not become angry?"

"When an interpersonal problem presents itself, people can set out to blame, or people can set out to fix. When they approach a problem on the blame/punish plane they first determine who is in the wrong and then they all quite automatically punish them for it. No logic is necessary. No thinking through what happened – how it came about – is necessary. There is no legitimate consideration of what result will come of it. It is a given in that way of thinking that a guilty party must be punished. Period. It is often accompanied by anger if in fact it was not engendered by anger in the first place.

"My alternative is the fix it approach. Find out what went wrong and determine what steps need to be taken so it won't have to happen again. With the fix it approach, anger never has an opportunity

to rear its head because there is no blame envisioned, no punishment inflicted. It is a help not hurt approach. To my everlasting sorrow, the hurt approach seems to be a growing presence in virtually every aspect of the world society today."

"Let me try it," Jaz said. "When a person starts from the blame/punish point of view anger becomes immediately legitimate – because the ultimate focus is on hurting or wanting to hurt the guilty party. When a person starts from the fix it point of view the whole focus becomes solving the problem so the person will gain new, really useful, ways of coping with similar situations in the future."

"An excellent characterization – at least excellent from my perspective. We've talked about the futility of punishment as a means for long term, stable, behavior change – how the punisher or his agent has to be present for the practice to work. And the concept that punishment is a given essential in cases of wrong doing is not only groundless but sets the stage for round after round of revenge taking."

"So, how am I supposed to react when I run across a 'Johnny's Father type', for example."

"The specific answer to that question has to be yours. If you are asking how you can react in a more constructive way than wanting to probe him with a hot pipe, then I have a suggestion."

"Go on."

"Instead of characterizing situations by thinking, 'He just did a bad or hurtful thing,' think, 'How did that come about and what needs to happen so THAT person will be prepared to prevent it from happening again?'"

"So, what we are proposing to do for Johnny and his mother by moving them far away is one way of seeing that the evil deeds no longer have to happen to them. That's only a partial fix, though. The father is still in need of help. His future cannot be positive with his quick bent to violence."

Doc nodded and offered a question of sorts.

"I'm interested in what you now want to have happen to that man, that father."

"Get him lots of help. Help him learn how to fix his problem. Fix his life and all the things that contribute to his misery and violence."

"No meat cleavers to the groin? No hot rods?"

"I have wasted so much of my life plotting revenge – what I

now see as fully useless and counterproductive. I'm ashamed of myself."

"A person can only be ashamed for having done something which he knew was wrong or misguided from the beginning. You did not know."

"You're really saying that at this moment I just need to apply the fix it approach to myself. No place for self-blame over what's been. Time to roll up my sleeves and get on with my life in a positive way."

Doc didn't respond, something Jaz apparently needed.

"You think I'm wrong?"

"I didn't realize you needed my blessing to make your own positive insights legitimate."

Jaz grinned and nodded his understanding.

"We have apple pie and ice cream for desert if you're up to it?"

Doc said kidding.

"I'll clear the table then bring it on!" Jaz said.

As they each tended to their tasks Jaz had another question.

"I doubt if all misbehaving people can be fixed so they won't do it again. Like child predators – pedophiles. I've heard that in a very large percent of cases that really can't be cured."

"When you can't fix the source of the problem fix the access to possible victims."

"Like sending the moms and kids off to different places from where they get abused. It sounds like you are not against incarcerating pedophiles and others who can't be fixed. Isn't that punishment?"

"There don't have to be bars, severely limited privileges, and harsh rules in order to keep folks separated from the masses. They could still work and play and have the best that life can offer them separated as they would need to be from possible victims."

"You're saying in such cases the fix becomes the separation from society at large. If that fixes the problem, there is no need for punishment; it plays no useful role."

"In essence, yes. One scoop or two? Why do I even ask? *Dos* it will be."

"Can we sit on the couch and eat? I know that one of my favorite memories of you and this place is going to be sitting there close together, talking, and watching the fire."

"To the couch and don't spare the horses," Doc said nodding

his head in agreement as he closed the freezer door.

"That first night I was here and we were sitting on the couch – you patted my knee and then apologized because you said adults weren't supposed to touch kids anymore. I really didn't understand the full significance of it. Being touched was not a positive event in my life. Now I do understand and I agree with you. It stinks. It's like throwing the baby out with the water. Touching and affection are so important between people. I'm growing to see that – to feel that, to want that – since I've been here. You always seem to know just when and how to touch – a pat to the knee, an arm around the waist or shoulders, brushing back my hair and patting my cheek. Touching shouldn't be outlawed just because there are a few rotten apples – check that, misguided, maybe sick, apples – in the basket."

"I'm glad you are coming to understand the miraculous power of touch. I suppose one could make a case for it being touch of a kind that got us together."

"Your foot forcefully touching my leg in the snow storm that night. It seems a lifetime ago, now. At that moment, I'd really given up all hope. I had no desire to continue living. I guess I'll never know for sure why it happened."

"Why? Because you had your snow-covered legs sprawled clean across the sidewalk. That's why?"

"You know what I mean."

"Why even chase that question, Jaz? It has no answer. Accept what happened and move on taking with you whatever you deem to be useful. That's what I'm doing."

Jaz put his plate on the table in front of them and reached over and placed his hand on top of Doc's. It wasn't holding hands like boys and girls do in order to feel close. It was touching hands. It suggested trust and togetherness. It suggested both surrender and a promise to protect. It suggested fondness, caring, positive regard – love. It suggested the most special kind of bond Jaz had ever experienced.

He hoped that someday he and his Father could be sitting side by side that way. He understood that was Doc's wish as well. It seemed like another trite saying but Doc loved him enough to let him go – send him home. He suspected that was the highest embodiment of altruism. Parting was going to be so very difficult.

He had decided to stay through Christmas and make it home in time for New Year's Eve. That meant every moment of the next

several days would be precious beyond measure.

Doc held out his plate toward Jaz.

"My eyes were bigger than my stomach. If you can finish it go to it."

Jaz happily obliged.

"Have you decided about returning home?"

Jaz shared his plan. Doc nodded.

"Well, then, we know our timetable. We have to make the best use of the time we have. First things first. We need to bring in more fireplace wood."

"I'll do it," Jaz said.

"I'd like for us to do it together, son."

"Sure. That will be nice. Two more bites and a long slurp should finish this up."

It did.

They stacked the wood with care beside the fireplace. Jaz added a log to the fire. He tended to like a roaring fire. Doc preferred a gentler, flickering, source of heat. The cycle of life.

"I think I better get to the snow shoveling before the temperature drops further," Jaz said at last.

He began getting into his outdoor clothes.

"Don't stay too long. The snow will be there in the morning you know."

"I know. I just really like being out in it. It's a brand-new experience. You may have gathered I'm from the south."

"I assumed that and must admit that I've been puzzled as to why you picked such a cold climate to run away to."

"It's the last place they'd think I'd go. While they searched for me in the warm lands, I was safely making my way far away from home."

"Safely?"

"Well, safe from their detection, I suppose I meant."

Doc nodded. Jaz continued to be amazed at how his old friend could change his perspective or provide a new insight with a mere word or short question. He was just as amazed at how well he, himself, took to that. He had lived his life feeling put down by the mere hint of correction. He was hard put to ever admit he had made an error or didn't know everything he needed to know. More than one promising friendship had been ruined as he jockeyed and blamed to

save face.

“When I come back inside maybe we can play some music. This is the first time I’ve ever missed a day practicing since Mr. Peabody thrust the clarinet into my hands and said, ‘This will be your life’.”

“I’d like that.”

“Leave the dishes,” Jaz said. “We can do them up together later. I like doing dishes with you.”

Doc wrapped one of his winter scarves around the boy’s neck and snugged it tight. He handed him the shovel and opened the door. He was soon alone.

Doc stood there looking around the big room wondering, for a moment, how he had spent his time before Jaz. It brought a smile and a chuckle and an all too common pain to his chest. He grimaced and went to the sink and slipped a pill under his tongue. He moved to the couch and sat down. The angina attacks had increased in frequency during the previous several months. They never lasted long but did not bode well for things just down the road. Doc had never envisioned an inactive old age. He’d fight it.

He donned his glasses, took his favorite seat, and diverted his attention with the book he had begun on the morning of the day Jaz entered his life. He chuckled to see that he was only on page thirty. He was used to devouring a hundred pages a day. When put into perspective it was a good thing. It meant he had more important things to do. The book would always be there. Jaz would not.

He couldn’t concentrate on the reading. He put the book down and removed his glasses. Doc took his encounters with youngsters very seriously. He wanted to do everything within his powers to prepare them to face their futures with confidence and the necessary personal skills to mount a positive, constructive, path. It always started with establishing positive values, of course. And broken values were seldom a quick fix.

It was the same with kids of all ages from Donny, his youngest foster son, age five, to the graduate students he had taught at the university as a professor of philosophy.

Paths were strange structures because they tended to branch and re-branch providing an almost endless set of possible journeys – options, choices. It was not the goal at the end of ones path that was of ultimate importance in life. It was making the journey in such a

way that the lives one touched benefited from the relationship. It was an axiom, Doc had found; In facilitating growth in others one inevitably grows, himself.

He nodded off. An hour later he awoke to the clinking of dishes in the sink.

“Hey, kid! I thought that was to be a joint venture. Wait up. I’ll dry.”

“Didn’t want to wake you. You feeling okay?”

“Now what would make you think I felt otherwise?”

He walked to the kitchen and secured a fresh dishtowel from a drawer.

“Well, you’ve taken a nitro pill every day since I’ve been here. That can’t mean good things. And you took one while I was outside just now.

“You have periscopes and video cams, boy?”

“No. I count your pills at night and I always position the bottles facing sideways – front to the right. That’s how I keep track of things.”

“You could just ask me, you know?”

“You wouldn’t want to worry me but you would answer honestly. I figured this way we avoided that whole hassle for you.”

“You never cease to amaze me, Jaz. I appreciate your interest and concern for my health but that should not be your focus now.”

“Did I just hear you tell me what my focus should and shouldn’t be?”

“Sorry. May I rephrase?”

“This one time, I guess.”

Jaz grinned.

“I appreciate your interest and concern for my health but I have to wonder if some other focus might be more meaningful for you at this moment in your life.”

“That’s better. I reckon I can handle more than just one focus at a time.”

“Reckon?”

“I told you. I’m a southern boy.”

“Without the hint of an accent.”

“My parents were raised in Bloomington, Illinois. Elbert in Maine. Since my contacts with kids have been severely limited I guess I did not acquire the accent.”

“I’ve never asked if you have favorite school subjects.”

“You’re right. You haven’t.”

Jaz was teasing and paused only long enough to savor it.

“I’m very good at math but I don’t enjoy it. I love reading history – AD mostly. English was always easy. I enjoy playing with words and building my vocabulary. I look upon science as important knowledge everybody needs to master. Within science I like astrophysics the best. To see back in time is an awesome experience. I suppose music and art rate at the top of my list – right under Playboy 101. I can’t imagine anything more beautiful than the female body.”

Doc repeatedly raised his eyebrows as if in unspoken agreement. Neither would probe further. Doc briefly envisioned Jaz as a father playing with his children on the floor in front of his own fireplace. He would be a good father. Scratch that. He would work hard to make himself a fantastic father. After all he had a great teacher in his own father – demonstrating all the things a parent should never do. Doc hoped the next five or six years at home would provide a dramatic reverse from the first fifteen. He hoped there would be lots of touching from love – hugs, patting, arms around each other, and kisses.

///

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jaz had been staying up late after Doc turned in. He was working on a very special birthday gift. Having taken to heart his old friend's reference when Jaz bemoaned the fact that he didn't have any money to buy him anything, he was hand crafting the gift like they had done with the ornaments.

Elbert had one passion – other than caring for Jaz. It was whittling. He had learned the art from his grandfather and passed it on to his beloved Jasper. The project might not qualify as mere whittling since it involved a pine log eighteen inches long and eight inches in diameter. He had sorted through a hundred such pieces of firewood on the back porch until he found the exact piece he needed. It was well dried and yet had not cracked. Soft enough but not flaky.

Using his pocket knife, a carefully sharpened wood chisel from Doc's tool box, and a coarse, wood rasp, the project was shaping up nicely. Jaz had good aptitude with his hands – one reason for his musical prowess. His father abhorred the idea that his son would make his living using his hands. He failed to see that connection with the boy's musical success and was determined to steer him in some other direction.

With a final, meticulous, sanding the project was ready for a coat of light pine stain. He had earlier found a mostly full can in the closet where Doc kept his tools and building supplies. The label promised a dry, glossy, finish in six hours. With the last stroke applied at 12:01 on the morning of Doc's birthday, it would just have time to dry by breakfast. It would be a special pancake breakfast complete with four candles – Jaz figured the first eighty were a given. He added a log to the fire and set the piece to dry some four feet away. He fixed his bed on the couch, stripped for sleeping, and was soon fast asleep. He set his watch to beep at three thirty – time to turn the piece around

with its opposite side toward the warmth of the fireplace.

The sound of running water, as Doc began his early morning shower, awakened Jaz whose late nights had caught up with him. He was quickly dressed, hid the nicely dried gift in the coat closet, and whipped up the pancakes. He put sausage paddies into the skillet and warmed the syrup bottle in a pan of water over a low flame. With coffee ready, two cakes on Doc's plate, topped with the lit candles, Doc descended the stairs. He figured there was to be something but acted surprised and appreciative – well, with Doc it was no act.

Playing *maitre d'*, Jaz pulled out the chair and helped Doc sit. Coffee was poured and the plates of pancakes and sausages were placed on the table. He also sat.

“What a wonderful way to begin a birthday, Jaz. I can't tell you how much I appreciate all your planning and effort.”

Jaz grinned up at him from across the table.

“There just might be something more if you're a good little, 84-year-old man and clean your plate.”

“More? Dessert for breakfast?”

“In a manner of speaking, I suppose.”

The boy giggled. It was an important moment in his life. It was a fully foreign feeling that had been growing inside him those past several days. This making and giving a gift for someone so special was a first for him. He couldn't believe the feelings – the unrestrained joy in particular. He hoped Doc would like it but he understood it was really not about the gift but the thought and work and care that went into it. It was the luvyith surrounding the event.

Jaz was so excited he could only pick at his food. It seemed to take an eternity for Doc to finish the main course. Then it was time! Jaz cleared the table and topped off Doc's coffee. He had studied about where to make the presentation. Due to its size and elongated shape he decided on the table where it could sit and be properly scrutinized.

“You have to close yours eyes now until I tell you to open them.”

“I've never been asked to eat dessert with my eyes closed.”

“This dessert you don't eat – unless you're part termite.”

Jaz giggled from the closet door, giving away his position in the room. Doc understood there was to be a surprise and that it was for his birthday but he had no idea what to expect. He had not

expected anything and, in fact, thought the pancake spread had been the entirety of the birthday doings.

Jaz moved the carved log to the table and placed it in front of Doc – back several feet to provide the best initial view. He stood to one side where he could watch the old man’s face.

“Okay. Open up!”

Doc’s jaw dropped. His brow furrowed in astonishment. A smile overtook his weathered old face as he closed his mouth.

“You carved this, Jaz? It is magnificent!”

He reached out to bring it closer. Jaz had to explain that which certainly required no explanation.

“It’s two hands – well hands and wrists – grasping each other. This bigger one is yours. See how I made it look just like yours. I’ve been studying your hands. And the other hand – the smaller one – is a child’s. It represents all the kids who you’ve worked with down through the years – given a hand to if you’ll allow me some hackneyed symbolism.”

Doc nodded and allowed a few tears as well. With his fingers he traced the three wavy lines which ran end to end across the base of the piece.

“I know that symbolism, Jaz. Ripples. Thank you, son. It is wonderful. You are so gifted with the knife. You are so gifted in so many ways. I hope you can live your life in such a manner so you never have to choose among them.”

“We’ll need to talk about that. I’m keeping a list of topics.”

Doc nodded and smiled.

“I understand now why all the yawning the past few days. You must have stayed up all night for days to complete such a huge project.”

“Never got less than four hours of snooze time. I’m good for it – young, strong, and foolish.”

Doc reached out and pulled Jaz close beside him. He took the boy’s hand, striking the pose on the carving and making a visual comparison. He reached up and pulled the lad’s head down close and planted a gentle kiss on his forehead. It said everything that words could not say.

“I will put it on the mantel while you’re here so we can enjoy it together. Later I may move it to my room where I can look upon it last thing at night and open my eyes to it first thing every morning.”

The mantel was cleared and the Helping Hand was set in place. Doc would return to it time and time again, each time retracing the ripples and patting the hands. Each time Jaz found his old friend beholding the carving he beamed and was filled again with the extraordinary new feeling for which he as yet had no proper name. The gift was a lovyith for Doc and it clearly filled the old man with great joy and perhaps thanksgiving. Jaz understood that. But his own response to Doc's response needed a name as well. The feeling that builds within one at the moment the receiver of the lovyith first comprehends it's full and special meaning. It creates a bond of a sort between the two people. The giver and the receiver share a special connection – one pleased to be the donor and the other feeling honored and special to be the recipient.

In one way Jaz was puzzled. Although he thought he understood the meaning of lovyith – the love-based process of giving – he expected that the words of praise for his accomplishment, his craftsmanship, would be centrally important to him. After all, he had put his heart and soul and dozens of hours into the project. But, once Doc opened his eyes to it, that never again entered the boy's mind. It was given as his expression of love and it had been received in that spirit. In that moment, the object ceased to exist in importance. It was only the giving and accepting of love that counted. He was glad that he had crafted a beautiful gift for Doc but he suddenly understood that Doc's experience would have been the same had it been a construction paper birthday cake. In those moments, the boy's life changed forever.

"Let's get the dishes done," Doc suggested. "We can make a grocery list as we work. Then, we'll make a trip to the store. You've been surviving on old man grub. We'll stock up on kid stuff this morning."

The boy's first inclination was to tell Doc to go sit down – that he would do up the dishes but he realized his old friend really did enjoy having them do things like that together.

The list was made. They bundled up and had soon completed the shopping. Again, the boy's first thought was to apologize to Doc for having to spend his money on him that way. It was not the way Doc thought and Jaz recognized it as soon as it entered his head. Doc felt good about being able to help. Jaz supposed that he should, therefore, feel good about allowing the old man to be helpful. He

would revisit that logic later.

As they retraced their route back up the path toward the front porch Doc had some questions.

"Ever make angles in the snow or build a snowman?"

"No. I've seen them on TV and in the movies, but I was never around snow."

"It is time for you to further your education, then. Let's stow the food and warm up a bit. Then it will be Playing in the Snow 101 under the tutelage of the old Professor, himself. Woops!"

Jaz grinned.

"I saw your diplomas on the wall in your bedroom – as I came and went to the shower. I was not at all surprised by what they said. I was a bit surprised that you would display such things. You're not the kind to show off in that way."

"It is not my way of bragging – although I am proud of my academic accomplishments. I hang them there to remind me of the responsibility they represent."

"Responsibility?"

"I believe that each time we acquire some new piece of information or skill we then have the responsibility to use it wisely and purposefully – in the thoughtful service of ourselves and others. Each of the three diplomas reminds me of that responsibility."

"Have I ever told you that you think differently from anybody I've ever met?"

"I believe we established that during our first evening together."

A few minutes later they were back outside.

"So are you going to demonstrate this snow angel thing?" Jaz asked all quite seriously.

"I will describe the process. If I were to stretch out down there on the snow we'd have to await the Spring thaw to extricate me."

"Does one dare extricate in public?" Jaz asked, teasing.

"Take a position on our back, legs together and arms at your sides."

Jaz obliged.

"Now, keeping your arms straight, drag them across the snow to positions at forty-five degree angles up from your shoulders. Excellent. Now, in a similar fashion spread your legs out. Great. Now, repeat it several times each time going a bit deeper into the snow.

"Okay, now the real trick is to get you up and out of there without ruining the picture. Keeping your body stiff – no butt dragging – take my hand with both of yours so you will arise equally on each side. Once standing, leap – hop, I suppose most accurately – as far away as you can."

That accomplished they stood back and admired the result. Jaz went on to construct several more, each an improved version he thought. Doc envisioned being able to look down upon them from his window and see them sparkling in the moonlight.

"Now to the snow man building," Jaz said. "As I've seen it done three balls are rolled up – a big one for the base, a medium one for the abdomen, and a small one for the head. Then we add stick arms and some decorations like eyes, nose, mouth, a hat and maybe a scarf."

"You passed the pre-test with flying colors. Now, let's see how you do when push comes to shove. This fresh snow is freeze dried. It won't pack very well. Northland kid lore directs that in such cases you use the snow that is up against the house. The escaping heat will have softened it just enough to pack."

"I'll get started on the big ball," Jaz said. "How about you craft the head? That's probably the most important part. I calculate it will need to be about a foot in diameter."

Doc was pleased. Jaz had taken on the brunt of the task but carefully provided the old guy with the important job of 'crafting' the head. He was thoughtful. Doc wondered how that had gotten tucked away inside him over the years. He was brilliant but certainly could not have acquired all of his positive traits just during the past few days. Elbert, most likely. Or a tutor."

Jaz rolled the first large ball onto the spot he decided it should stand. He then proceeded to make the second. Doc had seen the problem well ahead of Jaz. He rolled his second ball up close to the first. He pondered the predicament.

"You know, there is no way the two of us will be able to lift this one up on top of the other one. I seem to have miscalculated."

"Or stopped calculating too soon," Doc added.

Jaz stepped back and looked things over understanding there was a clue in there somewhere. He shook his head and threw up his hands.

"More, please."

"Think pyramids."

"Sand locked pyramids here in the middle of frozen tundra. Oh! Ah! Great! We build a snow ramp up behind it and roll the middle ball in place. Then we take the ramp away and nobody will be the wiser."

A half hour later the snowman was finished.

"It is magnificent," Doc said stepping back to get a full view.

"It is! Thanks for . . . all of this snow stuff, you know?"

"And I thank you for . . . all of this snow stuff, you know?"

Jaz smiled and nodded. He refitted one of the stick arms and brushed the snow from his dripping wet gloves.

"We can see him from the window. It's why I chose this spot and placed the head with the features toward the house."

"It will be right there until Spring. What a wonderful reminder of our time together."

Back inside they hung up their warps. Jaz was shivering in his wet clothes.

"A hot shower should warm you up, son. You can put on dry clothes after. I imagine it's time to do your laundry again anyway, isn't it?"

"When I shed these, it will make three outfits ready for the suds."

"Duds for the suds," Doc quipped. "I have a few things as well." "I'll get it all ready to wash once you're out of the shower."

The shower was finished.

The laundry was done and drying.

Jaz felt the need for sustenance and settled on a bowl of strawberry ice cream – one of his additions to the grocery list. He took it to the couch hoping Doc would join him there although he did not request it.

Doc followed, bringing a sleeve of Ritz crackers. He set them on the table.

"I love crackers with my ice cream," he said.

"But you don't have any ice cream. Oh. I get it. You're setting up an opportunity for me – a new experience if I'm so inclined."

"I do occasionally allow myself to eat them without ice cream," Doc joked reaching out and taking a handful.

Jaz tried the two together and from his mouth-filled expression and his nod it appeared he had quickly acquired Doc's taste for the

combination.

"I have a question?" Jaz said, then looked over at Doc somewhat sheepishly. "A question from me; big surprise, I suppose. Believe it or not, I never used to ask questions. My Father doesn't approve of them. He says they are a sign of weakness – admitting that you don't know something, I guess he means."

"I have lived my life in questions," Doc said. "I ask them of myself to increase my knowledge and to explore my beliefs. I ask them of others hoping to facilitate insights and useful personal growth."

"You do that for sure – the second thing, I mean. I assume you do the other as well, of course. I'm babbling again. Back to my question."

Doc munched, waiting.

"I want to be sure I have something straight. Do you believe that it is only a person's behavior that is bad and not the person himself? My confusion is left over from our talk about incarceration of those who can't be treated – cured – made safe."

"You ask an unresolved question that is as old as social philosophy itself. The answer depends on how you define the concept, person. If one believes the essence of a person is a divinely bestowed soul, and that souls are perfect in every way, then a 'person' could never be considered anything but good – never bad.

"A second way of defining a person is that we are each merely the sum of our behaviors. We act good, we are good. We act bad, we are bad.

"Still others emphasize one's intentions. If one intends to be good he is a good person regardless of how his behavior turns out – how successful he is at living by his good intentions. Since intentions, like a soul, cannot be seen or known by anyone else, there is no way to truly discover another person's intentions.

"My studied take on it is that people have within them both the potentials for good and for evil. I have seen it clearly demonstrated every day of my life. Whether one develops his good or bad potential is dependent on several things. For most of us it is a reflection of, or reaction to, what we observe around us during the first half dozen or so years of life.

"Another major influence, scientists are discovering, is the balance or imbalance of chemicals within our brain and body. Some

give a propensity for violence, for example. Others for docility, or depression, or impulsivity, or sensitivity, and so on – even political conservatism or liberalism."

"So, your studied position is that people can go either way and how they actually go is influenced by the treatment they receive as a child, chemicals within the brain and body, and other experiences they have along the way."

"Yes. In essence that's what I believe makes the most sense."

"So, if I combine the Church's divine soul concept with your multiple influences concept, it tends to explain how initially perfect beings can come to behave otherwise. The soul remains worthy regardless of behavior so the person remains precious regardless of what he does or doesn't do."

"I suppose. Yes. I get to the same place using my belief that the human species is precious to begin with – no soul required."

"And, I assume you don't postulate a soul, Doc, given things you've said."

"Perhaps my concept of that positive potential I see in everybody represents or at least is akin to your concept of a soul."

"Functionally, maybe, but not theologically."

Doc smiled broadly and reached over and ruffled the boy's hair. Jaz leaned into the old man's big hand, hoping to extend the moment.

"You think like a philosopher. I have some books I want you to take with you when you return home. They are stacked on the desk in my bedroom. They represent the thinking that has most influenced my own."

"Thanks. I'll look forward to reading them. I don't promise to agree, you understand?"

"And I wouldn't want such a promise, you understand?"

"Yes. I do understand that. You want me to think for myself. That alone becomes a huge responsibility, doesn't it – making sure you have all the relevant and important facts, that you have let go of unhelpful biases, that you are truly looking beyond just your own needs and desires to the greater good? Things like that."

"And once you have grasped that aspect of life you are well on your way to living out your years in a wonderfully useful and helpful way."

Doc held out a Ritz as if offering a toast. Jaz responded in

kind. They treasured the moment.

///

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lunch was over. The dishes were done. Jaz was poking at the fire trying not to show his boredom.

“That was a really cute girl working in the grocery store.”

“That’s Sara, the owner’s granddaughter. I believe she is a sophomore this year. She sings in the school choir. I’ve been to several of her concerts. The Christmas program was just last week. Sorry you missed it.”

Jaz cut to the quick.

“I suppose she has a boyfriend.”

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t know. She is a very sweet girl but quite shy as you probably noticed.”

“Yeah. She went into the back room when I started to move in her direction.”

“And, you can bet she kept her eye on you the whole time through the one-way glass in the swinging door.”

“You think?”

“I’ll tell you what I do think. I do think we forgot to get bagels. Would you mind running back to the store?”

“You are not very subtle, Doc. I’d like to run back to the store but you don’t have to conjure up a reason for me.”

“Conjure? Old Doc? I love my evening bagel, especially now that it’s eggnog season.”

“And you have a favorite kind?”

“Blueberry. If they are out, cinnamon. Get a pack that you like as well. Tonight, we can have a nog and bagel party here in front of the fire. Take a ten from the jar beside the sink. If you like cream

cheese on them get some as well.”

“Okay. Sure. I’ll be back.”

“I hope you don’t rush through this assignment, now. Should take an hour or better I’d think. Maybe two. Remember it’s Sara – I mean blueberry. I want blueberry.”

Doc’s eyes twinkled. Jaz smiled in his direction.

Doc walked Jaz to the door and, again, snugged the scarf around his neck. Jaz initiated a long hug. He pulled back and grinned into Doc’s face.

“Hugs on demand. You can’t know how fantastic that is.”

He was soon gone on the trot. Doc wanted to call after him to watch his step but thought better of it. He’d learn to traverse the city’s icy sidewalks without the old man’s help.

Doc went up to his room to work at the desk – a letter needed writing and there were those pesky end of the month bills to pay. He decided the stack of books for Jaz was too big. He wanted to get the boy hooked on contemplating great ideas not overwhelm him. He settled on four.

He picked up the picture of his wife that sat there on his desk and looked at it for some time. With his hanky, he cleaned the dust from the glass and rubbed away old fingerprints. Presently he reset it and got up. He was tired and lay down on his bed. The climb up the stairs was not as easy as it had once been.

He tried to remember about cute girls at fifteen and how they had affected him. It seemed impossible that had been seventy years before. His life had been busy and full and rewarding. He had known and treasured the many faces of love. He was mostly very proud of the life he had led – and was leading. He would make a few changes if he were to have the chance to redo things but he would not really want to start over. He drifted off to sleep.

The next thing he felt was the bed being jiggled. He opened his eyes. Jaz was sitting there on the edge of the bed.

“Sorry if I woke you. I tried to sit down easy.”

With that, the apologies soon faded. Other things took center stage.

“Sara is such a sweet girl. Her Grampa gave her some time off and we walked up and down the streets. She’s lived in that neighborhood her whole life and knows everybody and everybody we passed knew her. She’s a pianist and has applied at Julliard. I’d love

to hear her play. She has a wonderful laugh. She said I do, too. I told her she was pretty and she told me I was handsome. I've never thought of myself as handsome. What do you think?"

"Well, being as objective as I can be – being an elderly male – I would say you definitely qualify as handsome. And, the fact that you have never defined yourself that way is most certainly to your credit."

"We held hands. I took off my glove and so did she. She said it was the sexiest hand holding she had ever done. When we got back to the store she nudged me into the alley and we kissed. Not a chest heaving, groin heating, kiss, understand. Just a nice, gentle, kiss that will be a wonderful memory."

Doc chuckled at the boy's honest and open characterization of the happening. He raised his hand for help to sit up. He slipped into his slippers (so that's how they got their name) and stood, putting his arm around the boy's waist as they moved toward the stairs.

"I hope you understand that I was not laughing at you just now, Son. Quite the contrary. I am happy for you. You help me remember how things were for me and should be now for you. It appears you are doing well where boy/girl things are concerned."

"I still have some important decisions to make about how I am going to handle my urges when I'm alone with girls. I need to determine what kind of limits I believe are right between boys and girls and find some way to stick with them."

"The fact you are thinking about it is impressive. It seems to me that these days few young men your age ever really give it useful thought."

"I know one thing for sure. I'm NOT going to ever risk creating a child with anyone but my wife. It is not fair to any of the people concerned. I'm living proof of that."

He looked up into Doc's face. It required a response to his monologue. Doc smiled and nodded. That seemed to satisfy the boy. They started down the stairs.

"Looks like lots of long, warm, soapy, showers for me between now and my honeymoon," he grinned. "Let's see, at two showers a day for say eight more years that's nearly six thousand showers."

Doc responded.

"Your skin will shrivel up. Do prunes actually marry?"

Jaz grinned.

"Of course, they do. Where do you think raisins come from?"
They laughed.

"Where shall I put the bagels? Corner cabinet or fridge."

"We can just leave them on the counter where they are. It won't be long until we're into them."

"Do you feel up to playing music together?"

"What's with this, 'do you feel up to' stuff," Doc asked. "I'm as hale as I was at . . . 83, young man."

It had humorously evaded the question but Jaz interpreted it to mean he wasn't doing so well and just didn't want to worry him. In the Sara excitement, he had failed to check the medicine vials.

"I'd love to play if you will be so kind as to fetch my horn."

They played together for more than an hour. Doc needed to watch the music on many of the pieces. Jaz improvised in and around whatever his old friend played.

"I'll say one thing," Doc began as they put away their instruments. "The sound of my playing certainly improves when we play together."

Jaz grinned.

"Assuming that is a compliment, thank you, Kind Sir. And I'll say one thing, also. The fun of my playing certainly improves when we play together and I believe that is more important."

"You will get no argument from me."

"We played right through your nap time. I'll do my best to keep quiet if you want to sleep."

"We'll say my earlier nap will suffice. You up for a game of checkers?"

"Or chess."

"Chess is too much of a drain on my mental powers. When I play anything, I like to play for fun."

"Checkers will be good, then. Sara plays chess."

"It seems it I'm a poor substitute for Sara on several fronts."

"Well, no offense, but I do really, really, prefer her front to yours, Doc."

His little play on words sent him into hysterics – curled up on the floor and flailing his legs hysterics. It was infectious and Doc took a seat at the table and laughed along with him.

Eventually the laughing stopped. Cheeks were dried. Jaz sat up on the floor and looked up at Doc.

"That was so sad."

Doc was puzzled and his expression showed it. Jaz tried to explain.

"Oh, it was great, too. I meant that I can't remember a single time in my home that I ever laughed like that when my parents were around. Father would have told me to act my age and refrain from vulgarities. Mother would have said to get up off the floor or I'd get filthy. They would agree it had been all too noisy and disruptive. That's what I meant."

"I'm sorry – not for the wonderful laughter – for the way things have been at home."

Jaz became thoughtful and he looked around the big room.

"Who'd have ever guessed I'd find the Garden of Eden in the home of a 99% atheist? Life is full of surprises, I guess. Is that how you've found it – life – to be?"

"Oh, yes! Lots and lots of surprises."

Jaz reflected.

"Not long ago I wrote a short story for English about a boy who met a fairy who told him if he would complete a dangerous task – free a maiden from a tower – that the fairy would let him know his future. At first the kid thought it would be great but as he went about performing the deed he came to appreciate the unknown – the surprises. He rescued the princess but turned down the reward. There's more but that's the gist of it. The writing of it provided a remarkable insight for me."

"That was a remarkable story. I have a question, if I may. Did the story end the way you had planned in the beginning?"

"No, like life itself, the story found a path of its own. My plan was for the boy and the princess to fall in love and get married – well, that was the 'G' rated version that made it into my story outline, at least."

He grinned.

Doc shook his head and smiled.

"The checkers box is on the shelf in the coat closet – oddly, it has pictures of a checkerboard on it."

Jaz grinned.

They were soon setting up the board.

"I play to win," Doc said feigning a very serious tone and expression.

"I doubt that. You play to have fun, which, with that remark, has already begun."

"You are an insightful youngster."

"When you've lived your life having to weigh every word, every inflection, every decibel, your parents speak, you tend to get that way."

"I suppose. Something good comes from your upbringing after all."

Jaz frowned a heavy frown and held it for some moments.

"I have certainly never wanted to think that. It opens up a whole new area for me to inspect. Thanks, although I have the feeling it may present a set of very uncomfortable insights. I wish you were going to be with me through it – like my safety net."

"Dr. Derwood, perhaps?"

"I've always seen him as my enemy. I'm not sure his psyche is up to the change he is going to see in me. I'll give him a chance to prove his stuff."

"Or, try hard to make the two-way relationship become a beneficial one for you?"

"Or, that, I suppose."

The boy's face lit up.

"Now, let me at your red guys!"

They played a dozen games during the next hour. Neither would remember who won and who lost. It was the wide-ranging conversation that became their focus. Jaz did most of the talking. Doc did most of the nodding. They each grew from the sharing.

"Were the steaks we got for supper tonight?" Jaz asked as he replaced the checker box in the closet.

"It sure seems like a steak night to me," Doc said in his ever-agreeable manner.

"I don't have the foggiest idea how to cook them," Jaz admitted.

Admitting his inabilities was a brand-new undertaking for Jaz. He was intrigued by the wash of calm that engulfed him when he could do that. It was opposite in every way from the panic that set in as he pretended to know things, never sure when his bluff would be called and he would be found out to be every bit as ignorant as the next guy. That, he was certain, rated highest on his father's list of sins – being found out.

"I prefer to broil them," Doc said.

"Is that like boiling, pirate style."

"You've lost me, Son."

"Boiling with the added, Ahrrr!!"

"That was unbelievably terrible, Jaz."

Doc's chuckles grew the more he thought about it, although it had been terrible.

"I know. I knew it before I said it and I felt free to say it anyway. It was a wonderful experience."

"I'm happy for you, then and actually, had I thought of it, I certainly would have said it. Will you get the steaks out of the fridge or Ahrrr you going to make the old guy do that?"

"You're wonderful, Doc."

"I've always thought so. Just wait 'til you taste one of my steaks."

"What shall we have with it, ahrrrtachokes?"

"Very funny, kid. How about baked potatoes and peas?"

"Sounds good. Won't it take a long time bake the spuds."

"We'll use my wife's short cut. Microwave two good sized ones for seven minutes. Then slash the tops, pack them with butter, and finish them up in the oven while the steaks broil. "

"Doesn't exactly sound like the diet a guy with heart trouble should be on."

"I don't think of myself as having heart trouble. I think of my heart condition as giving the nitro pills something to do."

"You're twisting reality, ahrrrn't you?"

"Reality is what you make it to be, remember. The way **I** see the world **IS** my reality. The way **you** see it **IS** yours."

"I think I get it. In your reality, you are focusing on living and being useful not dying – the bad heart thing."

"Are you calling my heart evil, young man?" Doc joked.

The boy's face became fully sober.

"Oh, no, Doc. I've never run across such a good heart in all my fifteen years."

Doc had not intended for the conversation to take that serious turn and he hurried to change direction.

"If you don't like peas you can choose another vegetable. At my age they all just taste like salt anyway."

"Peas are fine. I like them drenched in butter. Here are the

steaks. Where are the spuds?"

Jaz clearly enjoyed cooking – or perhaps it was merely having the freedom to try new things with no fear of put downs or reprisal.

* * *

Jaz finished off the meal with the last of the apple pie. Doc passed on dessert and lingered over his coffee.

"I'm sort of scared about going home."

"Sort of? If I'd have been in your shoes at your age I'd have been terrified out of my gourd."

Jaz broke a grin and nodded.

"Okay, so it's more than sort of. It's just that they have no idea what's been happening inside me. To them it will be the same old pain in the ass Jasper who'll be walking through the door. Father will gloat that my running away was such a disaster that I had to crawl back. Mother will go on and on about how peaceful and great it was around the house without me there causing trouble. Father's first impulse will be to give me the beating of my life."

"Is there, perhaps, some way to prepare them – pave the way – change the tone?" Doc asked.

Jaz grew quiet and gathered the dishes from the table.

"I could write them a letter outlining the new me and my hopes for things when I get home."

Doc nodded.

"And you could pave the way for that letter by . . ."

"Calling them, you mean. I could do that. I could talk with Elbert first and have him let them know I will be calling. The shock of hearing from me again out of the blue might give the conversation a bad turn before it began. I'll write the letter this evening unless you have other things for us to do."

"My plan was to put on some Christmas music, admire our beautiful little Christmas Tree, and enjoy my newly decorated mantel. And, of course, the nog and bagel party to top off this marvelous birthday I am having. You should have plenty of time."

"I'm really glad I can be here with you for number 84. I was thinking on the way to the store that when you're 100 I'll be thirty-one. I'll probably be married to someone I don't even know exists today, and have a child or maybe six – that should keep me completely unwrinkled."

Doc chuckled a single 'chuck' as Jaz continued.

"I'll be working at some job about which I have no idea right now. Maybe music, maybe art, maybe writing, maybe even running the family business. That would be my last choice, I think. It's exciting to think about all the surprises that lay ahead for me."

Doc listened silently. It brought a rush of his own memories to mind. He had known Anna, his wife-to-be, at fifteen. They had grown up together. He had not at that time even heard of philosophy as an academic discipline. He enjoyed sports and reading and spending time with his friends. He enjoyed dating – though not his best buddy, Anna, at that point. He had a good relationship with his parents although home rightfully became less important as he looked to the future. He had been a happy teenager. That may have been unusual – so many of his friends were not.

He spent most Sunday afternoons at the orphanage doing what he could to make life better for the youngsters there. It had been his own first home although he had been too young to remember it.

There had really only been two dark times in his life – when he and Anna learned they could not have children and later when his dear wife passed on, way to early. Since that time, he had been able to rebuild a good life for himself. He retired from the University at sixty-five but returned to lecture frequently. He played in the local symphony orchestra and up until a few years before had sat on the Board of Directors of the shelter. He had hired Maude, in fact. He continued to spend time there doing what he could to help the abused rediscover life's positive possibilities and to realign their lives. Although he had given up offering horsy back rides decades ago, he often still tutored the children – in subjects and in life.

His goal was to start at least one, new, positive, ripple every day. It had seldom been fewer than a dozen. Doc was a good person. The world was a better place because of him. He believed both of those things – not in a haughty way but as the climax to the life he had set out to live – becoming the kind of person he had set out to be.

///

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jaz was pleased with his letter and said so before handing it to Doc for his perusal.

"I want your honest opinions and any suggestions."

"This is a hefty letter. How many pages?"

"Seven."

It began with a short paragraph outlining the purpose of the letter – to pave the way for a cordial homecoming after which he expected to sit down with them and work out a plan for family happiness.

In the final paragraph, he expressed both his sorrow for how they had treated each other in the past and his specific hope that they could move on in love to build a happy life during the few years they had left together.

In between was a verbal collage of sorts in which he tried to explain and explore the reasons for their troubled life. Much of it was well taken. Some was the speculation of a well-meaning fifteen-year-old. All of it came from his heart.

He spent one page trying to paint a picture of Doc and 'Eden' so his parents could understand how such a total transformation had been facilitated in such a short time.

Never once did he place blame. Never once did he express anger. Never once did he suggest there was any possibility that the three of them could not work through their problems. It was conciliatory without taking on any undeserved blame. He specifically asked his father to consider accompanying him to some sessions with Dr. Derwood.

Doc handed it back.

"Not a single suggestion, Jaz. It seems a genuine masterpiece to me."

"I hope they think so."

"You have no control over how they think, how they receive it. You have done your part – taken the first big step. They will be skeptical, you know. Like you said, they have apparently never known the Jaz that I have only ever known."

"I still don't fully understand how you did it?"

"How I did what?"

"Changed me around."

"I didn't change you around, Son. You changed yourself around."

"No. I beg to differ with you. Before I decided to run away I had determined I couldn't stand my life the way it was. I knew I couldn't fix it. Nothing I had ever tried had helped. So, you see, it couldn't have been me who did it."

"You're suggesting I crawled inside your head and rewired it?"

"Well, no. You know I didn't mean that."

"Then I'm baffled. How else could I have made changes inside you?"

"Well, something about this relationship changed me."

"Ah! Relationship. That implies a two way thing if I recall properly."

"I'll give you that."

Jaz cocked his head already fascinated by what he had not yet heard.

"You are familiar with the concept of a catalyst – something that facilitates a change without being changed itself?"

"Yes."

"It is not an exact analogy to our situation because I, as the catalyst, have certainly changed in positive ways as well. Remember it was you who made the first positive – friendly – gestures when you offered to pick up and carry my things home."

"You're saying that after that you set things up for me to make my own changes."

"Or to allow the you that you wanted to be, to show itself and refine its goals and procedures."

Doc had made his point. He sat back and watched the wheels turn inside the boy's brilliant young head.

"I remember something Dr. Derwood said once. Something like, 'You have spent your life trying to prove to the world that you really are a bad person deserving of the bad stuff your parents dole

out. All kids need their parents to be right or life would be unbelievably scary. If you allowed yourself to believe that contrary to their appraisal, you were really good, and therefore did not deserve the treatment you received at home, you would have unleashed anger driven destruction against your parents like the world has seldom known."

"What do you think of his characterization from your present perspective?" Doc asked.

"Maybe insightful. I'll have to think it through more carefully. What I think I heard you saying, was that given the right setting – one of maybe hundreds or thousands out there in the world – I could have fixed myself in this same way."

Doc shrugged his shoulders not wanting to agree and risk cutting short the boy's thought process.

"I don't know if that's exactly true," Jaz said. "I imagine all those settings could be graded from least effective to most effective. You and Eden would have to rank an A+."

"Some are more experienced – skilled, perhaps – than others, I'll give you that," Doc said admitting the probable accuracy of the boy's comment.

"You ask questions instead of preach or lecture. I have always been able to tune out a lecture. I find it difficult to tune out a meaningful question."

"Most people do. The deepest part of the human mind loves questions. It can't resist them."

"So, that's why you use them?"

"Partly. You surprised me early on when you referred to my approach as Socratic, which is of course leading another's thoughts with the use of questions."

"First semester of my eighth-grade year I opted to study great thinkers. Socrates was one of them. A cursory glance at him I'm sure but I remembered that."

"I hope you will read more about him."

"Another thing I've noticed you do is to toss out the seed of an idea and then later come back to it and help me add a bit more to it and then even later add some more."

"Some day read Alfred North Whitehead and his thoughts about the Spiral of Education."

"Okay, but my point is that it takes a huge amount of thought

to do what you do. It's not really like two good ol' boys just hangin'. How do you keep track of it all?"

"Years of practice, I suppose."

"Where do I start so I can eventually get to where you are."

"A wrinkled old, nitro popper, you mean."

Jaz grinned but only long enough to recognize his friend's attempt at humor. Doc knew it had not been an answer so he continued.

"Here's a useful exercise. During some period – say an hour to begin with – never allow yourself to provide an idea, an answer, or piece of information if you can pose a question that will lead the other party to the proper realization."

"Help them think it through, you're saying. Lead them along one small step at a time. Do you think I'm on the right track?"

"Very good. A question. And when you are confronted with a question of opinion you can often turn it back on the questioner by asking, 'An interesting question. What do you think?'"

"What if it's a question of fact, like, 'Who really started the Civil War?'"

"Do you have some idea about how to avoid giving an answer and turning it back?"

"Very good, Doc. Let's see, I could say something like, 'Where do you suppose we could find out about things like that?'"

Doc clapped.

Jaz expressed his enthusiasm.

"This is so great. I'm going to miss this kind of stuff so much."

"And why should you have to miss it? If you look, I'm sure you will find other souls who are searching just like you are. You can continue your searching together."

"You're saying that although you and I just stumbled upon each other, and it has turned out great for us, I now need to take steps on my own to continue growing and learning and such."

"I believe you just said it better than I could have."

Jaz nodded and smiled faintly. He looked away.

"Do you like to keep in touch with the kids you've known?"

It was his faintly disguised request for permission to maintain contact.

"I treasure everything I receive. I prefer letters to calls. My old ears don't do very well on the phone anymore and as you have

determined I'm not an internet guy."

Jaz nodded, suddenly understanding that his time for talking with his friend was soon to be over. Doc's comments triggered a thought.

"You haven't checked your mailbox since I arrived. What gives with that?"

"It's a silly tradition, I suppose, but this time of year I just let it build up – from the fifteenth on. Then on Christmas morning I go and bring it all in. It's the cards. I spend the day going through them and remembering about each person who remembered me. It is always a life affirming exercise. Lots of smiles. A few tears – mostly joyous."

"Sounds like I'll be in the way for that this year. Maybe I should leave earlier than I planned. I certainly owe you your privacy that day."

"My dear young Jaz. You could never possibly be in the way here with me. I love you. I treasure your presence. And the only thing you owe me is several dozen great hugs between now and the moment of your planned departure."

"Fortunately, I have a lifetime of great hugs stored up just itching to find a home."

Doc understood how deprived of loving physical contact the boy was. He realized he was still reluctant to make the first move.

"Come and sit here, close beside me on the couch, Jaz."

There was no hesitation in the boy's response. Doc put his arm around him and pulled him close. Jaz relaxed into his friend. With his hand, Doc eased the boy's head against his shoulder.

Again, the old man recognized that a few minutes or even a few hours together like that could not make up for the years of deprivation. He hoped it would show Jaz that kind of closeness was legitimate and help him begin believing that he was worthy of love and attention and affection.

Jaz let his tears flow. He envisioned meeting his mother at the front door and embracing her, telling her that he loved her. He saw himself approaching his father and extending his hand for a shake, then pulling him close for a hug. He realized both of those gestures would be one sided – neither parent would be ready to return a hug or word of love. That would be alright. He understood there had been no reason for their feelings to change toward him. He would nurture

that. He would be patient. He would even live through a period of continued abuse while he worked toward his new goal of an improved family life.

He had never been allowed to speak about the true extent of his physical mistreatment with Dr. Derwood under threat of the most severe sort of consequence. He had often contemplated doing so anyway. Maybe the doctor could have him removed from his home. Now, that was in the past. Jaz was taking responsibility for fixing things. The days of blame and the relishing of retribution were behind him.

It was nearly an hour later when Jaz spoke. He didn't move but he spoke.

"I suppose it's time for that nog and bagel party."

"If you're ready. No hurry on my part."

Jaz sat up but held onto Doc's hand. He looked into his face.

"Thank you. How do you always know what I need?"

"I try and put myself in your place and ask, 'Knowing what I know about you, what would I need at this moment?' It's been a pretty reliable approach for me."

"I'll certainly remember that. I want to help lots of kids, too. I want to start so many ripples the sea will simply surge!"

"Have I told you how I admire the way you use words?"

Jaz grinned and nodded, understanding it was Doc's not so subtle way of suggesting he spend at least part of his life writing.

Jaz raised his arm as if wielding a sword.

"To the bagels and don't spare the cream cheese."

He stood and helped Doc to his feet

"It's blueberry for you and onion for me. I like cream cheese. You?"

"I prefer butter on blueberry and nothing at all on onion. I'll get the nog fixed. You set things up on the coffee table – cheese, butter, knives, paper napkins, mugs, well, you know. I like to turn off the lights at night and just let the fire light the place, and watch its flames play chase with the dancing shadows."

Fifteen minutes later the lights were out, the fire blazed, and the world grew comfortably cozy inside the cabin.

Doc poured and then proposed a toast.

"To our friendship and your long, productive, and happy life."

Jaz responded.

“To our friendship and all the perpetual ripples the two of us will have set in motion during our lifetimes.”

Doc nodded and smiled. Jaz followed his lead. They sat in silence watching the flames leap toward the chimney and listening to the crackling of the logs.

“Look. With the lights off, you can see the snow coming down through the window, there,” Jaz said pointing.

Doc turned and looked, holding his gaze for some time.

“It’s beautiful, the streetlamp highlighting the snow against the blackness of the heavens. It’s always been one of my favorite views from in here.”

“You’re pretty good with words yourself. I hope you will write the stories you have been thinking about all these years.”

“Probably not time now, considering all the other things I am enjoying.”

“Are you going to continue bringing kids home forever?”

Doc turned back toward Jaz.

“Surprises, remember? The future is full of surprises. One never knows what’s just around the corner. I will tell you this. If you should be the final young man to share my hearth, the procession will end on a joyful, high, note.”

“Thank you. I believe you, if you can believe that – me the brat of all brats really believing that I brought some joy into another person’s life. I’m not entirely sure how, but I believe you. I’m not even really jealous of all your other kids anymore. What you had with them must have been great for you and them and I can be genuinely happy about that now.”

Doc nodded and reached over and patted the boy’s knee. Again the cabin lapsed into silence. Jaz refilled the mugs. They each had important things to think about – Doc mostly about out the past. Jaz mostly about the future. The cycle of life.

Jaz eventually broke the silence.

“So, tomorrow is Christmas Eve. I’m wondering why it is important to you, given your religious philosophy.”

“Christmas is the season of altruistic love. Regardless of what one believes about its origin, that makes this a wonderful time of the year.”

Jaz nodded and then added.

“Seems like everyday is Christmas in your life, then.”

“I certainly hope so. It represents the highest calling for us humans, the greatest gift we have as a species – altruistic love.”

“When I get home, there will dozens of gifts waiting for me. My folks always spend extravagantly. They aren’t gifts of love for me, understand. It’s entirely a show to impress their friends. It’s been one perk of having snobbish, self-centered, one-up-man, parents. I’m going to give them away. I have so much there, and so many kids like Johnny don’t have anything. I think I am going to start a tradition that at Christmas everybody in my family – when I have my own, understand – gets just one hand made gift from every other member. That will allow us to use all of our Christmas funds to give things to those who really need things.”

“That is a magnificent goal, Jaz – one I hope you can make ripple clear around the World.”

“Is there a plan for tomorrow? The Christmas tree and gifts at the shelter in the evening – I hope we can go.”

“If you want to be there, we will be there.”

“Good. What else?”

“I imagine you’ve noticed the gallon jar on my bureau upstairs with all the change in it.”

“Yes. I have.”

“Will you go get it, please? We need to count it. It is the accumulated change from my pocket at the end of every day throughout the year. I put it in the jar. Then, on Christmas Eve I take it to the grocery and buy food with it for the free pantry run by the church kitty-cornered across from the store.”

Jaz was soon back with the big jar.

“Heavier than I anticipated. How do you go about it?” Well, back when up and down was easier for me I’d always sit on the floor by the hearth, dump out the coins, and then count them back into the jar. Every time I reached a dollar I’d make a hatch mark on a yellow pad.”

“A good system. Let’s do it that way. I’m here to help you up and down. You know I’m strong. It will be great fun.”

Doc hesitated but then bit his tongue rather than offering a list of reasons not to do it.

“By golly, that sounds like fun. If you will pull the trunk over to right there so I can lean back against it, we’ll be in business.”

The trunk was positioned and Jaz helped Doc onto the floor.

“You need a pillow at your back. You can use the one I sleep on at night.”

With that arranged, the counting began. They would each count up a dollar’s worth of change and drop it into the jar. Jaz did the bookkeeping. It was nearly an hour later when the final coin had clinked its way to rest back inside the jar.

Jaz began adding up the tallies.

“Would you believe it? - \$288.41.”

“That will buy a humongous amount of stuff. What sorts of things do you buy?”

“Canned goods mostly. That’s what the Pantry prefers.”

“This is so cool. When?”

“I like to do that first thing in the morning. Store opens at eight. Pantry at nine. One thing left to do here. Count out ten dollars in quarters.”

Jaz didn’t question the request. There were soon ten short columns of four quarters each.

“Subtract the amount from our total.”

“Okay. That leaves \$278.41.”

“Next, see if you can fit all those coins into one of your hands.”

The boy’s puzzlement grew, but again, he did as requested.

“Excellent! Now slip them into the front pocket in your jeans.”

His young brow furrowed and for the first time he hesitated.

“You need some spending money – I seem to remember a certain sweet girl you’ve met recently.”

“I shouldn’t.”

“It will give me great pleasure.”

“Okay, then. Thank you. Thank you.”

He slid the money into his jeans.

“Okay. Next problem,” Jaz said.

“Problem?” Doc asked, puzzled, not thinking they had been speaking of problems.

“Getting you back into a position worthy of homo erectus.”

“I have a plan,” Doc said. “Help me onto my knees. Then I can push up on the trunk to help me stand. During the process you can apply leverage anywhere that seems appropriate.”

The endeavor took a few minutes – a few minutes longer than it would have, had the two of them not spent so much time laughing about the cumbersome process. They determined that first, Doc

needed to just roll over onto his stomach, so he was soon lying prone. Next, he needed to raise his posterior and drag his knees up under himself. With his right knee in place, he lost his balance and rolled back onto the floor on his side. After a short laughter induced break they tried again, that time inching both knees forward in an alternating pattern. Then it was getting him up onto his straightened arms. Jaz suggested a horsy ride and playfully mounted the old man's back, making sure not to rest any weight on him. The laughter that ensued nearly sent the old man back to the floor. Jaz was quickly to the rescue with his hands under Doc's arms. Doc then turned himself toward the trunk and, after several attempts, was there with his elbows resting on its top. With more help than had actually been needed from Jaz, Doc was eventually standing upright.

His knees didn't want to straighten out. They ached and his calves cramped. Jaz helped him to the couch.

"Well, that was certainly an adventure," Doc said, continuing to chuckle about it.

"What a team," Jaz added. "We count, we grunt, we laugh, and eventually we rejoin the human race."

"I thank you for your help."

"Oh, I wasn't helping. I was allowing you to let me exercise my muscles and show off my youthful agility."

"Both of which you accomplished in splendid fashion. That was really nice being down there again. I do thank you for being here for me, tonight."

Jaz took a seat close beside Doc and held the old man's arm and hand in his lap.

"I've never really paid much attention to your watch until just now. It's beautiful and looks very old."

"It was my father's and before him, his father's. He presented it to me on my thirteenth birthday. Can you believe that I was disappointed? I had my heart set on a new bike and the garish piece of second hand jewelry didn't seem to stack up very well. It wasn't until years later that I understood what a meaningful gift it had been. It was his most cherished possession. It's one of my most cherished possessions now. And, it tells me it is past my bed time. You're a bad influence, young man, coercing me to stay up late carousing – swigging nog and munching bagels."

Jaz nodded and grinned.

“I’ll clean up the stuff,” he said. “You go on upstairs. Have your legs unkinked enough to do that?”

Doc stood and began walking toward the open stairway.

“Oh yes. May take a bit longer than normal but I’ll be fine. It was worth every ache and kink that may arise from it. And the laughter will be eternally precious. You sleep well tonight. There’s an extra blanket in the closet. Looks like it will be pretty cold overnight. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Doc.”

Jaz figured with a heart as warm as his was at that moment, he surely wouldn’t need an extra blanket.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They had just sat down to breakfast when there was a knock on the door.

“It will be the pickup for the gifts,” Doc said getting up.

Jaz joined him at the door. The boxes were soon inside the van heading toward the shelter. The driver graciously agreed to drop the letter home into the mail for Jaz.

“The place looks empty over here,” Jaz said.

“It does indeed. But, we should have a better view of the snowman now,” Doc said moving to the window.

“Oh my!” the old man said in surprise. “What’s been going on out there in snowman land?”

“Merry Altruistic Love Season, Doc.” he giggled. “The addition is me standing there beside you. True, neither even faintly resembles either of us but such is the reality of snowmen. I’m the shorter one on the right if you were wondering. They have their arms around each other’s waists.”

“I see that. How wonderful. You missed another night’s sleep, did you?”

“I was in bed by midnight.”

“Well, I thank you so much. Up here in the North Country they may last until March. What a wonderful remembrance you have created for me.”

Jaz beamed. He experienced the second of those wonder-filled, soul swelling, luvyith accompanying feelings for which he had no name. Until something better came along he decided to call it a doc-yith.

After a long embrace, they returned to the table where the cold French toast was salvaged by the steaming hot syrup they had left too long heating on the stove.

Jaz reheated the bacon in the microwave and poured out Doc's coffee starting fresh from the pot.

"It's not everywhere you can have an adventure for breakfast," Doc joked.

"I've decided anything can be an adventure here," Jaz went on.

"After we've finished here we need to be on our way to the grocery," Doc said.

At 8:06 they entered the store. Sara wasn't there. Although a letdown for Jaz it still worked. He left a card with her grandpa. He had made it for her the night before.

"I didn't have an envelope large enough, Sir. I would be appreciative if you didn't look inside. It's sort of personal."

"Not a problem. I was fifteen once myself, you know."

'Sixteen,' Jaz thought. 'He figures I'm sixteen. Cool!'

Grampa held open a large money bag and Jaz poured the contents of the jar into it.

"How much this year, Doc?"

"What was it, Jaz?"

"\$278.41"

"Let's make that three hundred cans, then. Okay?"

"Thank you, George. Yes. That will be wonderful. As usual you are very generous," Doc said patting the old storekeeper's hand.

They filled four and a half carts. George packed the cans in boxes. Doc led the way across the intersection to the church basement. He and Jaz each carried a box. It would take six trips to take it all across the street.

"Thanks so much, Doc," the ever-smiling lady said. "Please fill in a donation card for us to post on the bulletin board."

Doc took the card. Jaz looked on over his shoulder. In large letters, Doc wrote S A N T A.

Jaz would not say anything but he tucked the ploy away for his own future reference.

It was going on ten o'clock when they were finally back into the warmth of the cabin. Jaz immediately made for the fire. He poked here and there and added a log.

"Hot cocoa?" Doc asked.

He proceeded to get out the ingredients anticipating an affirmative response. It came.

“Yes, please.”

They were soon on the couch.

The warmth of the fire felt wonderful. Doc’s circulation had not been good recently and his feet and legs were easily chilled. He pulled a comforter around them.

“I have an idea about something I want to give Johnny. He’ll know it came from me. You figure that’s okay?”

“Not only okay but probably very important. Johnny has trouble trusting people – believing he could be important to anybody. Something, which he knows came from you, should certainly help. May I ask what you have in mind?”

“He drew a picture of me while we were together. I thought I would color it and frame it and give it back to him. I didn’t even think to ask if you have crayons.”

“Crayons, colored pencils, water colors, and even a few acrylics that may or not have dried up in their jars. You’ll find them all in the cabinet above the washer.”

“I’m afraid I folded it so it would fit in my pocket. It’s all creased. Any suggestions?”

“You might consider giving it the waffle batter treatment.”

“What? Oh. Very funny. Iron it. You think that would work?”

“I’ve done it myself.”

“So, you’ll supervise.”

“Gladly. The iron is on the shelf above the dryer. I’ll set up the ironing board. You will need to let it dry before coloring. It will take just a swish of steam so the paper will get damp. It shouldn’t affect the lines.”

With the equipment assembled, Doc outlined the process.

“Flatten the page as much as you can with your hands against the ironing board. Place it face down and cover it with a smooth, linen, dish, towel. Set the iron for the lowest steam setting. Use a swirling motion. Move evenly and quickly. You don’t want to either scorch or soak the paper. I’d begin with no more than a five second treatment. Then you can check it out and proceed accordingly.”

With every thing in place Jaz began.

“One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand, four one thousand, five one thousand.”

He lifted the iron.

“It’s like a miracle, Doc. The creases are virtually gone. I

don't think I need to do more. Don't want to risk ruining it.”

“I'd go with that myself,” Doc said.

“How do we dry it? Damp paper usually crinkles as it dries, doesn't it?”

“How might you counteract that?”

Jaz smiled into Doc's face understanding what he was doing.

“Weight it under some books, but then it couldn't dry. . . . Place it between two smooth, dry, linen, towels and then weight it with books. The towels will absorb most of the moisture. After an hour we can check on it and go from there.”

“Sounds sound to me.”

“I like to work in colored pencils. Got any fine sandpaper?”

“There should be some in my tool box.”

“I use it to keep the lead sharp. Colored lead is so soft it tends to break badly in sharpeners.”

“I've noticed that but had no solution for the problem. May I watch while you work?”

“Of course.”

Again, Jaz felt that feeling – doc-yith – welling up inside. He could hardly imagine how wonderful life was going to be now that he had that awesome feeling at his beck and call. It was no wonder Doc was so happy and so laid back if he'd been experiencing that feeling for eighty years.

After an hour the sheet was virtually dry and remained smooth and flat. For several minutes, Jaz held it in the gentle heat rising above a table lamp and it quickly became bone dry. He was ready.

He pulled a chair up next to his at the table – for Doc – and began with an explanation.

“Johnny figured out I was running away from life. That's why he made this the back of my head – no features. I'm going to leave it as he drew it although now I am excited to be running toward life.”

He began adding a few lines here and there and carefully filling in the areas with colors. He used the side of the lead except when he was emphasizing a line or darkening some aspect of the picture. For those effects, he used the point. When a pencil grew dull he would lay it at an angle to the sand paper and twist it ever so gently, sharpening the point.

“I hope Johnny recognizes it was his drawing,” Doc said. “You have transformed it into a masterpiece. Is there anything you've

ever tried at which you didn't excel?"

Jaz grinned sheepishly and shrugged his shoulders.

"I seem to have lots of talents. Elbert says that may present problems when it comes to the choice of my profession?"

"And who says you have to confine yourself to just one pursuit in life?"

"Hey. Yeah. Who says? How did you work it out?"

"I selected one thing to do for income – teach. That freed me to then pursue all my other interests."

"Pretty cool. I was considering teaching just now while I was showing you about working with colored pencils. It gave me that great feeling I receive when I'm doing something useful for somebody. I can still count on my two hands how often I've had it, but not for long, I can see that."

"I am so happy for you."

Jaz nodded and finished putting a few details on the picture.

"Now I need to make a mat for it. You know about mats?"

"Yes, indeed. There is some chipboard behind the dresser in my bedroom – eighth of an inch I believe, maybe sixteenth. There is an exact-o knife in the kitchen drawer. Use the chopping board by the sink as a base to cut over."

A half hour later the picture was matted. Jaz had used a piece of blue wrapping paper to cover the frame. It accented the several hues of blue in the snow scene.

"Well, how do you feel about the finished product?" Doc asked.

It seemed somewhat uncharacteristic for Doc, Jaz thought – pressing him for an opinion like that – but he responded.

"I like it. I hope Johnny does."

"I have the idea Johnny would treasure a blank piece of paper if it came from you."

"I just need to wrap it and slip it under the tree tonight. When does that event begin, by the way?"

"Seven, depending on the state of crisis being experienced at the shelter at that moment."

"How does Maude handle the constant stress?"

"She focuses on the relief and comfort she can present rather than on the distress and hurt that continually find their way to her doorstep. When configured in that way each situation seems like an

opportunity for success to her."

Jaz nodded, tucking that away for future consideration, also. There seemed to be a lot of wise people out in the world. Maybe Doc was right and he would be able to find someone else with whom to pursue the meaning of life and find solutions to World problems.

"While you wrap your present, I have something I need to attend to up in my bedroom," Doc said.

He climbed the stairs more slowly than usual, returning fifteen minutes later. Jaz was at the stove.

"Half a mug of hot cocoa here for each of us," he announced.

"You take it all. I'll put on a fresh pot of coffee."

"Got it all ready to go. I'll just turn on the burner."

"You anticipated my preference."

"It is another of those skills my home has forced upon me. Focusing on the positive side of that, I suppose it will stand me in good stead, won't it?"

Rather than responding to the question that needed no answer, Doc took a different tack.

"You are spoiling me, you know. After you've . . . Well, later, I may well find myself helpless."

"I imagine most of these things are like riding a bicycle," Jaz said avoiding the 'leaving thing' as well.

With drinks in hand they moved to the boy's favorite spot in the universe – the couch.

"So, what advice do you have for me about sex?"

"Sex at what point in your life?"

"With my wife, after we're married. I thought I made that clear earlier."

"That should remain a very personal and private matter between you and her. I will just say one thing on the topic. Learn how to make it wonderful for her, first, and it will be wonderful for you."

"How will I know how to do that?"

"Pure and simple, honest and open, trial and error. Talk about it together. Help each other learn. It will come together just fine for you. It is nothing for you to worry about."

"Thanks for that. I'm good at everything else I try. I imagine I'll be good at sex, too."

"Doc smiled and reached over to ruffle the boy's hair."

"You loved your wife very much didn't you?" Jaz said, again plucking a topic out of the blue.

He wasn't sure he should have asked.

"Oh, yes. The most precious person I ever had in my life. We were good together. We had a balance. To find complete trust and devotion in a relationship is a wonderful thing."

"My parents fight all the time. May I ask if you fought?"

"You may, and truly we didn't ever fight. We disagreed sometimes – especially early on in our marriage but we always found civil ways of working things through. Neither of us saw disagreement as an unhealthy thing. Neither of us was given to raising our voice. We had learned years before that was always a futile approach to working things out.

"I believe that if couples always first focus on their love and then become determined to use the fix it approach, fighting – as you described it – is just never necessary. Fights emerge from selfishness – almost always. Marriage has to be altruistic to work. Each partner thoughtfully working to make life as wonder-filled as possible for the other."

"I hope I can remember those things."

"If you don't remember them, I can just about guarantee you will reinvent them yourself. You have the capacity to see what should be and the intelligence to find ways of achieving it."

"That's a responsibility filled complement if I ever heard one."

"You're not up to it?"

Jaz grinned.

"Thanks for that. Yes. I'm up to it. I just have to keep remembering and believing that."

He sank into silence for some time before speaking again.

"I have to be honest with you, Doc. There is still a part of me that is quite skeptical about all this."

"All this?"

"This way of life, here with you. I find myself wondering if it can really be transferred away from here to the rest of the places in my life. I have my moments when I don't see how it can."

"I understand. I am going to make you a guarantee – something I seldom do. By this time next year every trace of those doubts will have vanished for you."

"I guess I can't ask for more than a personal guarantee from

the man with an extra L in his name. I suppose that makes it an L of a guarantee, in fact."

You can bet your missing Z on that!"

"We always have fun, don't we?"

"We do. I hope you always will – well, most always. There is no margin in living your life any other way."

"My definition of fun has changed, you know," Jaz said thoughtfully.

"I'd be interested in hearing about it."

"Actually, it's like I added a second meaning for fun. I'm sure I am still going to enjoy doing things for the sheer thrill or pleasure of it but that's just short term, in the moment, kind of fun. But now there is a second, deeper, more important side to it. Like fixing the picture just now and making the card for Sara and doing the carving and the snowman for you were all wonderful, stick-with-me-forever fun. Maybe it is a dichotomy of self-centered fun and other-centered fun. Right now, I am captivated by the possibilities of the fun I have in just doing things for others. It's like the chewing gum ads – double the pleasure when it becomes a two-way thing. I help someone else and I also feel helped. That make any sense?"

"It makes perfect sense to me."

"Of course, it does."

Again, a moment of silence.

"There seems to be a down side to all this."

"Tell me more."

"Back when I was a self-centered, brat, going through life making things as miserable as I could for everyone I met, I really felt very little responsibility for anything or anybody – lots of power but no responsibility. Now, it is like the future of mankind is sitting squarely on my shoulders. I'm thinking that I'm just not up to that."

"Nor is any man by himself. Ripples, remember. Act and react in ways that give birth to helpful, positive, ripples. Even if they only ripple across a puddle they will affect someone."

"I think I'm hearing you say that if I just tend to those around me, they will in turn take care of those in their lives, and those will do the same, right on around the planet."

"That has always been my plan, my concept. I can't possibly solve every problem in the world, but if I help solve those close to home in such a way that the effect becomes dynamic and moves

beyond my immediate objective, good things are bound to happen in places I can never ever know about."

"It's like the saying about giving a man a fish and he eats for one day. Teach him to fish and he eats forever."

"Yes. In many ways, it is like that."

"So, we don't just go out and solve problems for people. We help them learn how to solve problems so they can do that for the rest of their life."

"And . . ."

"More, huh?" He boy grinned. "Well, let's see. We now have people knowing how to solve their problems as they come up, down the road – in essence, knowing how to take care of themselves. Ah! We help them . . . how to say it . . . eagerly embrace the idea of helping others learn that same skill so new ripples will just keep starting."

"Now, move that plan from mere problem solving to . . ."

"To living the good life in general – the good life the way you have presented it to me."

"And . . .?"

"And a positive philosophy for living encompasses the globe and replaces the hate and anger and vengeful thinking that has become so dangerously rampant during the past decades."

Doc nodded and smiled, refraining from revealing his own recent doubts about that actually happening any time soon. He would hope the enthusiasm and energy of the Jaz generation would accomplish what his generation had so sadly been unable – or unwilling – to do. Doc feared that this just might be the human species' last chance.

///

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

While Doc napped, Jaz slipped back to the grocery. Sara was there and again he got to go walking with her. She thanked him for the handmade card and apologized that hers was not.

Jaz assured her that he thought it was wonderful, privately accepting it as a luvyith. Many people, he imagined – he among them a week or so before would think a handmade anything was less worthy than something purchased. He smiled wondering if Doc's approach caught on if the world economy would collapse.

Again, they held hands, they talked, they walked, they answered the greetings from those they passed on the street. Again, when the time came to an end they shared a gentle kiss – several, in fact!

Jaz made a purchase and trotted back to the cottage. He had it wrapped and into a brown paper bag before Doc awakened from his extended nap. He checked the pill vials. Two more nitros were missing. Jaz was concerned but wouldn't inflict that on Doc. He had the right to attend to himself in his own way.

"So, you were out," Doc said sitting up and stretching.

"Sara," came his one word answer.

"Still cold out there I assume," Doc said, not going to pry.

"So cold, I felt obliged to hold her very close on several occasions – the gentlemanly thing to do, I figured. Heavy coats tend to spoil that, however."

"I'm glad womankind will always be able to count on you."

"Only until I'm married or in a committed relationship. From then on, womankind is on her – its – their – own."

"I hope you will consider not rushing into such a relationship. Picking a lifetime partner is a very serious undertaking. I know that in this age of disposable spouses that may seem quite old foggy-ish."

"Not at all, to me at least. I will do my best to keep my wits

about me during the process."

Doc understood that the boy had no way of knowing how it would be, but he figured such a commitment up front could certainly not be a bad thing.

"I'll fix supper," Jaz said. "What sounds good?"

"I'm really not very hungry. Why don't you choose and I'll sample it?"

"We got that humongous can of sloppy Joe stuff – the kind with the ground beef already in it. That sounds okay?"

"It sounds fine. Go to it. There may be some hamburger buns in the bread box. Probably old and dry but a few seconds in the microwave should transform them into a great depository for sloppy Joes."

"I'm almost actually sort of excited a little bit about the party this evening."

Doc chuckled. Jaz handled it.

"I wondered where old Broccoli Boy had been keeping himself. I guess he came out of hibernation. Probably famished."

"They chuckled together."

"My, that does smell good," Doc said at last. "I'm never certain whether sloppy Joes require milk or Pepsi."

"Definitely, Pepsi. Salty, spicy – they definitely fall into the Mexican/Pizza category."

"I'll set out the pop and nuke your buns if you'll hand them to me."

"I'll not have my buns nuked, Sir," Jaz said trying to make a little fun and giving his posterior a quick little jerk back and forth.

"Keep them as they are, then. *Butt* I've heard that the in thing these days is buns of steel."

"Have I told you how quick you are for your age, Doc? Quick of mind and wit I mean."

"Thank you, I suppose. There for a second I thought you were about to challenge me to a race of some kind."

"Oh, it was intended as a complement – not a challenge."

Doc smiled and went about his business. He opened a sack of chips to round things off and noted there was still ice cream in the freezer.

Eventually things came together. Doc made his an open face 'Joe' on half a bun. Jaz ate sandwich after sandwich until the skillet

was clean. Then he started on the chips and downed a second can of pop.

"Ice cream you said?"

"I think I'll let you get your own this evening."

"How about some yourself. It's almost required after salt drenched sandwiches."

"Okay. One scoop. I'd not want to break the rules."

With the ice cream in bowls, Doc hitched his head and they headed for the fireplace – Jaz on the floor, Doc on the couch.

"Where do you get your firewood?"

"Jake from the tree lot sells it by the pickup load. His son unloads and stacks it for me. I go through several truck loads a winter. It's pretty chilly up here from September through March."

Silence. The flames danced.

"Don't take this the wrong way."

Doc smiled and projected his most interested expression in the boy's direction.

"I've been thinking that – looking at the big picture – it may have been a good thing that you didn't have children of your own."

"You have my attention."

"Well, if you had, you would have probably spent your life caring just for them instead of all the other kids. Say you had three children – and I'm not saying that wouldn't have been fantastic. I'm sure you would have set those three children on the right path in life. But, this way, you have been able to help dozens and dozens and dozens of kids. You've changed all those lives."

"Thank you for that, Jaz. It is a very comforting take on my life."

They finished the 'required' dessert and did up the dishes.

"I stink," Jaz said at last. "I think I'll take a short shower before I dress for tonight. What shall I wear?"

"Clothes."

"Funny. You're saying my choice. I get it."

"I think I'll change into something a little more old-manish," Doc said. "It's what they expect at the shelter. I'll walk you up stairs. Bring the big jar. I need to get started on next year's Christmas Fund."

* * *

Jaz was downstairs first. He called up to Doc.

"Are you about ready to leave?" he asked, his youthful

impatience getting the best of him. “It’s twenty ‘til and it takes us a good twenty minutes to get there.”

“I called and they are sending the van. My old legs told me they didn’t have that trip in them this evening. Keep watch. They will just pull in out at the alley and wait.”

“I think it’s already waiting. I’m sorry you’re not feeling up to the walk. It looks like a beautiful night out there. Twenty-one degrees but beautiful.”

“We’ll see afterward. I may find a second wind.”

They got into their coats, caps, and scarves and were soon entering the van – the same one that came to pick up the gifts earlier.

“It will be a larger gathering than you are expecting, Jaz. Lots of foster parents from this area bring the younger children for the party.”

“I was wondering why there would be a need for so many presents. I didn’t see but maybe a dozen kids during all the time I spent there.”

“I know it’s none of my business but the brown sack you have?”

“The picture for Johnny and something for Maude. As it turned out I didn’t need the ten you gave me for spending money so I spent part of it on something for Maude.”

“I won’t ask what. I enjoy surprises too much to ruin that. It was a very thoughtful thing for you to do.”

“I want to take some gifts to my parents and Elbert. He will appreciate whatever I make him. I’m afraid my parents will scoff at anything that wasn’t purchased at an expensive shop. I’m going to do it anyway. I have promised myself I won’t be disappointed regardless of how they react. When we get home tonight I’m planning to call and talk with them.”

“Sounds like it is a big night in your life.”

Jaz nodded all quite seriously.

The van pulled to a stop. Several adults were escorting children into the big house. It suggested a question for Jaz.

“Do you think a big new facility would work for a safe house? I’ve thought about building a new one for Maude but then I got to thinking maybe what’s here is more familiar to the folks who come here. Maybe it’s more comfortable than a brand-new place would be. Maybe it’s easier to return home from this place than it would be from

a fancy, modern, new place. What do you think?"

"Two things come to mind. First, I think you have characterized things very well. The old house could use some repairs – a new roof and updating of the wiring and plumbing, but as you said, this kind of surrounding is probably more comfortable and poses less frustration regarding their own situations."

"You said two things came to mind."

"Well, yes. Do you really have the kind of money it would take to build a new facility?"

"A perk from my dysfunctional, money grubbing, family. My allowance has always had to be bigger than any of other kids my age. My trust fund has to be bigger than any other kids. What would we be talking – three hundred thousand to get things fixed?"

Doc swallowed hard.

"Something under that, I imagine."

"As shameful as it sounds to me now, I could handle that out of my piggy bank – well you understand what I mean. We'll need to get a hush hush set of bids for the repair work."

Doc nodded. They entered the house to the joyous strains of youngsters singing carols. Maude met them at the door and administered her special brand of hugs and pecks to their cheeks.

"I hoped you would be here tonight. Santa should make his entrance any minute now. The kids are gathered in the living room. I saved two chairs back in your favorite corner just in case you got to come."

They slipped into the seats. Each did his best to be secretive about passing what he had up toward the tree. They removed their gear and hung it on the backs of their chairs.

"Hi Jaz," came a high-pitched voice which turned their heads.

"Hey! My man Johnny – Hoops, sorry. Gimme five."

It may have been the most awkward high five ever attempted but once accomplished it put a huge smile on Johnny's – sorry, Hoops' – face.

The youngster just stood close. Doc gently elbowed Jaz and patted his own lap. Jaz nodded and winked.

"My lap seems to be empty, Hoops. How about you fix that for me."

Without a word, he held out his arms and Jaz lifted him on board. Jaz caught his mother's eye. She had been watching. He

raised his eyebrows as if asking permission. She smiled and nodded. The deed was sealed.

With that just right mixture of power and tempo, the much anticipated ‘Ho! Ho! Ho!’ accompanied the rotund, red clad, figure of Santa Clause as he entered the room. He spent time talking with every child he passed and administered hugs to those who accepted his open arms.

Santa looked a lot like Jake from the tree lot to Jaz – no padding needed. He figured that he then knew the source of the magnificent tree as well. Doc was surrounded by fine people. The boy had to wonder if he just attracted that sort or did he consciously go out and find them? His answer was some of both. Or, came the afterthought, perhaps there were just a whole lot more of them in the world than he had realized.

The first gift delivery was to Johnny. Santa then proceeded to read names and hand over the colorful packages to the eager and excited children. Johnny tore off the wrapping. His eyes grew wide.

“You made my picture into our picture, didn’t you? Thank you, Jaz. I’ll keep it for ever and ever.”

It was worth the finest, neck squeezing, Adam’s apple squishing, hug Jaz had ever received.

“I didn’t get you nothin’,” Johnny said looking suddenly saddened.

“Of course, you did. You made this picture for me at Christmas time. I added a few things and now I’m giving it to you. That sure sounds fair to me.”

It was worth another hug. Johnny’s arm remained around his new friend’s neck for some time as they watched the goings on. In the end, each child received three gifts – many donated by other generous hearts in the neighborhood.

“Looks like there are just two presents left,” Santa announced at last.

He hefted the one Jaz had brought.

“It says here it is for somebody named Maude. He scratched his head. Does anybody here know who that could be?”

The kids all turned and pointed, saying, “That’s Maudie.”

Santa insisted she come forward and open the gift while everybody watched.

It brought the house down – a big, red, five pound can of

coffee!

When the laughter died down Santa added, “From what I hear that should last you until this time next year!”

Again, the laughter and applause.

Santa picked up the final present. It was perhaps three inches wide, not quite an inch thick, and six inches long.

“This can’t be right,” Santa said reading the tag. “It says this if for something called a Jaz. Does anybody know what a Jaz is?”

Johnny raised his hand. “This is Jaz right here. My friend, Jaz.”

He kicked his legs in glee. Santa approached, handed Jaz the little package, and winked a knowing wink into the young man’s face.

It only confused Jaz more. He felt uneasy and embarrassed, being fifteen – sometimes mistaken for sixteen, even – and receiving a gift at a kid’s party. Still he went along. Johnny slipped to floor and stood close watching. Jaz carefully unwrapped it. His wheels began turning. He recognized the paper. He recognized the tag. He recognized the unsteady scrawl. But he didn’t let on.

With the paper removed he opened the shiny, white, pasteboard, box. Inside, as if floating on a sea of white cotton, was a watch. Not any watch, of course, but Doc’s old, old, gold watch.

Jaz gave a quick glance toward Doc’s wrist just to make sure. Then, he held it up for the others to see. As they then turned to other things he reached out and administered the very best hug he knew how to administer. He whispered his thank you. Beyond that he was speechless. Once he recovered he would have more to say in their privacy.

On a slip of paper inside the box, in Doc’s handwriting, it said simply: “It fills my heart with the greatest joy to give that which is most precious to me. Cherish this like I have. I can already envision it on your son’s wrist someday.”

Jaz turned his head back toward Doc and they sat just looking into each other’s faces for a long moment. Jaz returned the watch to the box and slipped it into his shirt pocket close to his heart. It went without saying that he would cherish it.

The children played with their new toys, for a few moments able to live outside the harsh reality of their lives. Maude approached Doc.

“I assume it is you I thank for the coffee.”

“I can honestly say it is not I, ma’am.”

She looked back and forth between the two of them.

“Then, may I assume it is you, Jaz?”

“I can honestly say I am just a mindless teenager, ma’am. You would be giving me far too much credit if you placed your thanks here.”

Doc nodded emphatically as if in support.

“Me thinks one of you lies and the other swears to it. Regardless of its source it was a thoughtful gesture and will be put to good use.”

She turned the can this way and that looking it over, playfully. There was a note attached to the bottom.

“What’s this?”

“She held up her reading glasses.”

“This entitles you to one, free, five pound, can of coffee each and every month. Watch the mail!”

She patted Doc on the shoulder and administered a lingering hug to the young man.

Doc stood followed by Jaz.

“It’s time for me to get my old bones back to the warmth and comfort of my cabin, Maude. It was a wonderful time, watching the children. Tell Santa thanks for us.”

“And thank you, Doc.”

“Me. I just showed up for the free punch – and there wasn’t any!”

He feigned irritation and gave her a final hug. Jaz followed suite.

“I’ll get your driver,” she said, looking around.

“I think we’ll walk home, tonight. Something tells me it is a very special evening out there.”

Doc set a leisurely pace and stopped often to call his young friend’s attention to points of interest – the oldest building in the area, a home that was the northern end of the underground railway where slaves at last emerged into freedom, several lamp posts which remained from the days of gas street lights, other things. Jaz had genuine questions about each of them.

The fifteen-minute trek had taken thirty. For some reason the cold didn’t seem so cold that night. The moon was just passing full but still spread an almost daytime brightness across the snow and trees

and buildings – enough to cast the blue shadows so often spread on Christmas cards. The few flakes that descended out of the black sky appeared like lacy ornaments seeking their proper place on the tree of all trees.

Doc paused just inside the opening from the alley to take in the Christmas card aura that Jazz had noted to himself that first night.

“It has been a wonderful place to live, Jaz. I built it myself. Did I tell you that? Every nail, every pipe and every foot of wire. It was good therapy for me after I lost Anna. I’m leaving it to the Shelter Foundation for sort of a social hall. There are other shelters nearby – for teens and pregnant girls. I think they will be able to make good use of the place for another fifty years if they choose to.”

Jaz listened and nodded. He was interested in whatever his old friend had to say. He searched the words for their unspoken meaning. It always came to the same end – unconditional love, no questions asked, no information required.

They entered the cabin and shed their wraps. Jaz moved to tend the fire.

“I’m feeling up to that this evening,” Doc said. “You fix some cocoa for us and I’ll fiddle with the fireplace.”

A few minutes later Jaz confronted Doc with his nitro vial.

“You only have one pill left, Doc.”

The old man nodded.

“We’ll walk up to the pharmacy and take care of that first thing in the morning – make that noon. Bobby will be taking off the morning to be with his family. It will be Christmas but he always keeps hours for those of us who count on him. He is a good man.”

Jaz nodded, though thought it had been pretty reckless of Doc to come that close to running out – regardless of how busy he had been. He returned the vial to its place above the sink.

“Table or couch?” Jaz asked, a mug in each hand.

“I do believe our favorite spot is the couch, would you agree?”

“Yes. That would get my vote, at least.”

They sat. They sipped. They talked. Jaz moved close and Doc spread his arm and engulfed the boy.

“I’m going to hold my children every day. I’m going to tuck them in and read to them every night. I’m going to answer all their questions right when they pose them. I’m going to kiss them and tell them I love them many times each day. I will never touch them in

anger. I will build them up and still help them handle the things that need handling. I will make sure they understand how precious they are and discover their great talents and skills. I'm going to help them learn about what is really important in life – altruistic love – and what is not – stuff, money, prestige, fame, and all that other tommyrot.”

He raised his head off Doc's shoulder for just a moment and looked him in his face.

“It sounds like I'm going to have a passel of little Doc's running around my place. Won't that be great?”

“It will, Jaz. I can just see you trimming all those little Doc beards.”

It was worth a long chuckle together. The boy's head again found its favorite spot. They sat in silence for more than an hour. It had been one the best hours in each of their lives.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"I guess I should make that call now. My parents should be home if they went out for the evening. They aren't much into partying except for the show of it at times like Christmas and New Years. Mother dresses fancy and wears her expensive jewelry. Father stands about preening, presenting himself as the man who can afford it all."

"Again, the privacy of my bedroom is yours if you want it."

Jaz sensed that Doc might feel more comfortable if he made the call in private. He might, as well.

"Yes. Maybe that's the way to go with this one. Thanks."

He climbed the stairs – slowly, deliberately, one at a time. It was all quite uncharacteristic of him. It was clearly a difficult undertaking. Doc wished he could absorb some of the anxiety and all of the pain if there were to be pain. He knew he couldn't – shouldn't – protect the boy. Still, his old eyes moistened as the lad moved out of sight at the top of the stairs.

Doc read – with little comprehension – while he waited. His mind kept returning to the brave young man upstairs.

It was nearly an hour later – 9:50 – when he returned. His expression was not unhappy. Neither was it elated. More happy than sad, Doc decided. He wouldn't ask. Jaz turned off the lights and went to sit close beside him.

"It was a good talk. Apparently, Elbert gave them a piece of his mind after I called the first time. It seemed to start them thinking in ways they hadn't before.

"They aren't guaranteeing anything but agreed to overlook this 'episode' – as father put it – until we've had time back together. They seem willing to talk about things. Father wanted to stress the past. I asked that we draw a line and start forward from there. He said that would be very hard for him to do. I said I understood because it was

going to be very hard for me as well. He seemed to have no idea what I was taking about. He only sees how I have made his and mother's lives miserable. He seems to have no idea how terrible his beatings and constant put downs have been for me.

"It isn't all I had hoped for but quite honestly it's a whole lot more than I expected. So, all things considered, I'm very glad I made the call and had the talk."

He held out his hands.

"See how I'm shaking. I guess it must have been a bigger deal than I let myself believe it was."

He scooted closer and snuggled into Doc's side. He continued talking.

"One thing became very clear during our talk. He and I now define success very differently. Well, we always have but I am no longer thinking of it as keeping their lives in a hellish turmoil over my misdeeds. They see success in all the ways you and I don't."

Doc smiled to himself: 'You and I'. How very nice!

"To them it's money and stuff and keeping their friends all jealous about what they have and can do and the other people can't have or do. It's like they might not even really want all the stuff but they have to keep getting more of it in order to keep putting down the others. Is that crazy-weird or what?"

"Sounds crazy-weird to me," Doc added for no reason other than to reassure the boy he was there and listening.

"I told them I was not their trophy and made them promise to think about that and how that had to change in our relationship. I told them I couldn't be perfect for them for two reasons: One, no boy my age can be 'perfect' and, two, that they and I held such different definitions of perfect that we would probably never really agree about it."

"How did they take such straight talk from you?"

"Surprisingly, there was no ranting and raving about it. I guess Elbert did a whole lot more than just gently pave the way for my call. Bless him! In his own, aloof, way I'm sure he loves me and has felt the pain of every blow my Father has ever laid on me."

"So, have your feelings about returning home changed in any ways?"

"Another one of your wonderful questions, Doc. I am so going to miss them."

"I'll tell you a secret."

"What?"

Jazz sat up to take notice.

"Begin asking them of yourself."

Silence. He returned to snuggling.

"I see what you're saying. I'll just think, 'Now what would Doc have asked me at a moment like this.'"

It wasn't exactly what the old man had in mind but it was close enough. He'd make no further suggestion about it.

"About the returning home question," Jaz said. "Oddly I'm rather eager about it. To get started changing things."

"That's wonderful. I am so happy for you."

Jaz nodded.

"How would you define success, Doc? I mean just the guts of the concept."

"I can only offer a definition that fits my philosophy."

"That's exactly what I'm asking for."

"I know I have lived a successful day when at night I can review that day and believe that I have lived up to my positive philosophy."

"I do understand that. A little more, though."

"My positive philosophy tells me what I need to be doing every day to improve the lot of mankind. When, as I review each day, I am able to say that I came pretty darn close to living that philosophy, then I feel very successful and I am filled with the greatest kind of joy."

"I assume that as a professor you made a good salary – well above the average for a family in this city. Did that fact make you feel successful?"

"I did and it most certainly didn't."

Jaz smiled to himself. It sounded so Doc-like. He tried again.

"What about all the successes you must have had helping kids. Did that make you feel successful?"

"Most certainly. And why would that have been?"

Again, Jaz smiled. It was like a classic Doc marathon.

"Because helping young people – people of all ages – is in accordance with your positive philosophy."

Doc nodded his patented single, emphatic, nod.

"I love you, Doc."

"Thank you. And I love you."

That raises a question, you know," Jaz said.

"Which question?"

"About love. It has been an elusive concept for me all my life."

"I can imagine."

"It seems to me that . . . how can I put it? It takes two people agreeing to be friends or there can't really be friendship. But, it only really takes one for love to happen."

"You are the most insightful fifteen-year-old I've ever happened upon, Jaz. Please tell me more."

"Well, you'd never say, 'I'm his friend but he isn't mine. Friendship is a back and forth thing, like it is at least tacitly pre-agreed to between the two folks. I can say, 'I love that person,' however, without that person ever agreeing to love me in return. Love is a one-way thing. Something I give – give freely with no expectations from the other person. When, like between us, it becomes a mutual thing, it is magnificent but love doesn't require that mutual arrangement."

"Sometimes I think you dropped onto his earth from the Planet of the Wise, young man."

"Being born smart has to help."

"Being born smart without the drive to question and search for answers and new configurations will never allow one to become wise. Searching for the truth requires bravery beyond belief because the searcher knows that at any second he may come upon some revelation that will turn his belief system inside out and upside down. You are brave. Such searchers as you and I give up most certainties. Our only basic certainty is that what we believe is true and sensible today, will almost inevitably change before all is said and done."

"It sounds scary."

"I assume you have risked the most dangerous of the theme park rides."

"Oh, yes!"

"Scary?"

"God, yes! I once actually wet myself."

"Was the fear worth it in the end?"

"Oh, yes. Oh, my. And just like that he makes it all fall into place. You make it seem so easy."

"You make it seem so rewarding."

He pulled the boy even closer and planted a gentle kiss to his young friend's temple.

"That's number six."

"Number six?"

"The sixth kiss I remember ever receiving from an adult and they've all been from you."

Doc was at a loss for words. His eyes moistened. Jaz took his old friend's silence for what it was. He continued.

"I figure a kiss like that one demonstrates love. And, since love is a one way path, I can't expect to have received kisses surrounded by people who truly don't seem to know anything about love. That included me, of course. No more, though. When I feel like giving somebody a kiss, I'm going to. Love. One way. Sincere. My signature from here on out.

"I still have some sorting out to do about kisses. When I kiss a girl it really has very little – probably nothing – to do with love. I mean I may love her as a fellow human being, but that's not what it's about. It's about revving up my hormones and taking pleasure in that side of my being. I'll never tell a girl I love her in words unless I am really sure that I do. Does that seem the way to go to you? I'm looking for an honest opinion, here."

"It most definitely seems like the way to go. You have had discussions about many of these topics with someone before, right?"

"Dr. Derwood. I always advocated and supported the sordid and corrupt sides of the topics. I didn't want him to think well of me. I suppose in being able to do that it means I had to know the opposite – the positive sides of the issues. Fascinating. I had to know what was right in order to intentionally argue for the wrong. Is that not a hoot or what?"

"I'd say as hoots go, that has to rank right up there with the hootiest I've ever heard hooted."

Jaz sat up, not really responding to Doc's attempt at humor.

"That poor man has been incredibly patient with me. On more than one occasion he pointed out that I was behaving like an asshole. I pointed out that kind of personification would get us nowhere and then encouraged him to keep it up – since nowhere was exactly where I wanted us to go. Can you believe all the crap I've put him through? I suppose at three hundred dollars an hour he was not in a position to complain, really."

“You characterize him as a money-only bottom line type of person.”

“You make a good point. I assume he does what he does for more altruistic reasons as well.”

“Three hundred dollars an hour? Really?”

“Yeah. Just think how rich you’d be if my Father had been paying you by the hour this week.”

“But it has not been your Father who has been paying me, Jaz. It has been you.”

“I suppose I understand, at least a little. There are things about our relationship, which for some reason, are important to you. I suppose that phrasing suggests I’m still in the dark about a lot of this stuff.”

“The time will come when it will all become clear.”

“You sound like the Kung Fu Master talking to Grasshopper on that ancient TV series. That reminds me you don’t have a TV.”

“You’re just now noticing that?”

“I have to admit I noticed it right off but haven’t really thought about it since then. It’s part of the magic of this place. I haven’t needed it. I haven’t wanted it. Clearly, I haven’t considered it.”

“Was there a question in there somewhere?”

“I suppose but only a faint one.”

“Explain.”

“It’s obvious that you are not one who enjoys being entertained. You prefer to be active not passive. When you read I’m sure it is filled with thoughts and ideas and questions not available on the pages. There would be nothing passive about your reading style.”

“I hear an answer but still no question.”

“I asked the question of myself. I answered the question by myself. A first step toward becoming Doc-like. How reassuring.”

“Yes, how reassuring.”

“You are suggesting there are two perspectives going here. I’m reassuring myself because I really do want to become like you. You’re feeling reassured because you see an important step taking place in my development.”

“Bravo. I wish that seventy years from now it would be possible for you and me to sit like this and talk about the life you will have lived by then.”

“You expect great things from me?”

“Great or small. Those will be your choices. I meant a discussion about the paths you have followed, the surprises you have encountered, the dreams that have become your passions, and the philosophic insights you have borrowed and created to guide your life.”

Jaz turned and looked Doc in the face, his eyes suddenly moist. He reached out and took the old man’s hand in both of his own.

“I wish we could have that talk, too. In fact, I promise to have that talk – at least my side of it. Who knows, some part of you just may be close enough by to hear me.”

“Who knows, indeed?”

Jaz moved to the floor by the fire. He poked a while as people are drawn to do. No special reason other than fires are for poking.

“Do you want to know where I’m from?”

“I know everything I want to know about you because I know all the things you have wished to share with me.”

“Maybe that’s how I want to leave it for now. How would this be? I’ll leave my phone number inside an envelope so if you ever need me, you will be able to contact me. Since you didn’t look inside my wallet I assume you won’t look into the envelop either.”

“I am fine with your plan. I just want to make sure you understand the whys and wherefores of your decision.”

Jaz tried to explain.

“It seems like if you know where I’ll be some of the magic of this place – our place this week – would be stolen from me. I want you to remember me here and not think about me someplace else. Is that being too selfish?”

“That’s a question you will have to answer for yourself, of course, but from my perspective it seems all quite fitting. It makes this time we’ve had extra special – like a moment in time that we’ve set aside just for the two of us.”

“This may seem callous, but how am I going to know when you die?”

“It is my hope that for you, I never die. If you want I can add the envelope, which you spoke of leaving here, to the folder containing my will – with a note to inform you.”

The boy sat in silence for a long time.

“I think I like it your way – never dying. Lay the envelope aside. That’s really how it will be anyway. I hope you know that.”

“So be it!” Doc said with an emphatic nod.

“This has been the greatest Christmas Eve of my life,” Doc. “I always used to waste it wondering about what presents I was going to get and how I could let my parents know I hated every one of them. I’d sneak looks after my parents were in bed so there were seldom any surprises on Christmas morning. I’ve spent my life trying to make sure there would be no surprises. Now, I am really looking forward to them – a lifetime of them.”

Doc repositioned himself.

“What time does our watch say it is?”

“Ten forty-two. Past your bed time I guess. I liked that – how you referred to our watch. I guess ‘our’ really includes your father and your grandfather, as well as you and me, doesn’t it. I suddenly feel a part of eternity – connected, do you understand.”

“I understand and I am so pleased that you do. Suddenly, I’m no longer tired. In fact, for some reason I seem energized. You said you were going to make some things to take to your parents. Perhaps you want to get started on that. I think I will get a jump on Christmas Day and begin going through my mail.”

“Sounds good. I’ll go get the mail for you.”

“Thank you, Son, but that’s part of my ritual. I’ll go.”

“Sure. That’s cool. I didn’t . . .”

“And I know you didn’t. I’ll be right back.”

Doc bundled up. With a brown grocery bag in hand he left. Jaz watched out the window from behind the drapes not wanting him to think he was spying. He merely wanted to make sure he made the trip safely. He did.

“It is chilly out there,” he said hanging up his wraps. “Were you warm enough on the couch last night? I have more covers upstairs.”

“I was fine. I put a log on about two. I love just laying there watching the flames. I think I’m going to have a fireplace installed in my bedroom.”

Doc shook his head in wonder. Jaz had second thoughts.

“I should probably spend that money on truly worthy causes. It was selfish of me to have that thought.”

“Being a good person does not involve taking a vow of poverty, Jaz. Look around. I have lots of things here I don’t really need. A man has to have a good place to hatch his great thoughts. You

and I both think best looking into a fire. I'd go for it if I were you."

"I'll give it careful consideration." He smiled. "I'm going to carve a couple of small things for them. I've had my eye on that log right there. It will involve some sawing. Can you do your thing with such a din in the background?"

"Oh, yes. That will be nice in fact – being reminded you are here."

Doc sat down and slipped out of his shoes. He positioned the sack and letter opener beside him and donned his glasses. Jaz helped tuck the red comforter across his lap and around his legs. For a moment, with his long white hair and beard he could have easily been mistaken for Santa, himself.

One card at a time he carefully moved through his annual ritual of remembrance. Some of the notes brought chuckles. Others brought tears. Most produced nods as he was moved to silently recall things long past. By one a.m. he had completed his examination of one hundred and eleven cards and many more times that in wonder-filed, joyful, memories.

He stood. Jaz looked up from where he was working on the floor by the hearth.

"That was a wonderful time. The cards are there. You're free to look through them if you want. I'm going to hit the hay. It's late. I'll likely sleep in a while in the morning. Rattle the pans if I'm not up by nine."

"Sleep well. I'm just carving now. I'll be quiet. I'm tired, too, so I'll soon be in bed as well."

Doc held out his arms and Jaz got to his feet.

"I feel the need for one of the kisses you say you're about to begin spreading about, Jaz."

"I've wanted to before, you know. I didn't know how to go about it."

Doc pointed to his cheek.

"Right here is how you go about it, Son."

Doc reciprocated and they held a long embrace each looking into the flames, pondering his own part of their exceptional relationship. Doc climbed the stairs. For some reason, Jaz sat and sobbed.

///
///
///

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jaz had not slept well and at six thirty he gave up trying. It was well beyond the usual time for arising at the cabin. He built up the fire. Doc was still upstairs so Jaz decided to put off his shower until later. He was hungry and fixed a bowl of cereal, which he took with him to the couch.

Three things had caught his attention. A cover had been pulled up around him, unlike when he went to sleep in the heat of a way too blazing fire. The nitro vial was missing from the kitchen shelf as was the carving of the hands from the mantel. Doc had clearly come down stairs during the night.

He rinsed out his bowl and readied a pot of coffee stopping just short of lighting the burner. He got dressed and returned to the hearth to continue working on his parent's gifts. It was to be a carved paper weight – a cabin in the woods – for his Father and a set of flowery coasters for his mother. It would be a set of four to eight depending on how much time there would be.

Nine o'clock came and went. Nine thirty came and went. Ten o'clock arrived. Jaz went upstairs to awaken Doc according to his request the night before – albeit a bit late.

He smiled seeing Doc there on his back, head propped up against several pillows, his hands resting on the carving as it lay there across his stomach.

"Time for all eighty-four-year-old youngsters to rise and shine," he called, as he pulled open the drapes.

Doc didn't move. Jaz tried a second time then went to Doc's side. He gently shook the old man's shoulder. There was no response. He felt his cheek – it was cold. He felt for a pulse – it was not to be found. His dear old friend was gone.

Jaz slumped to his knees and began sobbing. Ten minutes

passed before he stood and again looked into the face of his precious friend. His first inclination was to pull the sheet up over his head as he had seen done in movies. But he stopped short, thinking that act was to symbolize death. For him, Doc would never be dead. It had been Doc's request with his accord.

He knew he needed to call someone. Maude came to mind first but she had too many others to care for. Doc's address book lay beside his bedroom phone. Jaz began running down the list of names.

"Jake. He's the one for me to call," he said out loud.

The call was made. Jake was soon there and went to a shelf in the bedroom and removed a book titled, Reality as a function of Reality. It was one of Doc's early books. The odd title brought a short, quick, smile to the boy's face.

"Years ago, he told me his will and final wishes would be found in here," Jake said by way of explaining.

They were – on a single sheet, front and back, hand written. He had prearranged and pre-paid everything, outlining things exactly as they needed to proceed. It was essentially as he had described his wishes to Jaz. Immediate cremation with his ashes to be distributed among his trees at the old folk's home.

He specifically requested that there be no memorial service. Jaz figured a short celebration of his life would be permissible. He discussed it with Jake as they waited for the hearse.

Seeing his dear old friend being gently gurnied out of the cabin for the final time caused the tears to begin again. Jaz stopped them at the door. He tucked the old man's red scarf around his neck and slipped the matching stocking cap onto his head. Finally, he fit his hand into Doc's, just the way they had been preserved in the carving. After a moment, he was ready to let him go.

Since that carving only held meaning for the two of them Jaz decided he would take it with him. He felt certain that would have been Doc's wish.

"You better come home with me, Son," Jake said at last ready to leave.

"I'll be fine here. I'll need to get my things together. After the service, I'll be heading home."

"If you need anything you have my number. We will need to talk about the service – where and when and who should come."

"I have a plan I can run by you now."

"Sure," Jake said. "Doc left the final arrangements in my hands. I'm happy to receive your input."

Jaz outlined a brief service, which would take place in the 'woods' out front at the nursing home. It was agreed.

"The sooner the better, I'd say," Jaz suggested. "Doc's spirit is just too restless to be cooped up in an urn for long."

"Tomorrow morning, then," Jake said. "I'll make the necessary calls. Is there anything else I can do for you, now?"

"I'll be fine. I just need a while to reset my head about it all. Thank you for everything."

He saw Jake to the door then returned upstairs. He changed the bed leaving it the way he had first seen it covered in a blue quilt with two matching pillows set against the headboard.

He gathered the books Doc had left for him on the desk and added the Reality/Reality title to the stack. The rest were to go to the University Library. Jake would see to that.

Back down stairs he took out the trash and brought in more firewood. He straightened the kitchen.

Eventually he returned to his work at the hearth. Tears flowed from time to time but then so did chuckles and full out laughter as he looked back over the past week.

Although he wasn't into doubting his old friend's word, he wondered just what he had really 'taught' Doc. He could never know for sure. Perhaps someday, as an octogenarian, he would be able to understand. He hoped the old man had understood the magnitude of his love and how serious he was about carrying on in his footsteps – in his ripples. That brought a smile. He hoped he understood just what a pervasive positive influence he had been on his young life.

He looked at the cards there on the sofa and contemplated taking a peek. He decided against that. Just as his time with Doc had been so preciously private, so should that of the others. Later he would do something appropriate with them.

He wanted to think it all through one more time there in the place where his life had been changed forever. He remembered as he continued carving and sanding.

The basic, legitimate, social, purpose of life is to preserve and protect mankind, and enhance the human condition. Anything less is contrary to the laws of nature – destructive to the most precious being in the entire, known, universe and to its life-sustaining planet.

Success equals happiness, which equals establishing a fully positive philosophy that tells you what to do, and then living up to it every day of your life. Every person is worthy of happiness and of being treated with respect. In general, we are all doing the best we can at the moment, all forces being considered. People have the propensities for both good and evil. Unlike other beings, man can choose to be good – helpful, compassionate, love-filled. He can plan for the positive, safe, future of generations to come. He can live with pleasure but move far beyond that to deep down forever happiness by embracing a positive way of life.

He pictured himself at Christmas time fifteen years from then. There would be the fireplace and his young children, wide eyed with expectation yet already understanding the fundamental meaning behind the gifts – the luvyith. He saw lap sitting and hugging and hand holding and kisses – lots and lots of kisses. He saw his precious wife, ever smiling, ever supportive, ever positive. He kissed his wife and the children came running to get in on the good stuff. Life would be good. For the first time in his young life he truly believed that.

He remembered about Doc. Tough minded yet the gentlest human being he had ever met. He knew his own mind, yet was willing to shuck it all if some sudden new realization should happen into his life. He loved himself. He loved others. He had endless patience and delighted in seeing young people make their important discoveries about life. When he could gently lead them toward those, his delight was doubled.

He was an inquirer – never a preacher. He was a listener – never one to ignore. He found the best in others and was never led to put down or say 'I told you so'. With a carefully chosen word or question he could turn a life around. Jaz had felt it happen.

He came to realize there were undoubtedly thousands of Doc's in the world, waiting, ready and willing to offer their wisdom and counsel and it was the boy's plan to eventually become one of them. Still, for Jaz, there would only be one Doc, his Doc, his wise Doc, the corned beef hash Doc, the holding close Doc, the appreciator of small gifts Doc, the grocery collage in the moon lit snow Doc, the horn playing, smiling, laughing, trusting, punning, life enjoying, Doc.

In the end, both the cards and the tree ornaments were set free in the flames of the fireplace. Perhaps, in that way, they would reunite with the essence of Doc. Perhaps.

* * *

It was a small gathering there beside the new tree hole on the pure white, snow covered, front lawn of Harington Hills. Maude from the shelter. Jane and the Colonel from the home and Mrs. P. of course, objecting to how everything was being done. Jaz figured Doc would have enjoyed that. There were Jake and his wife; Sara and her Grandfather.

Three of Jake's men slid the tree into place and pulled down the burlap from around the ball of soil.

Jaz removed the urn from the brown paper grocery bag in which he had been carrying it – again, a touch he figured would have evoked a chuckle from Doc. Slowly, carefully, respectfully, he spread the ashes around the base of the roots. ‘The cycle of life,’ he thought.

He then handed the empty urn to Jane, assuming it could certainly be recycled there at the home. As the men filled the hole Jaz assembled his clarinet and played. The first was Doc's favorite – Rhapsody in Blue. The second was unfamiliar to those gathered but was every bit as beautiful.

When the instrument had been put away and the others had left, Maude approached Jaz and asked:

"That second song, Jaz. It was simply beautiful but I didn't recognize it – so light and upbeat, powerful in its simplicity.

"It's a piece I wrote recently. I call it, Ripples."

* * *

Although it was his parents' preference that he take a plane, Jaz opted to return the way he had come. He needed time to deal with the transition.

As the big, gray, bus rumbled up the ramp onto I-39 heading south, Jaz opened his notebook. He made that ultimate, 'first word' commitment – as Doc's wife had termed it – and began writing what would one day become his personal favorite of the over one hundred novels that were to flow from his pen. . .

Most who didn't know him called the old man crazy. Some, misguided. A few, eccentric. Although he was not given to be offended by anyone for any reason, if pressed, he would have preferred eccentric over the others. To him it suggested that he followed his own path on his way to living according to his own thoughtful convictions. He had come to treasure that precious potential of the

human species. Long ago he had learned . . .

Hardly the end