

## Table of Contents

<b>Story</b>	<b>Pages</b>
My Coronation – A Memoir	1-2
Of Two Minds	3-5
Pacemaker	6-9
The Note	10-11
River Otters	12-13
William	14-15
The Girl Wore Barrettes	16-17
An Impractical Romance	18-19
Where Do Bad People Go When They Die	20-21
Happy Birthday, Dylan	22-28
Ben	29-37
Max	38-43
Jacob’s Disorder	44-57
A Knock at the Door	58-59
Jamal Returns	60-61
The Cur and Its Master	62-63
Reflections	64
Top Hat	65
Top Hat – Extended Version	66
Preferred Endings	67-69
Trapped	70-72
Abby Learns to Play the Tuba	73-76
Unmatched	77-83
Donnie and Hank	84-87
Jolly Rollie	88-94
Jackie’s Domain	95-96

## My Coronation – A Memoir

The olive-skinned kindergartener looked up at me with her shimmering green eyes and smiled before answering her teacher's question, "Who can tell me who this nice man is?"

It was the first day of school for Mrs. Wilson's young students. For over thirty years, her first-day routines included teaching classroom procedures and taking her students on a school tour.

They were on their tour when they approached me in the hallway. As principal of Valley Elementary School, I looked forward to meeting all of our new students, especially the enthusiastic kindergartners wearing their new shoes and clothes. For many, the only new shoes and clothes they might have for the entire year. The school was located in what was identified by the city as a "child poverty zone." Hand-me-downs and clothes carefully sewn by mothers and grandmothers were the norm for most of the children in our school's neighborhood.

I stood before Mrs. Wilson's class; students lined up in pairs holding their buddy's hands, as instructed to do whenever they were outside the classroom. At almost six foot three inches, wearing a dark, pinstriped suit, I knew that I could be an imposing figure for most of our students, and especially the youngest. I waited for the answer to Mrs. Wilson's question.

"He's the school princess!" said the little girl with proud and unbounded excitement.

All I could do was smile. I really had no response. I stood quietly knowing that sometimes a child's innocent misuse of language has unintended impact. Mrs. Wilson looked at me with a veteran's twinkle and closed-lipped smile before saying, "Yes, he is."

After school was dismissed, Mrs. Wilson came to my office to tell me how well her day had gone. "I have a great class this year. And best yet, I get to work with a real princess of a principal!"

I broke down laughing and replied, "It's my honor and privilege to assume such an exalted position. I can't wait to tell my wife when I get home tonight."

My wife thought my coronation was a very sweet story. It was just another one of those unique school stories that educators enjoy telling one another. We would file it under the topic

of “Kids Say the Darndest Things” as in one of Art Linkletter’s old television shows. Little did I know that the story might have a broader impact. “It’s an amusing story that has some deeper meaning,” remarked my wife who also happened to be a licensed therapist.

Valley Elementary School was about thirty miles from my home. At one time I used to be a principal in the same neighborhood where I lived. As a result, I was fairly well-known in my local community. I also frequented a local bakery where I would purchase a coffee and pastry on my way to work. One morning, a few weeks after my coronation, I stopped at the bakery, and, while ordering a latte and a bear claw, a former parent from my old school approached and asked, “How’s the school princess doing?”

I responded, “How did you know?”

“Oh, word gets around!”

My wife had related my story to one neighbor and the gossip mill was engaged. It would have been easy to brush off a second reminder of the story as sweet and inconsequential. However, I felt an elevated pride and importance in my job. Sometimes young children say the “wrong” things without knowing how “right” they may be. My mislabeling was momentarily humorous but had gained a life of its own through its retelling. It acted as a trigger that caused me to think, again, about the importance of an educator’s work. After all, royalty carries significant importance. It was something that the little kindergartner in a homemade red dress had caused me to think about over and over. Yes, it was a slip of her vocabulary, but it was a slip that caused me to think more about my moral responsibility as a school leader.

At an upcoming faculty meeting, I told my coronation story to the school’s staff. I then used my regal powers to anoint each of them as princes and princesses and reminded them to use their royal authority with care and discretion. I don’t think the metaphor was lost on them and do believe the story helped bind us together as a school community. I’ll forever be thankful for that cute kindergartner’s unintentional reminder. Sometimes cute is more than cute.

## Of Two Minds

Freddie was born with two brains. Well, not actually two separate brains, but a brain with two hemispheres that were each divided into two hemispheres. There was no scientific term for his condition, so a new one was coined: “quadraspherical brain.”

Attending physicians first noticed the infant’s peculiar behavior when he would simultaneously gurgle and coo in what seemed to be different baby languages. Additional medical tests revealed his quadraspherical brain. As he grew older, he continued to demonstrate the ability to easily do multiple physical and cognitive tasks. For instance, he could draw two different pictures at the same time using both hands...without going back and forth between them...two entirely, unrelated pictures with different sets of pencils and crayons. In middle school, he was able to complete complex math problems while studying his chosen foreign language, Chinese. And write Chinese pictographs perfectly as he completed algebraic equations.

Every year, on his birthday, an extensive medical examination was completed, which included brain scans and further cognitive testing. It was difficult to measure his I.Q. because there was no consensus on how to measure two brains inside one head. Therefore, psychiatrists and psychologists simply agreed that Freddie was “beyond traditional measures of intellectual functioning.”

In spite of his uniqueness, Freddie seemed to have normal social skills. At his parent’s insistence and with his full cooperation, he graduated high school and college with his own age group while developing lots of positive acquaintances, as well as several close friendships. With a degree in business with minors in multiple languages, he secured a high-paying job with an international bank. He was in high demand because of his fluency in Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, French, Spanish, and Russian. He lived a productive and balanced life, owning an ultra-modern loft in the city center, driving a practical sports car, dating frequently, keeping in frequent touch with family and close friends, and trying to live with one emerging and troubling outgrowth of his two brains.

Freddie felt he was losing free will. It began with a feeling that one of his brains was holding the other “hostage.” Freddy tried explaining to his closest friends that his two brains seemed to be in competition with one another. His friends didn’t know how to respond and thought it was just part of his character. Freddie couldn’t understand why he becoming less and less able to hold onto longer thoughts? When trying take time to ponder complex issues, his thoughts only came out as slogans. He was losing his ability to engage in more sophisticated dialog. He was becoming something he detested: that person who posts motivational or “profound” posters on workplace walls in an attempt to increase productivity and commitment. And worse yet, he feared becoming one those who share short, snappy messages on social media like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as self-proclaimed intellectual prowess.

One time he found himself in a charged political conversation with friends. When asked for his opinion, after he had sat quietly for the entire argument, he replied, “Life is an ambiguity, so embrace difference.”

At work, during a team meeting when they were trying to develop a new strategy for Asian markets, his contribution was, “There are no straight lines to success, only nuance and subtlety.”

His friends and co-workers accepted his contributions as his special profundity. However, Freddie continued to wonder if he was falling victim to banality and triteness? Were his brains, with all their intellectual firepower, in an internal duel leading to simple thinking? Was immeasurable intellect a curse? He even thought about asking his doctors if there might be some way to disconnect one of his brains. He wanted to be normal, whatever normal meant.

One quiet Wednesday evening, Freddie was watching a popular talk show featuring a guest espousing mindfulness meditation. She was celebrating the benefits of quieting one’s mind and focusing on the here and now without being caught up in the complexities of modern life. This all made sense to Freddie. He purchased several books on the topic. Watched dozens of YouTube video clips giving instruction on how to practice mindfulness. He began spending time each morning when waking and each evening before going to bed practicing mindfulness meditation.

With all of his brain quieting exercises, his capacity for broader and higher-level thinking did not seem to be increasing; rather, he was become even quicker at synthesizing elaborate arguments and ideas into concise statements. And they were sounding even more and more like inane greeting card platitudes with one major difference: they were all novel and even a bit refreshing to those who heard them. One of his friends told him, “You’re becoming an adage factory. You should think about a career change.”

And then Freddie met Emma at a friend’s birthday party. They fell into easy conversation and began seriously dating. Emma was an elementary school teacher and had her own gift of empathy and insight. Freddie felt safe with Emma and shared his fear about being trivial and insincere. Emma shook her head and said, “Freddie, you have a gift for listening and coming up with nuggets that make a difference. Your genius is absorbing complexity and expressing it in ways that others understand and gain new insights. You are a simplicity machine on cruise control.”

“But I was born with two brains. Shouldn’t my life have more meaning than just making simple statements?”

Emma looked into Freddie’s hazel eyes and saw his question. “I think meaning is whatever we give to others. What you are able to give is no less important than anyone else’s. Your two brains are no more important than all the single brains in the world.”

“Meaning and purpose comes from what is freely given?” asked Freddie.

Emma embraced Freddie and softly replied, “Yes.”

## Pacemaker

“I’d like to purchase a replacement battery for my pacemaker,” said the short, white-haired, slightly bent over woman with inquisitive green eyes. She stood at Saul Gold’s battery kiosk in the St. James Square Mall with a closed-lipped smile waiting for service. No other customers were around, and Saul wasn’t exactly sure how to respond.

Gold’s Battery, with its slogan “You’ll get a charge from us!” prominently displayed over each of its six sides, was situated in the mall’s busiest section. Saul’s father Abe, who began the business almost fifty years before retiring and turning over all operations to his son, paid a premium for each of his thirty-seven kiosks in the best mall locations. The St. James location was the first and the one that Saul personally ran several times a month when he wasn’t overseeing the family-owned business from corporate headquarters.

“We carry almost every imaginable battery for small items such as watches, cell phones and smoke alarms, but I don’t believe you can purchase a pacemaker battery separate from the pacemaker. It’s the first time I’ve heard of such a thing.”

“You’re Abe Gold’s son, aren’t you?” asked the elderly woman. “Are you Saul? You look just like your father. He always took such good care of me.”

Saul was intrigued. Who was this kind-looking, trim lady wearing a light blue knit dress, pearls, matching pearl earrings, and an alabaster flower broach on her left shoulder? From behind the counter, Saul towered over her with his disheveled hair, three-day beard, and wrinkled, white linen shirt with sleeves rolled up unevenly. Here was a mismatched pair with someone in common, and Saul wondered what the backstory might be.

Saul asked, “You knew my father?”

“Oh, yes, we were friends for many, many years. In fact, we both graduated from Washington High School in 1955. And here I am almost 65 years later pretending to need a battery for my pacemaker. Your father always took good care of me. By the way, your father was an impeccable dresser. He always wore a coat and tie.”

“Yes, my father was a formal person. He was definitely old-school when it came to business. Did he really sell you a pacemaker battery?” asked Saul.

“Not really, but he took care of me in other ways. I was just trying to get your attention. I don’t even have a pacemaker, but, who knows, it could happen.”

Now Saul was even more curious. Saul knew his father to be a hardworking realist always trying to make a good living, but not much of a family man. Saul’s mother died from a brain embolism when Saul was five. He was an only child and was raised by various relatives, much of the time by Aunt Rose, until he was ten. That’s when he began accompanying his father to work every day, both after school and on those many weekends when Abe worked. “Field trips,” as his father referred to outings with aunts, uncles, and cousins who took him to museums, fairs, picnics, movies, and a variety theatrical performances. His father rarely went with them. Abe always begged off saying he had work to do.

The young man who regularly worked the kiosk approached. Saul welcomed the opportunity to leave the business in his hands, and turning to the woman he asked, “Can I buy you a cup of coffee or tea so that we can continue this conversation?”

“That would be lovely. By the way, my name is Evelyn.”

They walked over to a nearby Festival of Bagels and Saul purchased a black coffee for himself and a pot of mint tea for Evelyn. “Mint tea in the afternoon is a real pepper-upper,” said Evelyn. “I have some almost every day around 3:00, and often with some sort of nosh.”

Saul asked, “Would you like a bagel or a cookie? They also have some very good apricot rugalach here.”

“No, thank you, I’m fine with the tea.”

They sat quietly for a moment tending to their beverages, when Saul broke the silence. “So, you really didn’t want a pacemaker battery; you wanted to talk about my father.”

Evelyn replied, “I don’t know why I asked for a battery. It just popped into my head. Sometimes I use a little white lie to begin a conversation. Some of my friends say it’s an endearing quality. I’m not so sure, but it’s been habit I’ve been unable to break.” Evelyn sipped at her tea. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you for a while. I know that Abe recently passed away and I wanted to pay my respects and tell you something that your father made me promise not to reveal until after he was gone. It’s about your Aunt Rose.”

Saul asked, “Is that a fib to get my attention?”

Saul and his father did not have a close relationship, but he didn't think that his father kept secrets. His memories of his mother and father together were vague. His father worked long hours and his mother took care of the home. He remembered a few weekends when his mother and father purchased thick deli sandwiches from the corner market by their small apartment and they went to a park and picnicked. There were no events that stuck out as special except for small birthday celebrations or Seders at Aunt Rose's. Aunt Rose was his mother's sister, and she passed away a few years after his mother. It was whispered that she died of heartbreak over his mother's death. Aunt Rose died, according to other relatives, a lonely woman who had never married and lived an unfulfilled life. Saul never knew what was meant by "unfulfilled." He sat looking at Evelyn, who sipped at her mint tea.

"No, not another fib. The truth is that your father wanted me to contact you after he passed because there is a secret he could not reveal. He feared harming you."

Saul couldn't imagine what secret might harm him, and immediately wondered if his father might have been in some sort of relationship with Evelyn. He simply asked, "Were you and my father close in ways he didn't want me to know?"

Evelyn smiled, "Oh, no. Your father loved your mother, and, when she passed, I don't think he was ever with another woman. No, it's not about your father and me. It's about your Aunt Rose and me. We are the ones who were close."

"But I never saw you at my Aunt Rose's house." How could this have been kept a secret? And why did his father keep this from him?

"It was a different time back then. I stayed away when you were at your Aunt's. To others we were simply old maid roommates. But your father knew, and he helped support us emotionally and financially." Evelyn paused. It appeared she had more to say, but she waited for the news to sink in with Saul. "Abe was very special to us. And he was very protective of you. It was a time when he thought secrets and protection were important."

Saul was taken aback. These were more progressive times. His father could have given him this news before he passed. His father knew that he was a liberal thinker. "I'm certainly not 'harmed' at all. In fact, the only 'harm' I'm feeling is that my father couldn't bring himself to tell me."

“In spite of Abe’s support, he was still very old-fashioned. Talking about two women in love made him uncomfortable.”

“Is that all he wanted you to tell me?” asked Saul.

Evelyn’s smile broadened, “No, there’s something else that Abe didn’t even know. When Rose and I first got together in the 70’s, we had no permanent jobs and needed a car to secure better ones. Your father bought us a car.”

“My father was a generous man. I’m not surprised.”

“He was. And his generosity overwhelmed Rose and me. That’s where my first fib about needing a pacemaker may have come from. He bought us a brand-new AMC Pacer.”

Saul chuckled and scratched at his beard. “He did? That was one very ugly car!”

“Ugly, yes. But brand new. I still have it. It has less than 5,000 miles on it. We used it until we could purchase our own, a nice red Ford Pinto. We tried to give it back to your father, but he wouldn’t have it. He told us to do whatever we wanted with it. So, your Aunt and I decided to keep it in storage until Abe passed and then give it to you. I think it’s actually become so sort of collector’s item.”

“Evelyn, I’m absolutely floored by all of this. We need to spend more time chatting. How about if you come to dinner tomorrow night? My wife and I would love to have you.”

“That would be lovely,” Evelyn replied with her kind smile and twinkling eyes.

“May I introduce you as my Aunt Evelyn?”

“That, too, would be lovely.”

**Published in “The Literary Yard”, September 7, 2019**

## The Note

It wasn't much of a note. In fact, it really wasn't a note at all. Rather, it was a single word written with a blue ink fountain pen on a fine, linen notecard and addressed to me. "Ciao." I had said ciao when first introduced to Amy at a friend's birthday party. We were the only two singles there, and sure that we had been set up. At the time, I believed ciao invoked a certain kind of savior faire without being overly pretentious. I like two-way words for hello and goodbye, like shalom or aloha.

My Italian hello worked. After her initial eyebrow raising and somewhat questioning smile, we talked for most of the evening about ourselves and our families. As it turns out, we had both graduated from the same university, where she majored in history and I in mathematics. In spite of our college degrees, she became a computer programmer, having taught herself programming out of her own curiosity. I trudged through several low-paying jobs in retail before ending up as a small-town police officer where walking the beat and knowing residents by their first name was expected.

When we moved past ciao and her initial who-are-you reaction, we found that we had lots in common. We both enjoyed scary movies, films with spectacular car chases, modern art museums, quirky architecture, caramel topping on ice cream sundaes, escapist beach novels, and kimchi. It was a good start to our relationship.

We dated for about six months before deciding to move in together. Neither of us had apartments suitable to both of us, and our first conflict was over style. Amy's preference was traditional and mine quirky ultramodern. Apparently, she liked quirky, but not to live in. After we finally found a two-bedroom, eclectic mix of mid-century with a touch of traditional features, we began an emotional journey of deciding what furniture and other belongings would be kept and which would be discarded or put into storage. The smaller of the two bedrooms was furnished with my desk, small convertible sofa, coffee table, and lamps. The remainder of the apartment was furnished with her furniture, accessories, and what seemed like hundreds of knick-knacks.

Then came the routines of living together: shared bathroom space, alternating dinner responsibilities...who cooks/who cleans up...division of housekeeping duties, product acquisition and storage, scheduling of date nights, and how to allocate me-time. One day, Amy said, "Are we becoming too familiar?" I asked what she meant by 'familiar.' She answered, "Are we losing ourselves to predictability? Have we moved beyond wonder and surprise?" I suggested that we were probably becoming typical and that it wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

"I think we are maturing as a couple," I said. As soon as I said it, I knew it was wrong. Amy looked bored and distant. That's the moment I thought ciao had moved from hello to goodbye. I had a choice: save our relationship or say goodbye. I did nothing.

Several months passed, routines remained, familiarity and predictability grew deeper. Our conversations were pleasant, there were no conflicts, and we both seemed to be happy with being together. One day, when simultaneously arriving home from work, a small, black and white fluff ball of a mutt came bounding over to us. We both bent over to pick up the energetic little female doggy who had no identity tags. We brought her inside, fed her some leftovers, and made signs to post around the neighborhood. We called the animal shelter to inquire if anyone reported a lost dog. Placed a found ad in the local newspaper and waited. Several weeks went by, and no one made a claim. We took her to a vet, who found her to be healthy and about a year old. We hadn't named her, and when the vet asked for a name, Amy looked at me with a smile in her eyes and immediately responded with, "Ciao."

## River Otters

Just after dawn, Noland sat on a large, mossy boulder at the edge of Bear Creek watching two river otters frolic across from him. He had been visiting this spot for weeks, and the otters seemed to have grown used to his presence. The otters slithered in and out of the cold, water. It was the day after a light spring storm, the air was fresh and smelled of cottonwoods and the earthiness of fresh mud. This particular creek location provided ample salmon fishing for the otters. Noland felt envy for the otter's carefree lives and wanted one of his own.

He decided it was time and began stripping off his clothes. Another early morning nature lover walked by just at Noland pulled off the last of his undergarments without Noland noticing. Noland felt exhilaration and began scooping up wet earth and smearing it all over his body before slipping into Bear Creek. Noland began flopping around in the icy water, doing his best to be imitative of the otters. The otters, of course, fled the scene immediately. Noland began to yelp and became the loudest noise in the park. Noland felt pure joy, pure freedom, and exquisitely carefree.

After a few minutes, park employees and a local police officer rushed to the scene of Noland's exuberance, called for him to leave the creek immediately...which Noland obeyed...wrapped him in an itchy, woolen blanket, and escorted him to a waiting police cruiser. Noland was shivering and quiet, but all smiles. The officer sat him in the back seat, handed him his clothes, asked him for his name and for any identification he might have. Noland reached into his trousers' back pocket and handed the officer his wallet. The officer said, "Noland, what were you doing back there in the creek?" Noland just smiled.

The officer explained the he would be transporting him to the local hospital and that he could put his clothes on if he so desired. Noland was taken to the hospital's psychiatric evaluation unit. A few forms were filled out by the police officer and Noland was asked if he would like a shower and some clean clothes before meeting with a doctor. While it was a bit

disconcerting to be witnessed by a hospital aide while showering, Noland appreciated feeling warm and clean and dressed in crisp hospital garb.

Noland was led to a sterile room by a pleasant-looking psychiatrist who identified himself as Dr. Abrams. Following a series of form-like questions, Dr. Abrams said, "Tell me about being in the river, Noland."

Noland replied, "Have you ever wanted to be something other than yourself?"

"You wanted to be someone else, Noland?" asked the doctor.

"Not someone else. I'm fine being myself. I just wanted to see what it might be like as a river otter. I've been watching them for weeks, and their reality looked inviting."

"Are you thinking of trying it again?"

"I don't think so. It was terribly icy and caused too much of a commotion. But it sure was fun for the few minutes I was in the water."

Noland and Dr. Abrams smiled at one another.

## William

William believed that he had no arms or legs. The irony being that he had perfectly good, well-muscled, and exceptionally functional limbs. Standing six foot six inches, he played an exquisite game of basketball for his company's industrial league team and was known by his teammates and fans as 'Mr. Smooth Move'. None of that kept William from telling family and friends that he had no arms or legs.

Acquaintances often asked, "How do you explain the fact that you can do what any other normal person does?"

And William would reply, "They're not mine. I've been endowed with the arms and legs by some magical source. I can't explain it. All I know is that I'm an extension of another being."

That pretty much put aside any other logical or illogical argument. William lived in his own universe, and those who knew him accepted his quirky, some called 'crazy but functional', way of being in in the world.

From all outward appearances, William lived a normal life. Single, twenty-nine years old, a warm and loving family, not in a significant romantic relationship, William went about his days in a predictable, reliable and responsible manner. He woke every workday, took care of his personal needs, arrived at work on time, had favorable reviews from his supervisors, was working his way up the corporate ladder, starred on the company basketball team, and relaxed with family and friends on the weekends. The only anomaly was his frequent declaration that he didn't have his own arms and legs.

The one pressing question that all of his family and friends asked was why did William suddenly declare that he was limbless on twenty-first birthday. Reaching a typically celebratory plateau with a special dinner and legal alcoholic drinks with accompanying indigestion and hangover might be considered normal in one's growing up. In lieu of a normal birthday bash, William choose to spend time with a few close friends at a fast food restaurant sans alcohol and announce that he didn't believe that he was in possession of his arms and legs. His friends, three other teammates from his current basketball team, laughed while eating burgers, fries,

and milkshakes. William was generally seen by his friends as a serious fellow, but now they thought he must be developing a wry sense of humor. Other than making his matter-of-fact announcement, nothing more was said. As William's story unfolded with other friends, family, and co-workers, nothing much was made of his self-revealing predicament. It really didn't seem to be anything worth focusing on, and it began to be a simple tale of William-now-being-a-new-William. Until Mary came into his life.

He met Mary during a basketball game shortly before his thirtieth birthday. Trying to save the ball from going out-of-bounds, he dove into the first row of seats landing squarely on Mary's lap. He stood up and apologized to Mary, asking if she was okay and if he could do anything to help her. She smiled up at him and said, "Take me to coffee after the game."

They chatted for hours at the coffee shop. They had immediate rapport. Mary was tall, dark haired, smiled easily, and had brown eyes with extraordinary depth. Coffee led to repeated dates. William never felt the need to tell Mary about his arms and legs. Mary joked that as a couple William and Mary seemed a bit odd. "Might we be mistaken for a university?" she joked. William loved her sense of humor.

On his thirtieth birthday, having reached another celebratory plateau, he asked Mary to be his wife. She enthusiastically accepted. As he hugged her, he said, "You feel so good in my arms."

Mary replied, "I have always known they were made for me."

## The Girl Wore Barrettes

Lucy was 7 and wore a head of blue barrettes. It was the end of the school day, and her first-grade teacher has sent her to my office because she was concerned about what she was saying to other classmates. On her referral slip, she wrote, “Lucy is scaring other children. She keeps insisting that her barrettes are keeping her brain from falling out of her head.”

Lucy sat quietly on a hard-plastic chair outside my office. It was early in the school year, and I had yet to meet Lucy. Her parents had used the district’s newly enacted open enrollment policy to drive her over twenty miles to and from school each day so that she “could get a better education.” Her blue barrettes were clipped to long cornrows that hung below her ears. She looked up at me when I asked her to come into my office, her eyes bright with curiosity and a smile that said “happy to meet you.”

“Hi, Lucy, how are you?”

“I’m fine, but my teacher says I’m bothering other kids.”

“Tell me about your blue barrettes.”

“Oh, they keep my brains from falling out. I have green ones that keep my imagination inside, and pink to keep my feelings inside, and red I wear just for fun.”

“It sounds like you have magical barrettes.”

Lucy’s eyes grew wide and her smile broader, and she said, “That’s what my mommy and daddy say. They say that I’m so smart that I need barrettes to keep my thoughts and feelings from falling all over the place.”

I looked at Lucy with warmth and admiration. “Your teacher says that some of the other children are afraid that your brains will fall out.”

“Oh, I can fix that,” said Lucy. “I’ll wear my green ones tomorrow.”

No doubt she would. I sat quietly for a while, maintaining eye contact and a friendly smile. I could never match hers. I thought about the youngest children who often came to school skipping off to class. And I thought about the older elementary students who no longer skipped, and many who seemed to trudge along with heavy shoulders and infrequent smiles. I wondered how we could keep the skip longer and avoid the drudgery. “I think I’ll introduce you

to my pet whale tomorrow. We can walk to class together, and you and your classmates will get to meet Whaley Whale. But instead of wearing your green ones tomorrow and keeping your imagination inside, would you please wear your red ones so that we can just have some fun. We'll talk to your class about imagination."

The next day I met Lucy and her parents at the front gate. I had spoken to her parents the night before. I took Lucy in one hand, and, holding the whale from my young son's stuffed animal collection in the other, we went off to her first-grade classroom. She skipped and I walked with a newfound lightness.

## An Impractical Romance

“It might be impractical to seek out a new romance,” were words written by my best friend, a writer whose syndicated column “Mary’s Advice for Romantics” appeared in over 100 newspapers. “She’s been a relatively good woman for you. And that’s probably the best you can expect in any relationship.” It was difficult for me to read Mary’s words while sipping my morning coffee. How could she suggest that ‘practicality’ and ‘relativity’ were the best lovers could achieve?

Mary and I had been close friends since middle school. She was like the sister I never had as an only child growing up with parents who were overly affectionate in public. I spent far too much time feeling adolescent embarrassment when out with mom and dad. My parents were hand-holders, huggers, and frequent kissers who used a wide variety of what I thought were intimate nicknames: ‘sweetie pie’, ‘honey’, ‘kissy-poo’, ‘lambchop’, ‘squeezey-wheezy’, and others I really don’t care to remember. They continue to behave that way in their approaching Golden Years. Mary would tell me it was normal, and I’d understand when I had my own girlfriend. She was right. All through high school and college, I relied on Mary’s counsel as I went through a string of romantic disasters. Now, both of us are thirty-three, single, not in any committed relationship, and I’m reading her advice that suggests settling is a good thing. I pulled out my cell phone and called her.

“Mary, I’m reading your column. How can you suggest such a mundane existence to someone seeking answers to an unfulfilling relationship?” Mary didn’t immediately respond. She never did. Unlike me, she was not an impulsive person. She was a contemplator. She was also the most beautiful woman I had ever known. I couldn’t take my eyes off her when I saw her for the first time in eighth grade English. And I still can’t.

“Henry,” she said evenly. Others called me Hank, but it was always Henry with Mary. “Have you ever considered settling? You’re a serial monogamist who doesn’t know what you really want. You can be the loneliest man while surrounded by a horde of friends. How can you expect perfection when you are so socially flawed? And despite all that, we are still the best of friends because we don’t hold back anything from each other. In our own way we are perfect

for each other. The person that wrote for advice was in a similar situation. That's why I advised that it would be impractical to seek a new romance."

"I'm stunned. And I'm missing something. You say I'm flawed, but that we are perfect for one another. What are you suggesting?" Another long pause before Mary replied.

"What do you think, honeybunch?"

I blushed.

## Where Do Bad Folks Go When They Die

“Where do bad folks go when they die?” Not having a father in my life, it was something I had asked my Uncle Hersh several times. He was my own personal philosopher, and often spoke with contempt and distrust for others while calling himself a “happy cynic.” When I would ask him about death, he would reply with one of his invented Yiddish proverbs like, “The meek shall inherit the earth, but only after they are in the ground. And then the powerful will dig them up and scatter their souls to the wind.” At least that’s the way Uncle Hersh figured the world worked. He enjoyed putting his own twist on established orthodoxy, which he believed was simply a religious ploy to goad others into how the wretched might live meaningful lives.

It was a return phone call to a message I had left over twenty years ago that caught me off-guard. I listened several times before calling Uncle Hersh and telling him I need his help. He wasted no time getting over to my apartment. Dressed in black trousers, shirt, sport coat and silver New Balance running shoes, he sat at my kitchen counter fingering his gray beard and said, “Let’s hear that message from my long, lost despicable brother again.” *This is your father getting back to you. Give me a call when you have a chance to chat. My number hasn’t changed. As our people once said, ‘Life is too short to hold a grudge.’*

“After twenty years, my brother...your schlemiel of a father...suddenly finds it convenient to return your phone call. And the putz even felt the need to confirm his parentage with *this is your father.*” I looked into Uncle Hersh’s droopy eyes, became a bit teary and asked, “Should I call back?”

My father had abandoned my mother and me just before my Bar Mitzvah. Uncle Hersh took us in until my mother was able to establish her own career. In spite of his own anti-religious views, he encouraged and helped me complete my Bar Mitzvah, standing by my side, chanting an Aliyah, and giving me five, crisp twenty-dollar bills at the Oneg Shabbat reception. Now I sat, a single, thirty-three-year-old man wondering how to respond to my father’s voice mail to the message I had left him the day after my Bar Mitzvah: *Dad, I need to talk to you. Please, call.*

“Boychik, there’s little you can do to resurrect an abandoned relationship. As a wise man once said, ‘If you are fortunate, bad folks go away until they die; however, good people don’t abandon those who abandoned them.’”

## Happy Birthday, Dylan

It's been said that with age comes wisdom and other infirmities. For Dylan Rabin, he has no noticeable physical issues and wisdom remains an open question. Born Dylanski Rabinowitz on New Year's Day 1995, he was renamed Dylan Rabin as a result of a bureaucratic error when his parents immigrated later that year to the United States escaping the rising tide of Poland's anti-Semitism. His parents didn't object to the name change error, as it played into their wish to fully assimilate themselves and their infant son into American culture as quickly as possible. His parents, Lily and David, were theoretical physicists and able to secure positions at the University of Pennsylvania with the help of cousins who had previously made their way to Philadelphia after finding jobs at other local universities.

Dylan Rabin is celebrating his twenty-fourth birthday as a "utility gofer" at Club Coffee and Beats, the only Temple University graduate with a degree in American Studies not skilled enough to work as a barista. After three futile attempts trying to work the espresso machine, the owner suggested a less specialized job. Dylan was willing to run errands, wipe down tables, and set up whatever equipment might be necessary for the musical groups who played on Friday and Saturday nights. Minimum wage, shared tips, and still living at home gave Dylan time for contemplating a different future, or, as he would often say, "a different reality." Dylan spends much of his free time planning and imagining a life beyond the unimaginable. A self-described poet with dreams of a wealthy, privileged, jet-setters life style, so far, he's developed three get-quick-rich plans with virtually no success.

Because it's his birthday on New Year's Day, he's given the day off and all the coffee and bagels he wants. He sits at a round table farthest from the coffee counter and the small stage that's still set with three stools and microphone stands from last night's performance by WuLuSu, an a cappella girl's trio who sings covers of heavy metal songs. Their New Year's Eve performance was met by scattered applause and a few jeers, especially when they covered Metallica's "Fade to Black" just before midnight. It would seem that singing about depression was not the best way to welcome in the New Year. After exiting the stage, Dylan took the girls

aside and invited them to join him for his birthday celebration, and now they sit at mid-morning with lattes and bagels with a schmear in a mostly empty coffee house.

### Haiku Rocks

Dylan is a handsome man. His olive complexion, lithe stature, longish, unkempt black hair, and trimmed beard compliment his simple and consistent clothing: denim shirts, loose, but not baggy, jeans and olive suede desert boots. While being somewhat shy, he easily engages in conversation as long as it has focus and is not bent towards idle chit-chat. Betty “Wu” Valentine, Geri “Lu” Weinstein, and May “Su” Toledo have been friends since high school, when Dylan helped them organize and plan WuLuSu for the annual talent show. WuLuSu was a name invented by Dylan from nicknames he had given each of the girls, although, to this day, neither Dylan or the girls have any memory of how he came up with those nicknames. When pressed, Dylan claims he simply liked the sounds, but didn’t know where they came from. The trio had initially planned to perform an Andrew Sisters type act based on some old record albums found in May’s grandparent’s LP collection, but Dylan convinced them to go with a more contemporary and invitational vibe. They transformed from “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” to Slayer’s “Angel of Death” virtually overnight and succeeded before the Westside High School students and faculty. From then on, Dylan considered himself to be a personal mentor to WuLuSu. In fact, he and May had dated on and off for several years before realizing they could only be best friends and confidants. It was Dylan who booked them for their questionable and unsuccessful New Year’s Eve gig at Club Coffee and Beats.

“Dylan, we’re beginning to think we’re just another one of your get-rich-quick schemes. Last night’s performance was embarrassing. Covering heavy metal isn’t right for us. Oh, and happy birthday,” said Betty. Geri and May nodded in agreement while Dylan sat eying his half-drunk latte and half-eaten sesame seed bagel with a smoked salmon schmear.

“You all need to know I’m trying to do what’s best for you. Nobody else does a capella covers of heavy metal songs. Certainly not an all-girl trio,” replied Dylan. “Besides, I don’t appreciate you calling my ideas ‘schemes’.” Dylan thought about his first get-rich plan to inscribe river rocks with some of his original haiku poems and sell them on Etsy. He and May

spent an entire weekend selecting stones from the local Coho Creek, carting them home, washing them, and setting them out to dry. They had gathered over 200 pieces and spent hours using black Sharpie paint pens customizing each stone with one of the twenty-five original haikus Dylan had written. Dylan posted them for sale on Etsy and eBay at \$25 each, as he would say, “An introductory offer!” During the first month, three were sold, but inquiries were made by two of the buyers regarding how to facilitate a return. The 197 unsold ‘introductory’ haiku rocks sat in Dylan’s backyard. Actually, they remained in five-gallon buckets alongside his parents detached garage and out of sight from neighbors and passersby.

May said, “We love you, Dylan. I love you. But we’re concerned about the direction we’re all going. We decided after last night’s catastrophe to stop covering old, metal songs. We’re not sure where to go next, but it will be something softer, more feminine, and not apt to be ridiculed.”

“Let’s not deal with this today. It’s my birthday, and I’d rather spend it with my best friends drinking coffee and eating bagels than talking about your future,” said Dylan. They all became quiet not sure what to say next. Betty, Geri, and May looked at each other, Dylan looked at them. Their collective uneasiness was palpable. Dylan thought about his haiku rocks, the failure of his idea, and the foolishness he felt. Two years out of college, and, he believed in his parents’ eyes, an underachiever who should have studied physics and continued a family tradition. He felt they didn’t fully understand and embrace that poetry was his dream and he hoped a profession. His computer’s screen saver was a banner with a quote from Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* where Camillo says, “To unpathed waters, undreamed shores.”

### Hipster’s Scriptures

Dylan didn’t want his friends to think of him as a schemer. He didn’t believe he was trying to be underhanded or manipulative with his aspirations. His parents emphasized American inventiveness as an important personal attribute. All he was trying to do was turn his cleverness into a marketable enterprise. Helping WuLuSu develop into a unique performing group, three female voices without instrumentation singing unexpected songs was something he thought completely original and worthy of notice and financial reward.

“I know it’s my birthday, and I’d rather not get into an argument about whether or not my ideas are good ones or not. I really think some of my creative business ideas just need time to mature.”

“Are you talking about Hipster’s Scriptures”? asked Geri. “You’re still trying to come up with translations of bible verses into hipster language and you aren’t even religious.”

“Do you need to be?” asked Dylan.

“Come on,” said Betty, “you spend much of your time telling us how foolish religion is. For goodness sakes, Dylan, your parents ran from Poland to escape anti-Semitism and you spend so much time trying to escape from Judaism. You might be able to rid yourself of religion, but culture is another story.”

He thought how little Betty knew about his true beliefs. Betty had been raised by former hippies who espoused Wiccan beliefs, which he had trouble understanding. For Dylan, it was a religion that tried to incorporate all religious beliefs without naming names. Betty was a self-proclaimed agnostic with too many questions. Her parents had struck it rich as purveyors of homeopathic remedies, or, as Dylan would say, “scamming telemarketers.” What he said next to Betty even surprised himself, “Jews have never been popular, and they’re even less now. As the Holocaust becomes a distant memory, so does my culture. I could care less about my religious roots, but I certainly care about the Jewish journey.”

Dylan realized that his birthday was turning into a serious conversation, didn’t want the day to turn into an attack and defense of his plans. Nevertheless, he still had a point to make. “Listen, it’s still a good idea. Have you even done a Google search for hipster language? There’s an entire, vocabulary that is constantly changing. Even the hipsters have trouble figuring it out. Hipster language is like Ebonics for the white, privileged Fedora class. It’s going to take a lot of time to complete translations.”

All four of them retreated a bit more from one another. They leaned back in their molded, plastic chairs. They weren’t at the arm-folding stage, yet, but it was close. Dylan was immediately struck by the whole Jewish religion/culture/hipster mix. Yes, he was a Jew by birth, a secular Jew by choice, and absolutely not a hipster by personal aversion to what he believed was an artificial lifestyle. He looked at May, a petite, dark-haired woman with glowing green eyes. Because they had once been an on-and-off again couple, he could read May better than Betty and Geri. At this moment, she seemed without affect. Betty, with the exploding red hair

that appeared to be moving even when she was still, long legs, and tanned arms also sat without any outward emotion. However, Geri, mysterious Geri, who rarely engaged in conflict, said, “This is your twenty-fourth birthday and you work at a coffee shop, but you’re not allowed to make coffee. You say you have aspirations and plans. Haiku Rocks and Hipsters Scriptures? What a joke? Almost as big a joke as WuLuSu! I’m finished, Dylan.”

### Baby Poetry

Betty and May were stunned by Geri’s uncharacteristic explosion. “Come on, Geri, give Dylan a break on his birthday. We’re not going to break up. We’re just going to change direction,” said May. Betty was silent and then eyed Dylan with obvious contempt. This was not the New Year’s Day she wanted either. She began to rise before Geri put a hand on her arm and beckoned her to resume sitting. May added, “Haiku Rocks was a disaster, Hipster Scriptures still has potential, and I don’t know anything about the Baby Poetry project Dylan has been talking about.”

Dylan’s latest notion connected with his vision of being a successful, working poet. For several months, he had been using his iPhone to surreptitiously record baby talk while sitting in fast food restaurants, at the coffee shop, or any other place he could pull out his phone and turn on the voice recorder app without the baby’s parents noticing. He was fascinated by emerging speech. He had taken an elementary semantics class in his junior year of college. He approached his professor with the idea of doing a paper on infant speech, which was soundly rejected as something not appropriate for an undergraduate student. Undeterred, Dylan decided it was appropriate work for a poet. It involved making sense of language regardless of the speaker’s age. He was determined to use infant sounds to create a collection of poems he would title and sell as Baby Poetry. When he first broached the idea of Baby Poetry with WuLuSu, Betty wondered if there would be confusion over authorship. Should the babies be cited as co-authors? Dylan argued that the babies were more like musical instruments, and that he would be arranging their sounds in much the same way as a musical composer. “But composers program the music for the instruments. You’re using the baby’s music to write poems.” Dylan replied, “You might think of me as an artist who samples and rearranges what already exists into new forms.” Dylan

has already written several baby poems, one inspired by a six-month old child he titled “Reflections on the Current State of Infant Affairs”:

Ba-ba da-da ba  
Mmmmm bshtlz bshtlz  
Bye bye bye jstlsh

“He needs to stop scheming and get down to real work,” said Geri. And with that comment, in walked Dylan’s parents David and Lily. It was easy to connect the physical resemblance between Dylan and his parents. His father was lanky, with a slightly darker olive complexion in contrast with his short, graying beard. His mother was also slender and walked with a light step that added to her youthful appearance. They were proud of their son but stressed a bit over his lack of career drive. Their love was unconditional and wholly supportive of their only child.

“How’s our Dreamer-mensch birthday boy? We didn’t hear you leave this morning, but figured you be here celebrating with friends. Hello ladies,” said David. Both of Dylan’s parents called him a Dreamer-mensch, having coined a hyphenated word with what they thought was affection for their son. In their mind, anyone not involved in science or the pursuit of data-based truth was a dreamer. They viewed their Dreamer-mensch as a different sort of truth finder, one they didn’t fully understand or appreciate. By adding mensch to dreamer, they elevated his dreams to a highly noble and admired quality.

Dylan said, “We’re arguing about my ideas. They’re saying I’m a failure and should get a real job.”

“Dylan is our best friend and we care about him, but it’s time for him to him to get real. You understand, don’t you?” asked Geri.

Dylan’s mother Lily replied, “We know that Dylan is dreamer. But all of you are young and still exploring the world and its possibilities. His dad and I are physicists and we’re really not that much different. As scientists we dream, too. Our dreams are really more about wandering through our hard science looking for surprises and things that don’t seem to fit or strike us as odd and unusual. Isn’t that also true of poets. Physicists live in a world of structured realities looking for instances that don’t fit those realities. Poets have their own language structures seeking new patterns, newly imagined insights, and interesting observations or twists

on old observations.” Lily eased back in her chair, smiled at her husband David, who returned her smile with his own and a knowing nod.

“But don’t you think Dylan is wasting time with his silly ideas?” prodded Geri

Of course, all this is happening while Dylan sits somewhat dumfounded. He doesn’t know what to say. He’s always been a bit embarrassed when his parents called him a Dreamer-mensch in public. He’s turning twenty-four and one of his best friends seems intent on ruining his day with criticism while his parents appear to be defending him. He’s feeling small and disconnected. He looks at May for some reassurance, but she also seems to be in a fog. Betty continues to sit mute and uninvolved. It’s like a tennis match with two players, two observers, and Dylan’s parents as officials.

Dylan’s father said, “This is a time for all of you to be engaged in experimentation. Dylan’s mother and I wish we would have had the opportunity when we were your age. We came to America so that Dylan would have the freedom to explore and take his time to find meaning in his life. You’ve only just begun. He’s a poet, after all, and you are all musical artists. You’re supposed to be nonconformists. That’s the beauty of this country.”

Betty’s mouth opened and her eyes widened. “You talk about coming to America for the freedom to explore and be different. You wanted to escape religious prejudice. But Dylan wants to rid himself of religion and the culture you so much wanted the freedom to practice.”

“Just the religion, not the culture,” interjected Dylan.

Lily and David held hands and smiled at Betty. Lily said, “Dylan’s identity is his own. We simply love him. Happy birthday my Dreamer-mensch.” Lily broke her hold with David, stood, approached Dylan, leaned over and gave him a hug and a kiss on his forehead. “Find some joy today. You are with good friends. We’ll see you for dinner.”

Dylan watched his parents leave. He felt a deeper love for his parents and the gift of their wisdom.

## Ben

As he pulled off the freeway, he thought about what his mother had said as she hugged him goodbye. Whenever he left after a pleasant or unpleasant visit, Ben's mother always had some sort of sticky cryptic message that haunted him on the ride home. She was, after all, a self-appointed "omenist", a word she had coined to describe her "powers of knowing the future before the future revealed itself." When Ben suggested that the correct word was "seer" or "fortuneteller" or, better yet, "con artist", his mother's placid rebuttal was that she was different from those who professed special powers, and that omenist would prove to be the better term. His mother made no claims to know everything about the future. She merely claimed to know that every once in a while, something good or bad might be happening soon. Fortunately, he had become unconsciously competent at downshifting through the Triumph's gears and stopping at the bottom of the exit ramp. Otherwise, being lost in thought would have resulted in multiple disasters.

This visit had been pleasant, unlike the previous one when his mother told him his life was too comfortable. He dropped by unannounced to bring his mother a bag of lemons and limes. After drinking iced tea with some lemon juice and freshly baked oatmeal raisin cookies, his mother hugged him and said, "Ben, just remember that being a man means more than being a man." At thirty-nine, his mother was the only parent he had known. She was three months pregnant when his father was killed by Maoist terrorists while trekking in Nepal, after being warned by his mother that no good could come of hiking in foreign lands. Growing up meant a seemingly endless stream of caregivers while his mother worked two or three jobs to provide him with private schools, guitar lessons, summer camps, the most up-to-date computers, "with-it" clothes, and a diet of mostly organic foods. His mother never took advantage of knowing the future; rather, as she often reminded Ben, she elected to live in the "here and future." She often reminded Ben that it would be unfair to take advantage of one's special gifts to indulge in unnecessary frills or self-indulgencies. After graduation from law school at the top of his class and securing a job with one of the most prestigious San Francisco law firms, he bought his

mother a condominium near the Giants new ballpark along with season tickets with his first of many extravagant annual bonuses. His mother loved baseball but could never afford to attend a game.

Ben pulled into his Pacific Heights flat's driveway, pushed the button of the garage door remote control, and quietly thought about all he had accomplished before forty: An Ivy League law education and an exceptionally high seven figure salary. He spurned the offer of partnership, since it would mean too much responsibility for shared oversight of the firm's business, and he already made more money than he could ever spend. He invested well, had all the adult toys he wanted, and was recently named by San Francisco Magazine as one of the Ten Most Eligible Bachelors in the Bay Area. He felt very much like a man on top of the world. His mother, however, always reminded him that the future was not what he made of it; it was what the future made of him that mattered.

As he sat in his sports car, he fixated on a red azalea in full bloom. Ben wasn't a gardener. In fact, he had no interest in gardening. He felt it was important, for the sake of a good image, to have a professional gardener install and maintain the planting beds in front and behind his home. He had spent an inordinate amount of time and money for something he rarely noticed. This particular plant struck him as being perfectly beautiful. The red flowers reminded him of the lipstick his mother wore. They glistened with dusk's moisture. Something to his left broke his rare hypnotic state. He couldn't be sure, but it appeared that it might have been someone running silently across the intersection at the end of the block. He turned and saw another runner carrying what appeared to be a baseball bat. He thought nothing of it and pulled into his garage. Before getting out of his classic sports car, he scanned his mostly empty garage. There were no tools, gardening implements, or any other typical items found in garages showing evidence of home ownership. In one corner stood a folded ping-pong table shrouded in a blue tarpaulin that had been used once for a housewarming party given by one of Ben's law firm colleagues. A dart board randomly stung with six darts hung on the wall to his left.

His garage was a flight of stairs below his two-story home. He entered through the kitchen, threw his keys into the basket that served to catch miscellaneous items for which there were no clear organizational constructs. His home, as were his routines, was organized like an old-fashioned postmaster's desk. Everything had its own specific cubbyhole. The first floor was a large open space that included the kitchen, dining area, living room, and a small powder room. A professional designer had not only furnished it in Ben's post-modern taste but had also equipped it with every essential and non-essential gadget for which she could justify the retail plus consultation fee. Ben did not know that he owned five different types of vegetable peelers, nor did he care to know. It was more important that visitors knew that his Williams-Sonoma furnished kitchen, which included All-clad cookware, six-burner Viking stove, and a Sub-zero refrigerator, stood ready for preparing any dish requiring a state-of-the-art blender, mixer, or cookie sheet. Ben didn't cook, but he had acquaintances and a mother who did. Upstairs were three bedrooms, the smallest of which served as a home office. The master bedroom and bath, along with the living room, had sweeping views of City lights at night and the Golden Gate during the day.

Before shedding his work clothes, he plugged his iPod into the central music system and selected Mozart's Fantasia in C Minor for piano, played masterfully by Glenn Gould. He loved the mixture of serious and playful music and the intensity of Gould's rendering. Ben listened to all music genres except Chinese opera, which he found to be atonal and unnatural. Other than a good wine, music was the only sensory stimulant Ben used to enhance his ritualized life style.

After changing into jeans, sweatshirt, and running shoes, Ben intended to walk down to the bottom of the hill to pick up a newspaper and some gourmet take-out from one of the popular boutique neighborhood restaurants. Intentions change when confronted outside your bedroom door by tall, blond, hallow-cheeked woman dressed in a tan topcoat, flowing red scarf, red watch cap, and large black sunglasses holding what initially looked like a cannon of a handgun.

“Good music choice, now sit down, Ben. You won’t be going anywhere for a while.”

Ben stood not knowing what to do. The woman again told him in a measured tone to sit down against the wall with his hands behind his back “Close your eyes, Ben. You don’t know me, and it would be best if you never do. Close your eyes, Ben.” After following her instructions, Ben felt two large patches being placed over his eyes followed by the sound of tape being pulled off a roll. “I’m going to secure the eye patches with duct tape, Ben. After I do, I want you to roll onto your belly while I wrap your hands with tape. If you try to resist, remember I have a weapon and the ability to use it.” Ben did as instructed and was assisted to a standing position. “We’re going to go downstairs, now.” The lady with the topcoat and gun led Ben down to his living room with the panoramic view of the City lights and seated him in the yellow leather chair he rarely used. She instructed him to sit quietly, ask no questions, and wait for further instructions. He wasn’t sure if those instructions would be meant for him or her.

For several minutes, Ben’s mind remained blank. He didn’t know how or what to think. Slowly he began to meticulously take stock of his situation and try to give it some meaning. He practiced mostly anonymous law. He did research for large class-action law suits. He rarely met the individual clients who benefited from his investigatory gifts. The firm’s partners understood that Ben’s strengths resulted in large corporate profits, and they paid him royally for his efforts. Ben’s first thoughts were that no single person could possibly be seeking revenge against him, because he worked for the benefit of large faceless groups. He also had an astonishing track record: he had never been on the losing side. The losers were always, like Ben, anonymous entities – deep-pocket corporations with deep-pocket insurance companies paying damages. He concluded that his circumstance could not be about his work.

He could not imagine any personal relationship to be the source of any violent behavior towards him. He had few close friends and no current romantic relationship. It seemed that being named one of San Francisco’s most eligible bachelors was more of a curse than a gift. The notoriety more often than not was a reason for women to shy away from being seen with him.

He surmised that celebrity must be the reason for his sudden victimization. Clearly, this criminal act would turn out to be nothing more than crime for profit. He thought that what he needed to do was keep calm, be patient, listen carefully, follow instructions, and gather available information so that he could effectively negotiate a win-win settlement.

His captor had not physically harmed him, and so far, appeared to behave in a direct and business-like manner. Her instructions were clear, direct, and not spoken with vile temperament. Ben thought this must be a professional crime, not some amateurish whimsy. He heard three short, followed by two short, knocks at the front door. "Come in boys," said the woman. "Put the baseball bat in the corner. He's secured. Remember, I'm the only voice he hears. Have a seat on the sofa." Ben now knew that she had colleagues in crime. He didn't know that the two men had been a diversion while he sat in his driveway. They ran across the intersection to pull his attention away from the open garage allowing the woman to enter and hide behind the folded ping-pong table. "We'll wait for the call."

"May I ask what's happening?" Ben said with all the politeness he could fathom.

The woman replied, "You need to sit quietly and wait."

Ben obeyed. A cell phone rang, and he heard the woman answer. "Yes, I understand. Don't you think it may be a bit early for that? Okay, then we'll proceed." He heard the phone click shut. "Ben, I've been instructed to shoot off the small toe on your left foot. I'll be removing your shoe now." This marked the first of what would prove to be several feelings of panic for Ben. Suddenly any thought of rationale disappeared. He felt a shudder spike from the base of his spine up through his shoulders and skull. When his left New Balance cross-trainer was slipped off his left foot and sock pulled off, he discharged a small amount of urine and felt cold perspiration ooze around the collar of his shirt.

“Wait, please,” he trembled. “Can’t we talk about this? What is it you want? Money? Legal advice? What is it?”

“Ben, I’m sympathetic to your situation, but I’ve been instructed. We’ll talk about what we want after we get your attention and compliance. You have a reputation for believing you can solve anything through reason and negotiation. We’ll need to make sure you understand in advance that there will be no negotiation, no compromise, no reasoning. This isn’t about being rational; it’s about performance on our terms.”

Ben heard a mechanical sound that he couldn’t identify. “What are you doing?”

“Turning the silencer onto the pistol,” was the cool, surgical reply. Then he heard a pop and his entire body stiffened. “That was a test shot. The only real noise from the next shot will be your scream. Most likely you’ll pass out. We’ll have you treated with an anesthetic and bandage before you awake. We also have pain medication for you.”

Ben began to feel cold and nauseous. “Please, can’t we talk first? Let’s think about future consequences. Let’s think about the future,” he pleaded.

“We are your only future, Ben. You need to know that.”

“I do. I promise. I do.” Silence in the room ensued. Ben felt colder and began to shiver. A metallic taste pushed up through his throat and the back of his head began to tighten and ache. “Please,” he whispered.

Finally, the woman spoke. She said that while she had been given specific instructions, she did have some discretionary power. She assured Ben that unnecessary pain and suffering could be avoided if he followed all demands. He felt his breathing slow and he consciously took

a deep breath filling himself to his diaphragm and gaining some measure of calm. He assured the woman that he would do all as she requested.

“I need you to call your mother, Ben. You must instruct her to come here. The business we have involves her. Once you fulfill this demand, you’ll be freed from all other obligations.”

“How is my mother involved in this?” The tightening ache pulsating across the back of Ben’s skull began to surge down the nape of his neck and spread across his shoulders. “You mustn’t hurt her.”

“Ben, you have a choice to make. Get your mother over here or suffer painful consequences for not obeying orders. I’m going to hold a phone to your ear and dial her number. It’s your choice how you handle this. If you tell her something is wrong, the toe is gone and there will be other serious consequences.”

The phone was put to Ben’s ear and during the six rings that it took before his mother answered, he thought about options. He could make an outrageous request that might alert her to something being very wrong and subsequently prompt her to seek help. However, he couldn’t think of any invented story wild enough to prod his mother to take such action. Of course, he could also simply blurt the truth of the matter and suffer whatever consequence might ensue. He chose instead to engage in conversation while trying to buy time to figure out another solution.

“Mom, you said something when I left this evening that I’ve been wondering about. Do you remember?”

“Yes, Ben. I told you that being a man was more than being a man. Is that why you’ve called?”

“It’s just that from time to time you say things that leave me wondering. Like being an omenist and knowing what the future brings.”

“But, Ben, I don’t know what specifics the future holds. I only know if the future might sustain promise or hold potential doom. What’s bothering, Ben? You sound down.”

“I still want to know what you meant about being a man.” The phone was removed from Ben’s ear and he heard it being hung up. The woman told Ben to stop stalling and get to the point. Ben explained he had never spontaneously asked his mother over to his house and that he needed to find a way to do so without raising suspicion. The woman agreed and explained that she would redial his mother. She instructed Ben to say he accidentally disconnected the phone. Once back on line, Ben again asked what his mother meant about being a man.

“Ben, I felt a presence about the future that would require you to make an extremely difficult decision. I simply wanted you to know that being a man sometimes requires action that benefits others while resulting in undesirable conditions for the one taking action.” His mother’s response seemed rehearsed. It appeared to Ben that his mother was trying to teach him a life lesson. The tightness in his shoulders increased, perspiration soaked the collar of his sweatshirt, his right eyelid began to twitch, and he felt a shiver and fainted. His captor, while holding the phone in her left hand, used her right hand to push Ben against the back of the yellow, leather chair and keep him from tumbling forward. Her accomplices moved to hold Ben back by the shoulders. The woman took the phone and matter-of-factly told Ben’s mother that Ben would be calling back soon.

When Ben regained consciousness, the woman offered him a sip of room temperature water. Ben sensed perspiration dripping down his spine and soaking through his sweatshirt. The woman observed color returning to his cheeks. What she couldn’t see was that Ben awoke with a new sense of self and resolve. “Ben, you must call your mother again. You’ll need to explain

that a friend suddenly dropped in and apologize for hanging up so abruptly. Do you understand?”

Ben replied, “I need more information. You can do whatever you want to me. I don’t really care. But you need to tell me how my mother is involved before I decide what I’ll do next. Go ahead: shoot off my toe.”

The next time Ben came to was in an ambulance. His left leg was elevated, and he felt a throbbing pain from where his toe had been. “You’re lucky,” remarked the EMT. “Whoever shot you had some medical expertise.”

The policewoman riding with the EMT informed Ben that an anonymous caller made a 911 call from his house to report the incident. She explained that he was found on his back, eyes patched, and his leg elevated on the leather chair. “Whoever did this to you was careful to minimize physical damage.”

Ben asked the policewoman to call his mother and tell her what had happened. “We’ve already contacted her. She’ll meet us at the hospital.”

Published in the *Scarlet Leaf Review*, February 13, 2020

## Max

Max lived a simple life. The small closet in his one-bedroom apartment reflected his minimalist beliefs. Long-and short-sleeve blue and white cotton dress shirts, tan pants, two blue and three black blazers, one navy blue suit, seven red ties, and three pairs of dress shoes made up his entire work wardrobe. For weekend wear, there hung two pairs of Levis, four T-shirts, one V-neck black sweater, one red cardigan sweater, a yellow and green Hawaiian shirt given to him by his mother on his thirty-third birthday, a pair of all-white New Balance sneakers and a pair of flip flops. At six foot four and exactly two hundred pounds, Max's clothes hung loose and straight, and, to his colleagues at the small college at which he taught English literature, seemed perfectly in keeping with his personality.

Every morning at precisely 5:30 AM, National Public Radio woke Max. He would remain in bed through the news update, then rise, slip into his jogging clothes, and run the same three-mile loop he had run for the past five years. After shaving and showering, a breakfast of rye toast, vanilla yoghurt, three stewed prunes, black tea, and a multi-vitamin, Max would read the New York Times and five poems from the frayed Norton Anthologies he had first used as an undergraduate at the same college where he was now a tenured full professor. At thirty-five, he was the youngest tenured professor at this Midwestern, ivy-covered college.

Students enjoyed Max's classes. They found his lectures interesting and the questions he posed intriguing. The serious students imagined Max to have a casual and uncluttered academic life. Less serious students fantasized a romantic relationship with him. After all, Max was a handsome man bordering on prettiness. His blonde hair stylishly a bit out of place, bluish eyes that always seemed actively engaged, an easy smile filled with genuine sincerity, and a relaxed gait that made it easy to keep up with him on walks across campus. Acquaintances were never sure if Max's bent was towards men or women. This was a part of his life that Max kept completely private. It might have surprised some to know that he was heterosexual.

Although he was not currently involved, there had been five women in his life. And each relationship, with the first being in graduate school, was kept mutually discreet to ensure respect for his lover and privacy for Max.

After completing his daily college duties, Max would stop at the University Diner for dinner. He always sat at the same window booth, which had become known as Max's Booth. Karen Allensworth served him every day except when she had a commitment with her school-aged son. Max ordered one of three meals. His first choice, if it was fish, was the daily special. Otherwise, it was sirloin tips over egg noodles with a green salad and bleu cheese dressing on the side, or a chicken cutlet without gravy and a cup of the soup-of-the day, unless it was a creamed soup, and then he would have a green salad with Thousand Island dressing on the side. With his meal, he drank two glasses of unsweetened iced tea with lemon and had one cup of black coffee and apple pie for dessert. After dinner, Max walked to the college library, where he wrote in his journal, read obscure poems, and chatted with the serious students until 9:00 PM, when he walked home and retired for the evening. The only exception to Max's weekday routine occurred on the third Wednesday evening of each month, when he would hold court with interested students at the Village Pub. Over beers, pickled eggs, and pretzels, Max and the serious students would engage in debate over some unresolved issue that had come up in class. On weekends, Max cooked for himself.

It was on one of those Wednesdays when Jill Templeton walked through the pub's front door, purposefully approached Max, pulled a small caliber pistol from her purse, and shot him in the head. Max fell to the floor. Jill Templeton turned and walked out the door to the nearby police station, where she reported her crime and was arrested. In the meantime, an ambulance responded and whisked Max off to the hospital where he lay with tubes and breathing devices keeping him alive. Medical tests determined that he was not brain dead. Apparently, the bullet was not powerful enough to obliterate brain functioning, but it was lodged in a place where it could not be removed.

While Max remained in the hospital, Jill Templeton's trial was a speedy one. She pled guilty and explained that she was one of the few students who had failed one of Max's English literature classes. She told how she had offered sexual favors in exchange for a passing grade but had been spurned. Her attorney convinced the judge that she was clearly a deeply disturbed young woman and ought to be committed to a psychiatric facility.

Thinness was a genetic trait that ran in Max's family. Every day of his hospital stay, his thin, sixty-year-old mother visited from 11:00 AM until 3:00 PM. His thin father had died in a fiery accident as an amateur sports car racer when Max was ten years old. He had no siblings and his mother never remarried. His mother always brought a bag lunch, usually egg or tuna salad on white bread, an orange or apple, and two Oreo cookies. The nurses would bring her apple juice or water, which she drank out of the serving container.

Max did not inherit his imagination. His mother and father led ordinary, plain lives. His father owned a gas station and purchased an extravagant amount of life insurance that served his mother well. His mother never held a job outside their tidy, cottage-style home. She dutifully cared for Max through his undergraduate schooling and she belonged to the same women's service club for almost forty years. Max's imagination emerged in early adolescence when he began writing poetry. With his father gone, his mother would sit at the dinner table and listen as Max read his daily poems. She would silently affirm his efforts with nods and smiles. His mother never fully understood his obscure metaphors and references. When Max left for graduate school, he and his mother kept in touch with weekly letters, her's mailed on Friday and received by Monday; his sent on Tuesday and received on Thursday. Only visits home on observed holidays broke the routine. Well-crafted words defined this mother-son relationship better than promises and feelings.

While Max lay in his coma, Jill Templeton sat incarcerated in a ten-by-ten-foot room in a psychiatric hospital surrounded by lush woods and a twenty-foot security fence. She was awakened each morning, had breakfast among fifty other criminally insane patients with whom

she had no ongoing relationships, attended a one-hour group therapy session, walked the grounds when the weather cooperated, ate lunch with the same fifty criminally insane patients, and retired to her room to spend two hours writing letters to Max. At 3:00 PM she had a one-hour private therapy session with a staff psychologist, at which time she delivered her daily letter to Max hoping it would be mailed. The psychologist dutifully made note of each letter and turned it over to the staff psychiatrist for analysis and feedback. The letters were never mailed.

Jill Templeton could best be described as cute and bouncy. She was twenty-eight, red haired, with a perfect complexion and a slender, well-proportioned body. In high school she was a cheerleader who never dated. She learned early on to sit at the front of the classroom, smile, raise her hand, and reply to questions even if she didn't know the answers. She always stayed after class to ask a question or two. She was what teachers would describe as a polite and ideal student. Although she didn't do well on tests, she turned in all her homework and excelled at participation. In return, she received grades good enough to gain entry into college even though her college entrance exams were below the norm. Jill's parents, neighbors, and friends could not understand why she would shoot a college professor. They collectively believed that Max must have done something to incite Jill to such gruesome action.

In his coma, Max began to dream. All of the dreams involved Jill. The first was a replaying of Jill walking into the pub. At that moment, Max hadn't recognized Jill, even when he saw her pull the pistol from her purse, aim, and shoot. In his dream, he saw Jill enter in slow motion wearing a pink cashmere sweater, blue jeans, clogs, and carrying a black tote-style purse. He watched her walk towards him, reach into her purse, pull out the pistol, and fire. He saw the bullet leave the barrel and strike him in the forehead. He felt nothing but watched as the serious students screamed; their mouths wide open, and saw Jill turn to walk out the door after dropping the pistol on the black-and-white linoleum floor. Max played this dream like a video loop for months.

Doctors would tell his mother that his brain was still very much alive and that there was evidence from both brain wave activity and rapid eye movements that he was dreaming. They encouraged his mother to talk to Max as much as she was comfortable. She began writing letters to Max and reading them to him later. She would three-hole punch the letters and place them in a binder. She believed that, should he recover from his coma, the letters would serve to fill in the history of his long sleep.

In the meantime, Jill's letters, which had begun as long apologies, were turning into love letters. They began as a simple wooing gesture. She wrote about flirting with Max in class, and how she would answer a question from the lesson's literature assignment by doing what romance novels had instructed: look up from her book with come-hither eyes, moisten her lips with a swirl of her tongue, and softly say that she couldn't remember. She wrote long descriptions of how she dressed to seduce Max. She described a life that they might have together in a romanticized future, and slowly her letters evolved into highly erotic descriptions of an on-going honeymoon. The more Jill wrote, the more connected she felt to Max. She thought of the ink flowing from her pen into Max's veins as a life-sustaining plasma.

Max's dreams about Jill began to change. At first, he heard Jill's apologies as whispers. With each new apology and description of her own condition, her voice became louder and clearer. Max found himself seeing Jill in her own deep sleep – unable to be free of her own circumstances. Max imagined his own letters in reply to Jill's long narratives. He would ask for Jill to clarify her motivation for injuring him. He would describe his own disconnected state and inform – and later remind - her that she was his only link to the outside world. Each new response from Jill brought him comfort. Max grew increasingly sympathetic to Jill's isolation.

As Jill's letters became more sexually explicit, a new video loop in Max's brain took on highly charged romantic overtones. He vividly saw himself and Jill meeting for sexual trysts at fancy hotels and weekend stays at country inns. Evidence of these new dreams showed as

increased brain wave activity and visible erections. The dreams grew in intensity for most of the second year of his coma.

Jill wrote ninety-nine letters. Her last letter to Max was a suicide note. In it she apologized again for the pain she had caused. She described her longing for him and the belief that they would one day meet in heaven. On the day Jill hung herself, Max awoke.

Several months later, after undergoing extensive voice and physical therapy, Max was back at the college teaching serious and less serious students. He resumed his regular rituals. One day, he sat at his usual booth at the diner. Only this time he was joined by his mother. She was sharing the binder filled with the letters she had written during Max's hospital stay. Max had ordered chicken noodle soup and salmon patties. His mother chose an egg salad sandwich and an iced tea. As Max flipped through his Mother's letters, he was approached by one of his less serious students. She politely leaned over and whispered into Max' ear. He considered her request and decided to meet with her later in the week.

When Max's mother inquired about the young women, Max informed her that she was the friend of a very dear, departed friend.

Published in the *Scarlet Leaf Review*, March 13, 2020

## Jacob's Disorder

Jacob Goldman woke every morning wondering if that day would be his last. His mother had told him that Jesus lived to be thirty-three, and how could anyone expect to live longer. Anything beyond thirty-three years was a blessing to be savored. "Mom, we're Jews. We don't believe in Jesus. And, besides, he didn't exactly die from natural causes or some horrible disease." With her own brand of mother's logic, she explained that, regardless of the facts or myths, his death set the bar extremely low. This sense of a predetermined lifespan with the potential for bonus years is what guided much of Jacob's life. Of course, being raised by a somewhat eccentric, doting, and highly protective mother contributed to his worldview.

Jacob lived a simple, uncomplicated life. He figured that if his mother was correct about his "bonus" years and an earlier than desired demise then why leave a mess behind. He had a few friends, which he kept at a respectable distance. Sometimes they would meet after work at a local bar or bistro. He kept his weekends open for solitary cycling, a movie, or a quiet walk in one of the many public parks that dotted the city. He was between girlfriends, the last one a three-year romance. When Lucy asked about their future, he said he wasn't sure. That was their last intimate moment together. When his mother or sister asked if he was happy, he said he wasn't exactly sure what happiness was. When they asked if he was lonely, he had the same reply.

Mike was his closest friend, at least the one he had longer conversations with and with whom he confided some personal information. They both worked as account managers at a large pharmaceutical firm in the city center. For both of them, work was work and not

something they spent much time talking about. Mike had a full family life. He, his wife of twelve years, and their two elementary school-aged children lived in a small cottage-style house on the edge of town. Jacob and Mike usually grabbed a drink at their favorite pub once a week, talked sports for a while, and maybe shared some of Mike's family news or Jacob's social news when there was any to share. Until recently, Jacob never talked about his family.

One Wednesday evening, Jacob entered his small, one-bedroom apartment located not far from his office; it was only a five-minute walk from work. His five-year old Toyota Prius had a mere 8500 miles on the odometer. He kept it covered in the underground garage, and mostly used it to drive himself and his Trek road bike to a weekend cycling event far outside the city. He favored sleek, Scandinavian design. A boxy, tan leather sofa faced the gas fireplace. The one dot of color in the otherwise brown, grey, white room was a red chair perpendicular to the sofa. He referred to it as his thinking chair. It was the only piece of furniture that looked lived in. A few museum prints and cycling posters hung on unblemished white walls.

Even the odors in Jacob's apartment were clean and scent free. He splurged on weekly Wednesday "green" housecleaning. The housecleaning service also took care of his laundry, changed the sheets and linens, and left a single flower on the kitchen counter with the invoice. Jacob would promptly use Pay Pal to pay the invoice and then toss the flower into the newly emptied kitchen garbage can. Jacob did not like accumulating things. His mother was a collector of tchotchkes, almost bordering on being a hoarder, and Jacob had developed a habit of disposing of anything that lacked purpose and distracted from simplicity. If life was short, then why accumulate. He didn't understand why his mother did. His mother had once said that

accumulating things might be the only evidence of one's existence because memories simply faded away.

On this particular Wednesday, Jacob found a plain, unopened envelope wedged into his front door's jamb. Written in black, all-cap letters was "Jake." Nobody called Jacob "Jake." He had just turned forty-five, although he didn't mention it to any of his friends or co-workers. Mike was the only exception, and, when Jacob told Mike over an evening beer, Mike shook Jacob's shoulder and said, "Tonight the drinks are on me." His mother Nancy and older sister Rachel called him at work to wish him a happy birthday and invite him over for a Friday Shabbat dinner, which he quickly declined, reminding them for the umpteenth time that he was not an observant Jew. Both his mother and sister often pushed him to at least honor his culture in spite of his anti-religious and atheist "tendencies", as they referred to his "so-called beliefs." For the last ten years, Jacob insisted on no birthday recognition or presents.

Now there was an envelope left on his door with "Jake" written in heavy, dark letters. Jacob took the envelope, entered his apartment, and sat in his thinking chair. Jacob's father left his mother when Jacob was a nursing infant, and he had no memories of his father. When Jacob was old enough to ask about his father, his mother simply said he had left, and she had no idea where he was. A divorce had been handled quickly with his father abandoning not only his wife, daughter and son, but also all his larger worldly possessions: a three-year old car, bank accounts containing several thousand dollars, and their small Craftsman-style home in exchange for only five years of alimony and child-support. Fortunately, his mother was a bookkeeper who had a small at-home business that earned more income than her salesman

husband. She agreed to the terms of the divorce, and, as far as Jacob knew, never heard from his father again; nor did his father ever try to make contact with any of them.

Nancy was twenty-eight when his father left. Her brother-in-law Herschel Goldman found it appalling that his father had left his family with no apparent warning. He immediately began helping Nancy with whatever she asked. Nancy led a quiet life taking care of Rachel and Jacob, making sure they completed their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs with Uncle Hersch's help. She occasionally dated men from the Beth El Synagogue's singles group, but never brought home a date for any sort of intimate relationship. It was only after both Rachel and Jacob had left for college that she began a few, as she called them "special relationships." She kept them hidden from Rachel and Jacob.

When Jacob was twenty-five, he decided to try and find his father and make contact. He felt an emptiness that needed to be filled. He didn't inform his mother or sister that he hired a service that specialized in finding lost relatives. It didn't take long to locate his father. He was living in a neighboring state less than two hundred miles from his home, unmarried, and retired from a job as a successful electronics salesman. Jacob wrote him a letter asking if he'd like to get together. He never heard back.

Jacob didn't know what to make of the envelope. It felt like a disruption to his organized and predictable life. He slit open the envelope and a note and business cards tumbled onto his lap. He was astonished to read: "This is Gary, aka your father, getting back to you. Yes, I'd be willing to meet with you. Please, give me a call and we'll arrange a time." Twenty years since he wrote and now he was hearing back from his "aka" father.

Jacob placed the empty envelope, note and business cards on the chair's side table, pulled out his cell phone and called his sister Rachel. She answered on the first ring. "Dad wrote back," said Jacob.

Rachel had been reheating some homemade chicken soup and paused to turn off the burner before responding. "Gary wrote back?" she asked. "What are you talking about?"

"I never told you that I located him twenty years ago and wrote him a letter. Well, he responded by leaving a note wedged in my door sill. He must have come by today after the housecleaners left. It was here when I got home from work."

"I'm coming over. I'll be there soon," said Rachel. "I'll bring soup. And don't call mom."

"I'll wait for you," said Jacob wondering why he shouldn't call his mother.

"I'm bringing soup and you'd better have some bread, salad and wine to go with it. We'll need it. And you need to call Uncle Hersch."

"Do we need Uncle Hersch? You know how he feels about his brother."

"Call Uncle Hersh!"

Rachel knocked on Jacob's door thirty minutes later. Although two years older, Rachel looked like Jacob's paternal twin sister. They were both tall, slim, dark haired and olive skinned. While Jacob cycled, Rachel ran. In fact, she was an accomplished distance runner in college and still ran 10K races in her age division, often finishing in the top twenty. They both had that loose/taught athletic bearing. Rachel immediately walked over to the stove and began reheating, again, the chicken soup. Jacob had taken out a sourdough baguette from the freezer and it was quickly defrosting on the kitchen counter.

"Let's get dinner ready before we talk about this situation," said Rachel. "Open a bottle of wine and I'll set the table. Did you call Uncle Hersch?"

Jacob replied, "He will be here soon."

Rachel shrugged with her hands raised. She wondered how this could be happening. Most of all, she worried what this might do to their mother who had recently turned seventy-two and was not always, as Jacob often said, "in her right mind." Rachel argued that their mother might be more forgetful than usual, but she was certainly "all there" in spite of her crazy thinking: "living past thirty-three were bonus years; don't get married for love and make

the same mistake I made; marry for longevity, security, and nice vacations; remember to always wear clean underwear because you never know when you'll need to see a doctor or meet your future mate."

"Jacob, we need to be careful about how we tell mom about this. She's becoming more fragile," implored Rachel. "And this could really complicate things."

"What do you mean 'complicate'?" asked Jacob.

"I'll explain later," replied Rachel.

The doorbell rang, and, before Jacob could answer the door, Herschel Goldman strode in asking, "What has my no-good nudnik of a brother done now?"

Jacob stood before his uncle not knowing how to respond. He was so grateful for all that Uncle Herschel had done for his mother, his sister, and himself over the years. And he was always in awe of his physical presence. Closing in on eighty years, he was tall, fit and sported longish gray hair that covered half of his large ears. Since his retirement, Herschel Goldman never missed a two-hour morning workout at Sid's Downtown Gym and House of Boxing. His regimen included stretches, weightlifting, at least fifteen minutes punching the heavy bag, and thirty minutes of lap swimming in the saltwater pool. From time-to-time, he'd even manage to spar a few rounds with the "kids", as he called the ethnically diverse group of wannabe boxers.

While Herschel was a handsome man and actively dated women he referred to as "nice Jewish and goyish girls", he had never married. He said he enjoyed his freedom to pursue "the richness of feminine charms without hesitation or commitment." In some ways, Jacob coveted Herschel's machismo even with the reality of the Me-Too movement. When confronted by Rachel about women coming forward with charges of sexual abuse made against public celebrities and how that could impact Herschel, he explained that all of his relationships were consensual and that he even kept in close contact with all of his women friends.

Rachel directed Herschel to sit at the kitchen counter and asked if he wanted some wine before dinner. "I'd rather have a beer. One of those fancy schmancy, overpriced micro brews that Jacob keeps in the fridge will do."

Jacob said, "I'll get one for both of us." He sat on the stool next to Herschel with two bottles of Sierra Nevada and told Herschel, "Dad was here. He left a note saying he was answering my request to meet."

Herschel raised his bushy brows and asked, "When did you try to get in touch with Gary, my no-good brother?"

"I located him twenty years ago and wrote him a letter. He just replied with this note." Jacob showed Herschel the note and business cards.

"Why did you try to contact Gary? You could have opened up a very uncomfortable Pandora's box that your mother would have great difficulty with," implored Herschel. "This is not a good thing, Jacob."

Rachel leaned over the counter to read Gary's reply to Jacob. She shook her head and said, "Let's have some dinner and talk about this. I see the bread, but where's the salad, Jacob?"

"Sorry, I don't have any salad makings. Soup and bread will have to do."

"Seriously, Jacob! How do you live like this? We'll talk, but we won't tell mom, yet. Set the table and sit. I'll serve."

"Why not tell mom," asked Jacob.

"Let's sit and eat and talk," said Rachel.

Once they were seated at the dining room table, Rachel ladled out soup, passed the bread and butter, and poured herself a glass of chardonnay. Jacob and Herschel uncapped a second beer. Jacob felt some tension before Herschel broke the silence. This was one of Herschel's many skills. He was always good at initiating conversation and often vigorous debate. His career as an attorney was marked by his ability to engage in confrontation with successful outcomes for his clients. Even in retirement he was often contacted by former partners and colleagues for counsel and sage advice. He was known about the courthouse as the "go-to-guy."

"Jacob, do you believe in fate, karma, god, or any other intervening influence?"

It seemed like an odd thing to ask. One of Herschel's opening gambits was often a question that seemed nonsensical. Jacob responded with, "You already know that I don't believe in any of that crap Hersch. What does that have to do with my father?"

"Good! Because that imbecile of a brother of mine will try to influence you like a snake oil salesman with his twisted thinking and self-centered motivations. Your mother has fallen for his scheming nature far too many times over the years."

"What do you mean 'far too many times,'" asked Jacob.

Rachel suddenly choked back some soup. The skin around her neck reddened and became splotchy. Herschel became silent knowing that he said something he shouldn't have. He immediately regretted his verbal slip. He had allowed his emotion to get the better of him. This was very un-Herschel like. Jacob wondered what had just happened. Herschel turned to Rachel and said, "It's time he knows the truth. Let's call Nancy." Herschel pulled his cell phone off his belt clip and called his sister-in-law. "Rachel and I are over at Jacob's and we need you over here. It's time for the truth."

"What are you talking about Hersch? What's going on Rachel?" Jacob could not imagine what might be behind all the mystery.

Rachel said, "It's a long and complicated story, Jacob. Just promise to listen and try to understand. We need to wait for mom."

"Okay, we'll wait for mom, but I want you to tell me what's going on."

Rachel took a deep breath and looked at Herschel who shrugged his shoulders and nodded. Rachel and Jacob had a good, if not terribly close brother/sister relationship. They shared news but not feelings or deeper thoughts. Like Jacob, Rachel had a series of relationships, but never anything long term or serious enough for marriage. Once they had a longer conversation about a common familial theme of serial monogamy without commitment. And Jacob reminded Rachel that, "Mom once said that everything is temporary, so don't make plans."

"Go ahead, Rachel, tell Jacob. It's time to put an end to the big secret," said Herschel.

With tears forming and beginning to pool, Rachel took another breath and said, "Jacob, Gary is my dad, but he's not yours."

“What!” exclaimed Jacob. “He’s not my father! Am I some kind of bastard or something?”

Herschel put a hand on Jacob’s shoulder and said, “Jacob, it’s a complicated story and it’s not just about you. There’s more to it, and we’ll wait for Nancy before explaining.”

“No! I need to know how Rachel knows this and I don’t.”

“Years ago, I overheard mom arguing with Gary on the phone. At one point, she said ‘I don’t care about the letter you got from Jacob, you can’t contact him. I don’t want him to know and you can’t tell him.’ When I confronted mom, she told me about having an affair, getting pregnant with you, and Gary abruptly leaving shortly after you were born. Mom made me promise not to tell you, and I’ve stuck with that promise. I wish I hadn’t.”

“Well, then who is my father?”

“I don’t know, Jacob. Mom wouldn’t tell me, and I’ve never asked. All she said was that she made a mistake and that her punishment was to keep it a secret.”

They waited quietly and uneasily while the soup became cold and the bread developed a stale crust. Nancy gave a single knock on the front door before letting herself in. She looked more like Rachel’s older sister rather than her mother. Like her daughter, Nancy was slim, her dark hair heavily streaked with silver, and her unblemished olive skin smooth and clear of any age-related blemishes. She was an attractive woman who carried an air of knowingness. In spite of her predilection for inventive and what Jacob deemed cockamamie phrases, her children deeply admired and loved her. She sat down in Jacob’s thinking chair while Jacob and Nancy sat on the sofa. Herschel stood and appeared ready to direct the conversation.

“One thing I’ve learned over the years,” began Nancy, “was that as my physical skin becomes thinner, my emotional skin gets thicker.” She looked directly at Jacob and continued, “Now it’s time for you to get a little thicker skin and know the truth about your family.”

Nancy leaned into her brother and put an arm around his shoulder. “It’s okay, Jacob, we love you very much.”

Everyone was quiet for a moment and Jacob’s mind wandered to his friend Mike, whose family seemed so normal when his own suddenly felt extraordinarily abnormal. A wife, two kids, a cute home just outside the city seemed idyllic. While Jacob lived his simple life that

seemed to be without definition. He was not overly close to his mother, sister, and uncle, but distant and temporary from any other meaningful relationships. Mike was his best friend, but not someone, until now, he thought he might need to confide in and seek advice. Was it his so-called father's leaving that caused that lack of intimacy with family and friends? Now he was faced with what appeared to be another unexplained truth: Gary the "aka" father.

Herschel cleared his throat and said, "Jacob, families are not always what they seem to be." Before he could go on, Nancy interrupted, "No, they're not always rational, but they can have a logic no matter how obscure. Hersch, it's time for me to explain."

Rachel put her head on Jacob's shoulder and muttered, "We're all going to feel better when the secret we've all carried for so many years is no longer a secret." Jacob pulled away from his sister, stood, and with all the softness he could muster said, "What is going on? I just learned from my sister that my father is not my father. Mom, you might say that is a 'tad of a revelation.' I think you used that expression when informing me that the tooth fairy was a made-up story to make losing teeth fun. Well, this isn't fun."

"Gary is Rachel's father, he's not yours, but Rachel already told you that," stated Nancy. "When I became pregnant with you, Gary couldn't bear the reality that his brother and I had an affair."

Rachel jumped to her feet and shouted, "Uncle Hersch is Jacob's father!"

"Yes, and he's been more of a father to you and Jacob than your own father ever was or could be," stated Nancy with simple calm and directness as though she were announcing something on the evening news. Herschel slumped a bit and backed away taking a seat at the kitchen counter.

Nancy went on to explain that she and Gary had continued to stay in touch over the last twenty years because Gary wanted to know how his only daughter was doing. He didn't show any interest in Jacob and didn't know what he should do about Jacob's letter. Nancy urged Gary to not contact Jacob and to keep his distance from Rachel. The romance with Herschel did not continue, but Herschel's support did.

After Rachel had confronted her mother and learned of her father's whereabouts, she began to have infrequent conversations and meetings with Gary without her mother's

knowledge. Both she and her mother now had their own secrets. She was able to develop a semblance of a loose father/daughter relationship with phone conversations to keep current about what was going on in their lives, several get-togethers for lunch and dinner when Gary was in town, and even the exchange of short notes and some special occasion greeting cards.

Rachel's blurted revelation that 'Uncle Hersch is Jacob's father' continued to echo in Jacob's ears. With a few loud words from his sister, he realized he was a bastard by his own uncle, the uncle he loved and trusted as much as he could love and trust anyone. He didn't know how to cope and resolve the dissonance buzzing in his head. There was a sudden, overbearing quiet in his meticulously kept living room.

Jacob stood dumbfounded, turned and grabbed his keys and cell phone off the kitchen counter and walked out the front door with his uncle pleading for him to stay, "Jacob, please, allow us to explain."

He walked down the steps to the garage, pulled the tarp off his car, and drove not sure of where he ought to go. The revealed family truth, or rather the uncovering of lies was too much. After a few minutes of driving aimlessly, he called Mike and told him he was on the way over with important news. Mike's home was about a ten-minute drive. He lived on a tree-lined street in a part of town that Jacob called "too good to be real." When he joked, which was hardly ever, he kidded Mike that one needed a "visa stamped *white person*" to enter the imaginary gates of that part of the city. Mike's response was that it was for his kids and the good schools.

Jacob sat in his car in front of the light blue cottage with cream trim, manicured front lawn, and a colorful mixture of plants and flowers surrounding the front porch and thought about how he was going to approach his best friend; the friend with whom he had only shallow conversations. For some reason, he felt the need for friendship rather than family at that moment. The front door opened, and Mike came out, walked to the curb, and got into the Prius. "What's doing, Jacob?"

Jacob shouted, "I just found out my family is a lie!"

Mike calmly looked at Jacob and said, "Well, come inside and we'll have a beer. Janie and the kids happen to be over at her folks for the evening. We have plenty of time to talk."

Mike's home was a picture of order on the outside, but the inside was an explosion of toys and children's books scattered everywhere. The furniture was an exemplar of well-used comfort. Kid's art covered the refrigerator and family photos filled several walls. Mike got a couple of bottles of Miller Lite from the kitchen, sat in the green corduroy easy chair and pointed to the sofa for Jacob, which he easily sunk into.

"When I got home from work there was a note for me wedged into the door sill from whom I thought was my father. I emphasize 'thought was my father'. It turns out that my family is one big lie." Jacob went on to tell the entire story, and Mike listened and sipped his beer without interruptions or questions. Jacob talked non-stop for thirty minutes.

When Jacob finished, Mike shook his head and commented, "Well, that's interesting, but why are you here?"

"I just couldn't stand it and needed a friend to talk to."

"Are you wanting to abandon your family the way Gary abandoned your family. And, frankly, the way Herschel abandoned you?" asked Mike. "Jacob, I'm your friend, and I'm going to say something that might be hard to take, but I'm going to say it anyway. You try too hard to create rational order where life just isn't that way. Now you're faced with something that doesn't seem to make sense and that's just the way life is sometimes."

Somehow Mike's words were exactly the kind of direct wisdom Jacob needed. He felt a sense of comfort from Gary's bluntness. That's all Mike needed to say before Jacob used his cell phone to call Rachel. She told him that they were still at his apartment hoping he would come back. Jacob told them he'd be home shortly.

"You know, Mike, I'm forty-five years old and I've surpassed what my mother identified as the Jesus standard. I think it's time for me to be a man."

"Jacob, get back home and begin putting some disorder in your overly ordered life. It's okay to be uncomfortable with ambiguity. I learned that from my own therapy. You didn't know that about me. I'll tell you more after you get through your own family episode."

On his way back to his apartment, Jacob stopped at the market and picked up some produce for a salad, some fruit and cookies for dessert, and some flowers for his mother. It had been less than two hours since he left and his mother, uncle, and sister were still situated in the

same places. They had obviously been in active conversation when Jacob entered. Rachel and Nancy were holding balled up tissues, Hersch sat next to Nancy patting her softly on the back.

“I brought salad fixings and something for dessert. We need to talk over dinner. Mom, these flowers are for you. I know I made this difficult, and I’m sorry for hurting you.”

Nancy took the flowers with tears on her cheeks and said, “We never wanted to hurt you, Jacob. Or you either, Nancy. Hersch and I lived an uncomfortable lie thinking it would be better for you if you thought the family had one father. It was a terrible mistake. You know families can be sane and insane at the same time. It’s biblical.”

Jacob shook his head and smiled. “All I want right now is to know the entire truth. And I want to figure out how to give up an uncle for a real father.” As Jacob looked over at his father, Herschel did not appear to be so imposing anymore. His mother seemed much more vulnerable and accepting, which comforted him. And his sister Rachel had helped to bring some disorder he needed in his life, while the noise in his head quieted.

“I’m not sure about what families are supposed to be, but the one thing I do know at this particular instant is that we can work at figuring it all out. How about reheating the soup for the third time and let’s sit at the table and begin a new conversation?” stated Jacob with newfound confidence.

Yes,” said Nancy. “Chicken soup has a way of curing lots of ills.”

## A Knock at the Door

After the initial thunderstorm had passed through the valley and over the foothills, Gracie the Poodle cuddled against me on the leather sofa shivering from the trauma of it all. I tried to soothe her fears with gentle pets and soft words knowing that another round of Mother Nature's fury was on its way. We had that kind of relationship: when she was afraid, I comforted her; when I was anxious or upset, she delighted me with humorous antics and her funny, soulful eyes. I'm fairly certain she had ESP at all the right times.

Gracie's head perked up when there was light knock at the front door. Normally, her awareness of someone on the front porch would elicit a run to the door's sidelight and aggressive barking that immediately ceased when I opened the door. Then she would go into her affectionate welcome with sniffs, licks, and canine kisses. Not this time. I went to answer the door and she stayed on the couch, curled up with her hind legs still quivering. I was torn between staying with her and answering the door.

I opened the door to find a short, graying lady with a closed-lipped smile looking up at me with the same sort of eyes I found so welcoming in Gracie. Sometimes, however, eyes can be deceiving in humans, especially the senior citizen variety.

"Hello, my name is Mary. I'm here because you've just experienced Satan's wrath, and I'm here to comfort you. Are you ready to welcome Jesus into your heart?" she said with all the sincerity of a true believer or snake-oil salesperson. I couldn't figure out which, if there was really a difference.

"I pointed to the mezuzah tacked to the door jamb and replied, "Did you happen to notice that this might not be the door for you to knock on?"

"Oh, no, that's the reason I knocked. You people need all the help we can offer."

"You people!" I shouted. "You've got the wrong people lady. Now, please go away. I have an upset dog that needs tending to."

"I'm sorry I offended you. I'm just here to help."

With that Gracie came bounding over to the door. She barked snarled and showed her teeth at the woman. This was an entirely unusual behavior. Fortunately, the screen door was

closed and kept her from charging outside. The lady raised a bible in the air and exclaimed, "Keep that beast away from me." And then she collapsed.

After the paramedics loaded the woman into the ambulance, one of the police officers who had also responded after I had called 911, came to the front door. Gracie leaned up against her leg while the officer massaged her behind her ears. Clearly, the policewoman knew how to approach a dog. "We've been getting complaints about that woman for weeks, but there's nothing we can really do. She kept muttering that Satan's hound had attacked her, but there's no way this sweet poodle had anything to do with her fainting. Have a nice evening, sir. The air is so fresh after that thunderstorm, but I hear more are on the way."

Gracie and I returned to the couch. She was snuggled up against my side. I heard some distant thunder and felt renewed electricity in the air. I looked down at Gracie and she looked up at me with a new kind of calm and reassurance. She appeared to be smiling in her own confident way.

## Jamal Returns

Jamal sat before Adam Bluestein, for the first time in thirty years since he was a twelve-year-old obstreperous African American young man attending Green Street Junior High School where Adam Bluestein was the school's principal. During those early adolescent school days, Jamal was frequently sent to the office by his teachers for being rudely outspoken, but now he voluntarily appeared to speak with Mr. "Bluesman", as many students referred to their principal who enjoyed playing ZZ Top during lunch in the school's quad.

"You're still here," said Jamal. "You've gone gray, but still look to be in good shape."

"You've always had a way with words, Jamal."

"It was a gift from my grandmother."

After a few bantering pleasantries, Adam informed Jamal that he would be retiring at the end of the school year and asked what the occasion of Jamal's drop-in visit was.

"I heard you were leaving and remembered that we had some unfinished business."

"It's been a long time, Jamal, what do you mean?"

Defying his teachers' predictions, Jamal graduated high school, was accepted into a historically black college where he earned a degree in business administration. His entrepreneurial spirit and willingness to take calculated risks led to financial independence.

"When I was a goof-off student here, you issued me a challenge. At the time, I thought you were just being some wise-ass old white guy trying to control this poor black kid."

"I was just trying to motivate you, Jamal."

"Well, I learned later in life that your good intentions were really your own white privilege at work. You offered to take me to anywhere I wanted to go for dinner if I brought you a report card showing I had earned a "B" average."

"I remember." Adam continued to listen wondering where this was leading. Jamal leaned forward, smiled, and then sat back with a knowing look and slowly shook his head.

"It didn't work. Part of your privilege was offering a challenge without support. You didn't get it, but neither did I. I managed to slog through high school with decent enough grades to get into college where I finally started figuring things out."

Adam probed with, "So you've come back to tell me how wrong I was."

"Not really. I'm back to collect. Here's my college transcript showing I earned the highest honors."

"Where shall we eat?" said Adam with a smile.

## The Cur and Its Master

Carmel Bay glittered and stilled most thoughts. A murder of crows filled a Monterey Pine with squawks and other noisy recriminations. It was midday and I sat on the patio watching for whales when a scruffy cur came sauntering by with its hobo master. My elegant, well-coiffed poodles ran to the entry gate and barked warnings to stay away from the premises, but the hobo stopped and turned his gentle, bearded head towards them while his dog curled at his feet. The poodles, not sure what to make of the situation, stopped barking and sat down at the gate.

The hobo, for I can't find other words to describe the tall man wearing faded dungarees, woven leather sandals, a brightly colored Mexican serape and carrying a twisted walking stick, stood serenely. He bent down and whispered something to his furry companion who appeared to raise its head with understanding and a twinkle in its eyes. The poodles' ears perked up and they both cocked their heads in wonderment.

"You have a couple of beauties there," said the wanderer. "My dog Ralph thinks they are particularly regal. Might we grant them each a wish?"

Now, I was taken aback because my name is Ralph. I thought: what were the odds that a hobo would come sauntering down the street with his dog, my namesake? I stood and walked over to the gate where my dogs continued to sit quietly and stare at the disheveled Ralph.

"My name is also Ralph. This is a bit of an unlikely coincidence."

"I find in my journeys many events that look like coincidences, but often have deeper meanings. How did you come to your name, good sir?"

This wanderer with the cur Ralph did not appear to be to be your normal hobo, and I asked, "How did you come to be a hobo offering wishes?"

"Thank you for noticing that I'm a hobo. Many think of me as a bum who is unwilling to work or a tramp who only works when forced to. Actually, I'm a self-employed roamer, a hobo in the true sense of the word with purpose and means. But, again, I ask: what is the origin of your name?"

“Ralph was not my given name. When I was a young boy my closest friend and I decided to exchange names as a friendship pact. He took my name, Mickey, and I took his. At first the exchange became assumed nicknames, which, over time, stuck.”

Mickey had been my best friend till his family moved away when we were eight years old. We freely roamed the open hills and fields behind our houses during a more innocent time when mothers told their children to “go out and play and be home in time for dinner.” It was a time when finding treasures such as dehydrated frogs and unusual rocks were more interesting than being glued to an iPhone screen. It was a time for making up stories and learning to negotiate differences without adult intervention. We invented our own games and weren’t told how to play. We could exchange names and identities without being sent to a therapist.

“How long ago did you switch names?”

“Almost 70 years.”

“A long time,” said the hobo. He bent again to whisper something to his dog, who seemed to whisper back. “Ralph says your dogs still have wishes coming.”

The poodles stood and approached the gate. Ralph the cur pushed his nose through the bars and gave each poodle a lick before backing away, sitting, and looking up his master.

“It’s time for us to move along. Ralph and I have both enjoyed meeting you and your regal dogs. We hope all of you enjoy the wish.”

“What wish?”

“You know that wishes can’t be spoken aloud. That would cause them to vanish. Use your imagination. That’s all that really matters anyway. Wouldn’t you agree?”

The hobo waved and continued on his way. The poodles and I returned to the patio. I reclined on the chaise lounge, closed my eyes and began to drift off into an afternoon nap. After what felt like a deep sleep, I was awakened by the poodles, one on each side of me, nuzzling my neck and licking my ears. In that space between sleep and being fully awake, I thought I heard them whisper, “It was thoughtful of Ralph to grant us wishes and Mickey was a nice man, too.”

Reflections – Under 100 word flash fiction

You caught me by looking at my reflection as I was looking at yours in the Cripple Creek Music Store's window. You stood with a bemused look and nodded at the window while I continued to play my guitar, singing folk songs with a raspy voice, and being caught off-guard by your startling beauty.

You turned and said, "You sound good."

I inquired if you played an instrument.

You replied, "Cello."

I asked if you'd like to have coffee, "No strings, I promise."

A bit of concealed laughter before replying, "Yes."

That's how our love song's duet began.

**Published in "The Drabble", December 18, 2019**

### Top Hat – Under 100 word flash fiction

The perfectly cooked rabbit was pulled out of the top hat and placed on the plate before us. “Bon appetite! And enjoy your magical treasures,” said the tuxedoed waiter. Service at Café Surprise was, indeed, different. We smiled at each other, shrugged, and cut into some of the most delectable meat we had ever tasted. As we finished the meal with a final sip of Oregon Pinot Noir, we held hands, closed our eyes, sighed with contentment, and suddenly found ourselves inside an immense top hat before it was lifted revealing a wildly applauding audience.

## Top Hat – Extended Version

The perfectly cooked rabbit was pulled out of the top hat and placed on the plate before us. “Bon appetite! And enjoy your magical treasures,” said the tuxedoed waiter. Service at Café Surprise was, indeed, different. Our good friends had encouraged us to make reservations for what they described as a “once-in-a-lifetime experience.” Our friends didn’t tell us that it was a suit-and-tie restaurant, and we were both dressed in business casual. We felt somewhat out of place when we entered and saw how formal the staff and patrons were dressed. We asked the maître d if we should return after changing into appropriate clothing, but she assured us we would be well taken care of. We were led to an intimate table, handed menus and asked if we would like to order a cocktail or some wine.

After our martinis were served and we had some time to review the menu even though we knew, based on our friend’s recommendation, that we’d be sharing the rabbit for two, we looked around the restaurant and felt an odd sense that the other patrons were taking surreptitious glances at us. Perhaps, it was because of our inappropriate garb. It was as though we were a featured stage attraction. I reached across the table and took my partner’s hands in mine, gave them a squeeze, and said, “I hope the food is as good as being here with you.” Summoning romantic words was never my forte. And then the waiter arrived and pulled the rabbit out of the top hat with a dramatic flourish.

We smiled at each other, shrugged, and cut into some of the most delectable meat we had ever tasted. As we finished the meal with a final sip of Oregon Pinot Noir, we, again, held hands, closed our eyes, sighed with contentment, and suddenly found ourselves inside an immense top hat before it was lifted revealing a wildly applauding audience.

## Preferred Endings

She always complained about certain endings. “How in the world could the writer...or director...end the story...or movie...without a satisfying resolution. It’s just wrong!” The latest grievance came after we had seen a collection of Oscar-nominated short films. Of the five we saw, three had complex endings requiring the viewer to speculate. “I don’t want to be put in the position of completing the story! I want to know what the filmmaker intended!”

As we walked down Main Street, I listened to Sara while looking down at my five-foot, 95-pound wife from my six-foot ten-inch, 300-pound lumbering hulk of a body. We met one day in Golden Gate Park while she was sitting on a blanket with her sister, both of them knitting hats, when I lunged for an errant frisbee and crashed into her. After pulling a knitting needle out of her hair and making sure she was okay, I apologized and introduced myself. I was immediately smitten by her smile and emerald eyes. Her sister began chastising me for my clumsiness and almost putting out her sister’s eye with a knitting needle. Fortunately, Sarah cut her off with, “I’m fine. And you are?”

Sara and I quickly became a serious couple in spite of her sister’s ongoing commentary, “Well, it’s a good thing you’ve found something you like about each other because you really don’t make for an attractive couple.” We married one year later. Sara doesn’t knit anymore, and I don’t play frisbee. We work long hours. I’ve found success as an artist creating kinetic sculptors and specializing in large installations. Sara makes much more money in a high-tech job that only she can explain, and I can try unsuccessfully to understand. Sara is the reason we can live comfortably in The City in a high-rise condominium with sweeping San Francisco Bay views.

“What I don’t understand, Sara, is how you can like my sculptors, which ask the viewer to interpret what they see, but find books or movies that ask for speculation so difficult to appreciate.” Sara said she enjoyed my sculptor’s colors, shapes and movements, and that was all she needed to understand. As she put it, “I like the will and the whim of moving air.” She was rarely so poetic.

One day Sara asked if she we might collaborate on one of my projects. She suggested she could motorize a sculpture using tiny motors utilizing wireless technology. “Although I do

appreciate the random nature of air currents moving your constructions, it might be fun to be more intentional using technology.” I thought we could give it a try. I was working on a large piece that was going to fill an immense atrium in a new hotel in Santa Clara. It had a wingspan of almost thirty feet and a height of about twelve feet. I made it out of fiberglass and aluminum to keep it lightweight. It was a stack of five colorful propellers meant to evoke images of the nearby San Jose International Airport. Each propeller’s edge was honed sharp as a sword and made to spin silently. Sara had developed a smartphone program allowing for the propellers to be spun at various speeds and in multiple directions. She also built in a safety feature that would keep the blades in alignment and from spinning too fast. The sculpture was designed to move languorously while creating almost hypnotic attention.

It was installed on a Wednesday just before the hotel’s grand opening. After testing and slight adjustments, I thought it was one of my finer constructions. I valued the working partnership Sara and I had formed, and the creativity it added to my work and our relationship. As we stood together gazing up at our creation, Sara remarked, “It looks like the colorful blades of a blender moving in slow motion.” I thought that was an interesting observation.

The hotel opened to rave reviews, and “Propellers to Space” was featured in several architectural and art’s publications. Every critic had a different interpretation of the mechanized sculpture. Some said the obvious, “colorful propellers as a tribute to the city’s airport.” Others took it a bit further, “colorful propellers meant to evoke the diverse, inclusive, and on-the-move nature of the region’s technology.” One critic described it as “a symbol of lifting spirits.”

It was about two years after the hotel had opened when a significant earthquake shook the entire Bay Area, with its epicenter just a few miles from the hotel. At that precise moment, several dozen guests were admiring “Propellers to Space” when the earth shook, and the propellers began pick up speed and spin out of control. The increasing speed of the sharpened blades along with the gyrations from misalignment caused the entire structure to violently break apart.

In the end, two hotel patrons were decapitated, six severely injured, and a dozen or so treated at the scene by paramedics before being released. The ensuing investigation revealed

that the smartphone app wasn't so smart after all. When we were informed of the tragedy, Sara fell sobbing into my arms. I held her. It was all I could think of doing. It was the one and only time we worked together on a piece of art.

## Trapped

Trapped. At least it feels that way with a Life Partner, three dogs, two cats, a gerbil and an ant farm. Two of the dogs, both of the cats, the gerbil and the ant farm being looked after while the Kid hitchhikes around the globe on a journey of self-discovery. The Life Partner and I not speaking at the moment due to the continuing argument over who needs to feed what animals at whatever specific feeding times that were dictated by the Kid before she left for worlds-to-be-discovered. The one dog the Life Partner and I share eats whenever he feels like it. So, when the virus hit and we were ordered to shelter in place, things got dicey. And the Kid is quarantined in Peru.

I've heard that resilience is an indicator of good mental health. Well, that might be true. But it's awfully difficult to be resilient when constantly nagged to pick up dog poop, clean out the cat box, and put fresh newspaper...torn into "not-too-wide and not-too-thin" strips...in the gerbil cage. Fortunately, the ant farm is low maintenance. I gave up responsibility for the shared dog several years ago. Resilience...better yet, recovery...seem to be a distant dream.

Then the Kid called. Finally. The Life Partner and I were sitting in the living room reading, the shared dog curled at my feet, and listening to the gerbil spinning away in its cage when my cell phone rang. I knew it was the Kid because of the distinctive ring tone she had installed. "Wild thing, you make my heart sing, you make everything groovy," was the portion of the Troggs 60's anthem that our twenty-three-year-old daughter thought an appropriate way of alerting us to her availability.

"Hello."

"Daddy, is the Life Partner there?"

"Are you okay? What do you need?"

"I need to talk to the Life Partner."

The Kid calls me on my phone, not the Life Partner's, to talk to her mother. Typical.

The Life Partner talks with the Kid for a few minutes, mostly listening with verbal nods, "Uh huh. Yes. I understand. I'll tell him." I watch and listen trying to decipher what sort of plot they are designing against me. The Life Partner hands the phone to me and says with a serious and somewhat caring tone, "She needs to talk to you. Please, listen and count to five before responding."

Count to five? Now I'm beginning to worry. The Life Partner only asks me to count to five when really difficult issues are raised. There was the time when the Kid, who was her high school

valedictorian, announced that she wasn't going to college. She didn't see the point. Although she had been accepted to three Ivy League colleges and offered scholarships that would almost entirely pay for a world-class degree, she didn't see the point. At one time, she talked about becoming a doctor specializing in tropical diseases and working in third world countries, but then didn't see the point. She was turning into a raving existentialist and I was preparing to give the fatherly lecture of a lifetime, but the Life Partner said, "listen and count to five before responding." Too often I don't see the point.

"Daddy, I'm scared."

The Kid was never scared. She was fearless. She never backed down when facing a challenge. When she was eight and we were visiting the zoo, she practically begged to get into the lion enclosure. "I want to tame a lion." In middle school she finished Algebra in sixth grade and demanded to take geometry at the high school. Without telling us, she strode confidently into the principal's office and told the Big Boss...her name for the principal...., "You need to arrange for me to take geometry at the high school. It's your responsibility to make sure I get a good education."

"Kid, what's wrong?" Even though her name is Samantha, and her friends and other family members called her Sam, we always called her Kid and referred to her as the Kid. When she was a newborn, I turned to Phyllis and said, "We've made a kid." And from that moment on, we both called her Kid. One of her aunts tried calling her Kid, but she quickly rebuffed that effort with, "Only Mom and Dad get to call me Kid." It was about that time that she also decided that Phyllis would be called the Life Partner. I continued to be Daddy. Life Partner stuck.

"I feel trapped. I'm stuck in a hotel room. I can't leave for any reason. Meals are delivered and left outside my door. I've been told that I could be arrested if I try to leave. Everyone is afraid of the virus, and I'm feeling scared and alone and wanting to come home. Are you and the Life Partner okay."

"We're on a bit of a verbal hiatus at the moment. It seems that we can't agree on how to take care of so many pets."

"How is George, Daddy?" George the Gerbil was the only one of the Kid's pets with a proper name. The others went by Dog One, Dog Two, Cat One, Cat Two, and Ant Relatives in a See-Through World.

"Oh, George is just spinning away and pooping in paper."

"I want to come home."

I could hear the tension in her voice; tiny breaks in what was always a clear and assertive tone. I looked over at the Life Partner and could read concern in her eyes. I wish I could reach through the phone connection, grab the Kid, and pull her home. "We want you here, but there's little we can do at the moment. It's just good to hear your voice. What are you doing in your cooped-up state?"

"I've got my computer and I'm able to do some design work. Money isn't a problem." The Kid was a self-taught graphic designer and web guru. She made plenty of money, which afforded her the luxury of continuous travel. "How are you and the Life Partner doing?"

"We're confined to home, too. We have groceries and other essentials delivered. The Life Partner just signed a pretty hefty book contract, and I had a poem published in another obscure journal." My wife has been a successful mystery writer for over thirty years. I've taught creative writing at the local community college and from time to time have had stories and poems published. So far, I've not received a single cent for anything I've written. The Life Partner inherited the successful writer's gene from her father. I inherited the frustrated artist's gene from my mother.

"That's great Daddy! One of these days you'll get the respect you deserve as a poet."

I hoped that "one of these days" didn't mean posthumously. "Well, at least nobody can criticize my poetry when it's published in an obscure journal that only obscure poets read. Your mother is the writer in the family. Her imagination takes others to unpredictable and engaging worlds. My poetry seems to reside within me with little access by others."

"Daddy, you are my poet."

"Kid, the Life Partner and I really want to help. What can we do?"

"Just listen. Be there for me. I'll get home eventually. And do me a favor."

"What's that?"

"End the hiatus with the Life Partner. She likes your poetry."

## Abby Learns to Play the Tuba

There's that look that my poodle gives when I ask her a question. "Emmy, would you like to solve a math problem? Emmy, what do you think of the current state of politics in our town?" She cocks her head in a way that I suppose all dogs...smart ones like poodles...do when faced with an inquiry that doesn't involve going for a walk. It's the same look my wife gave me when I asked, "Abby, what do you think about the two of us taking tuba lessons?"

"Huh?"

"It would be something we could do together. It might be fun."

Abby and I have been married for seventeen years. We chose to never have children and live our lives filled with adventure and unpredictability. We met shortly after graduating from college, filled with ideals and the visions of perfection, with good jobs, and a passion for each other. We tried to break out of any perceived ruts by signing up for painting, dancing...tango was a disaster...and music appreciation classes. We took vacations that family members questioned: studying fire ants in Texas, archeological digs in Cambodia...watching out for land mines...and adult space camp in Alabama. Neither of us played any musical instruments.

"But we're not musical. And why tuba?"

"I thought we could do Oktoberfest in Germany and join an oompah band."

"Seriously?"

"Why not?"

We found Helga's Top Brass Music by Googling tuba lessons. The website said that they had instruments and lessons for every age group. We entered and noticed an older gentleman behind the counter. He was a stout fellow and sported an immense gray beard. He greeted us and asked how he might be of assistance.

Abby said, "We called about tuba lessons."

He looked us over with an amused expression. Abby is the definition of cute and petite; I am sturdy and small. I had the sense that he didn't see us as hefty enough to play a large brass instrument, much less lug it around.

“Might I interest you in a trumpet or perhaps a French horn. Tubas are quite large and heavy.”

“No, we are determined to learn how to play the tuba,” replied Abby. I had always admired Abby’s assertiveness once she made up her mind. When I first broached the idea of tuba lessons, her first response after “seriously?” was to think about it. Less than a few hours later, she proclaimed, “Find us some tubas and an instructor. We’re going to Oktoberfest in two years.”

As it turns out Helga was Otto’s mother. She was retired, and Otto had taken over the family business. For the first year of our lessons, he insisted that we learn while remaining seated. We slowly moved beyond what he termed “initial instrument farts,” while learning to read simple music notation and making progress into the tuba’s deep, sonorous noises and then recognizable sounds. Abby was a quick learner and began making decipherable sounds early on. It took me months before I was able to match the noise with the musical notations. Otto often scratched his wiry head of graying hair in wonderment of Abby’s ability to blow enough air through the tuba’s mouthpiece. My breathing was consistently too shallow, my lips either too tense or too lax, and my fingering uncontrollable. Otto would utter, “Abby, you’re getting to oompah, but your husband is barely at oomph!”

On a rainy December evening, a little over a year since we began our lessons, Abby asked me if I thought we’d be ready to play publicly at the next Oktoberfest. “Abby, I think you are well on your way. You have real tuba talent. I’m not sure about myself.” I had begun to grasp the idea that my musical talent might be as a listener and not as a player. Yet, giving up was not part of my personality.

“Maybe tuba is not your thing. Let’s ask Otto.”

At our next lesson, we talked with Otto about options. Knowing that oompah bands typically employ trumpets, trombones, clarinets, tubas, accordions, and drummers, he suggested I take up the tambourine or cowbell. “It would be unusual but refreshing.”

The switch to a rhythmic instrument was not easy. It turns out my weak breaths and fumbling fingers on the tuba were not my only musical shortcomings. Apparently, I lacked a basic sense of rhythm. Otto convinced me that playing a simple woodblock was my calling. For

the next year, Abby and I rehearsed daily. Otto described the sounds emanating from her tuba playing as, “round, robust, earthy, and resonant.” To me he said, “You are mostly in rhythm, but be gentler with the hammer on the block.”

September arrived and Abby had learned several typical Oktoberfest songs. She was confident that she could play simple tunes with an oompah band. What was even more amazing was that Otto believed she had a highly tuned ear and could improvise even when she didn’t know the song. “You’re a natural, Abby.”

Our plan was to fly to Munich and participate in the festivities by spontaneously joining bands at one of the many so-called pop-up events. We figured that there would be enough beer being hoisted and sausages consumed to keep others from paying much attention to us.

Oktoberfest felt like Mardi Gras with lederhosen. We checked into our hotel carrying only backpacks and one tuba. My woodblock fit easily into my backpack. The front desk clerk welcomed us with a broad grin... probably reserved for Americans... and a guide to Munich’s celebratory activities. After a short in-room rehearsal, we were interrupted by a call from the front desk asking us to be respectful of neighboring guests. Abby wiped down her recently purchased tuba treating it like an infant. I left my woodblock on the chair. We went in search of a quiet place for dinner. The front desk clerk suggested a small delicatessen off the beaten track. “You won’t find any revelers there, and the food is moderately priced and very good.”

The hotel was amazingly quiet, and we both slept well in spite of the time change. Abby suggested we take a walk and get our bearings, find a place for breakfast, and ask locals where we might want to go for good local oompah music. One thing we found early on was that our inability to speak German was not a barrier to communication. Every German we encountered spoke excellent English.

“You want to hear oompah?”

“Actually, we came to play.”

“Oh, what instruments do you play.”

“I play tuba, my husband woodblock.”

“Woodblock? There are no woodblocks in oompah bands.”

Later that evening, when festivities were liveliest, Abby carried her tuba and I my not-an-oompah-band woodblock. We returned to a rustic square we had noticed earlier in the day. It was set up with long tables and filled with revelers. We were immediately welcomed by a young woman wearing a traditional dirndl. She recognized us as Americans and asked in her unaccented English, "You are here with the band? The rest of your group will arrive shortly. Sit and I'll bring you steins." Then she glanced at the woodblock and added, "I suppose you'll be watching and listening while your lady friend plays."

Now I was determined to make my woodblock sing. I kept hearing Otto's voice, "Hold your instrument like a butterfly, feel it's beautiful wings flapping, and allow rich tones to escape."

The musicians arrived and began playing recognizable Volksmusik that Otto had prepared us for. Abby and I edged behind and joined in. Abby had no problem picking up the rhythms and effortlessly blended in. Several of the band members turned their heads toward Abby smiling with their eyes and nodding approval. At the end of the first song, the other tuba player welcomed Abby with a pat on the back. "You play well for a tiny girl. Please, continue." Then he turned to me, "There are no percussion instruments like yours in our band, so please enjoy the music from the bench. Also, you still need to work on your rhythm."

I smiled at Abby and encourage her to continue. I was benched just like when I tried out for Little League baseball. The band played a dozen or so songs and then strutted off while continuing to play. Abby marched with them. I trailed behind having left my woodblock behind.

When we returned to our hotel room, Abby was ecstatic. She had triumphed and could feel it in her entire being. While I knew I was a failed musician, I was proud of her. She wiped off her tuba and gently set it back in its case. She tenderly embraced me and whispered in my ear, "I am the tuba."

Published in the *Finding the Birds*, May, 2020

## Unmatched

They weren't friends. They were brother and sister. They abhorred each other. It happened early and lasted almost their entire lives. It was their mother Celia's fault...an unwed delinquent who gave birth to twins at fifteen, and who believed her children were the curse of the devil. That's the simple version of an almost completely tragic story for one sibling and a remarkable one of resilience for another.

Sometimes it's difficult to separate comedy from tragedy. In this case, Bobo, born minutes before his sister Plum Pudding, was very much a comic character bordering on the absurd, as one might imagine when learning of his future employment. Plum Pudding, named after her mother's favorite nursery rhyme and her love of creamy desserts, experienced constant childhood ridicule because her name had been shortened to P.P. Who knows how things might have been different if her full name had been used instead. Bobo was allegedly named after his father who was a third-rate clown in a struggling, traveling circus. His one stop in Celia's town and a brief coupling, which Celia later described to her few friends as "hurtful and humiliating," had long term consequences.

Like cute and cuddly hamsters who sometimes chow down on their own offspring, Celia figuratively ate her own children by continuously berating Bobo and Plum Pudding with expletives and accusations of their satanic heritage. She managed to instill in both of them a fundamental hatred for each other. Of course, they also despised their mother. There were the predictable tangential consequences of an unloved childhood: few friends, failure at school, extreme loneliness, and some very interesting hobbies. Bobo enjoyed competitive tiddlywinks alone in his room. The competition was with himself and he enjoyed keeping complicated statistics.: the percentage of times he flicked the multi-colored discs into the bucket; not only by gross amount, but also by color. He filled notebook upon notebook with statistical tables. Plum Pudding found delight in her collection of selfie pictures. She didn't own a smartphone, so she drew pictures of herself while looking in a mirror. She possessed no artistic talent, and her bedroom walls were filled with grotesque images of how she perceived herself.

At twelve years of age, Bobo and Plum Pudding were placed in foster care. Celia had been arrested while running naked down Main Street, and eventually assigned to a group home for what Bobo and Plum Pudding were told was for paranoid schizophrenia. They never saw their mother again because soon after her group home placement, she ended her sad and unfulfilled life by stepping in front of the local express train.

Bobo and Plum Pudding spent the remainder of their supervised lives in separate homes...Bobo with two different sets of foster parents, and Plum Pudding finding her own unique talent to irritate four different households. Bobo managed to graduate from high school, which surprised his foster parents. Apparently, he had an aptitude for ingratiating himself with his teachers, and they passed him along in large part because he showed up on time and was rarely absent. The education system valued students just being there. Plum Pudding did not graduate. Ironically, she was a much in demand babysitter, in spite of the changes with her foster care families. Somehow her dour expression was taken to be seriousness by those families who entrusted their children to her care. And, since she did no harm, she kept getting childcare gigs and saved almost all her earnings.

At eighteen they were set free and told to find their own way in the world. There were social workers assigned to them as they transitioned to independence, but they were too overworked with huge caseloads and lost touch with Bobo and Plum Pudding within a few months. Even though they hadn't lived together or seen one another during their foster care years, they maintained a deep-seated hate for one another whenever the other's name was mentioned. Plum Pudding went so far as to get a tattoo that read "Bobo" in simple, black script inside a circle with a line through it on her right forearm and "Mom" also in a circle with a slash through it on her left. Celia had created a lasting legacy.

They had few life skills, poor attitudes, some limited funds, and very little curiosity or hope for a better life. As bad as that sounds, they managed to find low-level employment and avoid homelessness. Plum Pudding was hired as a full-time, live-in nanny by one of the families for whom she was a babysitter to their five children. She spent fifteen years with the Williams' before finding another nanny position. She spent her days caring for other family's children and never developed any friendships or significant relationships with others.

Bobo became the youngest greeter in Walmart's history. He managed to convince the store manager that he would bring freshness and new energy in place of the ancient retirees who were just looking for something to do before they became completely infirm and died. He greeted customers with gusto and a broad smile with all his youthful teeth intact. He had become adept at putting aside his maternally nurtured poor attitude to earn enough to live on. Over time, his faked affect morphed into a newer, more positive one. After a few years of referring to himself as a professional welcome mat, his section manager approached and asked him if he was interested in a more meaningful career, perhaps working his way up to management. Bobo spent the next four years working in a variety of positions: stocking shelves, constructing displays, assisting with customer service, and taking turns at the check-out stations. He was earning just enough to afford a better studio apartment and came to value the health benefit package. He had never been to a doctor, dentist, or optometrist and was pleased to find out that he was in good health, with only two cavities, and no need for glasses. Then his manager, who was now the assistant store manager, approached Bobo again with an offer of a promotion to low-level management. Bobo was sent to a three-week management training course and returned as the assistant manager for the sports and recreation department. He was defying all the odds of his childhood upbringing by becoming a moderately successful corporate up-and-comer. Yet, he had few friends and no special relationships.

Years passed, Bobo found continued success as the sports and recreation department manager. He earned enough to afford a one-bedroom, fully furnished apartment and began purchasing clothes and other goods from stores other than Walmart. He eventually made a few friends from work and even dated a few women employees. At thirty-five, he had a more positive and hopeful view of the future. Walmart was serving his professional and personal needs.

Bobo was dutifully patrolling the sports and recreation aisles when he noticed a woman with a young boy in tow. They were checking out the basketballs. Bobo, who now sported longish hair and a neatly trimmed beard, approached and asked if he might be able to help her find what she was looking for. Plum Pudding turned but didn't recognize her brother. She was wearing a white T-shirt, jeans, and open-toed sandals. Her dark brown hair was cut short,

almost boyish, and she had the expression of someone who didn't ever want assistance. Her bare arms clearly showed her tattoos. Seeing Bobo inscribed on one arm, he immediately knew it was his sister. He was surprised that he didn't feel antipathy towards Plum Pudding; rather, looked at her as a curious creature from a distant dream. He wasn't sure what to do.

"Are you looking for a basketball for your son?"

"Not my boy."

"Oh, well the Spalding balls are the best. That's what the NBA uses."

"I doubt they are using the ones sold here."

"Well, I wouldn't know that. But they are our best sellers."

Plum Pudding looked closer at Bobo. "Do I know you? You look familiar."

"I've worked at a lot of different departments. You've probably seen me around. I have one of those familiar faces. You probably shop here often. We are the most common shopping experience, after all."

"The family I work for hired a clown for their son's birthday party. Are you a clown on the side? You look a lot like him, but he was older."

"No, this is my only job. But was he a good clown? I've always wondered about clowns, and what makes them want to be clowns."

"I told the family that clowns can't be trusted and tried to talk them out of hiring one."

"Really? Can't be trusted? I'm a bit cautious of clowns, too."

"Yeah, I think my father was a clown."

Bobo was stymied. Should he announce, right there in the sports and recreation section that he was Plum Pudding's brother? They had been raised to hate each other; they were the offspring of Satan. They hadn't seen one another in almost twenty years. Thanks to his employment, he had found some purpose to his not quite solitary life. He was silenced by indecision. Plum Pudding picked up a basketball, beckoned her charge to follow along, and headed for the check-out station. Bobo was left with questions. Was it possible that the birthday clown was his never seen clown father? Could his name Bobo be a misspelling of Bozo? Might he be able to form some kind of relationship with a sister he never liked or respected?

Bobo spent the next several weeks searching for birthday clowns. He asked Stan, the manager of the fruits and vegetables department, who had become one of his closer friends...meaning they infrequently ate lunch together at the adjacent McDonald's, to help him do a Google search using a break room computer. Management encouraged its employees to improve their technological skills and kept a small bank of computers available to workers for their personal use. It was considered a radical idea by management but knowing that most of their employees couldn't afford their own devices, also described as a job perk. The most common use was public playing of solitaire or clandestine purchases on Amazon.

With Stan's help, Bobo found lots of birthday clowns, but none named Bozo. And none who looked vaguely like himself. To be sure, how could a clown in full make-up and billowy costume look like Bobo, who wore a full, methodically trimmed beard with no colorful facial adornment? Bobo gave up trying to find his clown father.

Time passed and Bobo was promoted to assistant manager. His name tag now identified him as Bob. He decided to distance himself from anything clownish. He was now earning a salary allowing him to move into an unfurnished two-bedroom apartment with amenities. He was slowly furnishing it with online purchases from Wayfair, Overstocked, Amazon, and even a few loyalty buys from his own store. His buddy Stan, who had also been promoted to one of the assistant manager positions, encouraged Bob to "move up in the world." Stan also began urging him to find female companionship. "Bob, you're in your thirties, it's time to think about family." Bob told Stan that he didn't think he had the makings of being a family man.

Bob was an exemplary employee. He showed up on time and never missed a day of work. He learned from his school days that simply showing up was the key to getting by. He took minimal vacation time and used it to mostly watch television in his apartment. Tiddlywinks was a distant memory along with much of his childhood.

One day a customer approached Bob and asked where he could find dietary supplements. Bob was giving directions when Plum Pudding approached, this time without a child alongside, and exclaimed, "You're Bobo!"

"And you're Plum Pudding. I remember helping you in sports and recreation."

"You're my twin brother."

“You’re my sister.”

Plum Pudding’s hair was still cut short and her expression unsmiling. Her arms were bare, and he noticed that the Bobo tattoo was barely visible. It was more like a shadow under her skin. The Mom tattoo was still prominent and seemed even more of a slander than before. She stood before him with her hands on her hips waiting for more of an answer.

“I’m not sure what to say. Those were terrible times, and we didn’t exactly do well with them.”

“Well, it looks like you are doing fine now,” to which she added “Bob” with a bit of a snarl.

“My boss thought Bobo wasn’t a proper name for a manager.”

“Well, I don’t go by Plum Pudding anymore. It’s Clara.”

Bob invited his sister to join him in the break room, where they exchanged contact information and made plans to meet after work for coffee. Clara explained that she was a nanny for a very nice family, really had no “after work” time, but could arrange to get together the following week at the Starbucks down the street.

Bob waited at the coffee shop for over an hour, but Clara never showed. He tried calling the phone number she had given him, but it was answered by an older woman who said that Clara had worked for the family over ten years ago and had no idea where she was currently living. Bob’s lost hope of any kind of reconciliation.

More time passed. Bob had a girlfriend. He had finally learned how to drive, a stick-shift no less. It was an ancient Fiat spider that burned a quart of oil a week. The convertible top was long gone, so it was only driven on sunny days. He and his girlfriend liked to take long drives and find secluded places to picnic. They were out for a drive one gorgeous spring day when they came by an open field where a traveling circus was being erected. Handbills attached to the surrounding fence listed several featured acts. Bob got out of his car to take a look. He thought perhaps Bozo the Birthday clown would be listed.

In the middle of the flyer was a picture of one of the top acts: Clara the Clown. Bob’s girlfriend asked if he wanted to go to the circus.

“I don’t think so. Clowns have always scared me. I used to hate one, but I got over it.”  
He got into the Fiat, shifted into gear, and smoothly drove away.

## Donnie and Hank

Looking back, Hank had led a successful risk-free life. He had very few near-misses, and they were always ones beyond his control, such as the time he was rear-ended by a texting teenager. With few exceptions, he obeyed his parents, followed the school rules, and spent his entire adult life free of entanglements, deceptions, and threats. As he packed his well-worn Samsonite, a suitcase given to him as a graduation present, for the trip to his 40<sup>th</sup> high school reunion, his wife came into the bedroom to make sure he picked the right clothes and wish him a happy trip. He and Sheila were high school sweethearts who married young and enjoyed a comfortable marriage.

Hank was not one of the popular boys in high school. He didn't grow into his height and out of his gawkiness until college when his moderate acne finally cleared up and he began to feel comfortable in his own skin. Sheila saw through his clumsy shyness and always thought of him as a good boy worth pursuing. She was also tall with longer arms than were necessary and a slightly off-kilter sense of humor. She had no desire to attend the reunion. She found nostalgia to be a flight of fancy and wishful thinking...opportunities to retell history in ways that fit the moment. "You go and enjoy yourself. I wonder if your old friend Donnie will be there. You haven't heard from him for so many years."

"Come all the way up Hank. The view is incredible!" They were at San Mateo's Central park celebrating Donnie's tenth birthday with hamburgers, chips, and a birthday cake in the picnic area. Donnie and I had wandered off to our favorite spot, which we called the Black Forest, an area of densely packed pine trees that seemed to stretch well into the sky. Donnie had taken to use its ladder-like tree limbs to climb near the top where he could sway back and forth to his own rhythm. I would climb about halfway up before feeling uneasy and wanting to go back to the safety of solid ground. Donnie was moving back and forth like a metronome's arm when I heard a loud crack and the limb on which Donnie stood gave way. Donnie, who had the balance and coordination of a spider monkey, quickly reached out for the trunk, hugged it, and gently moved to the next branch, where he stood and laughed while the broken limb fell. "Cool!" he shouted.

“Sometimes I do wonder about Donnie. After high school, he enlisted in the Army and I never really heard from him again. Viet Nam changed a lot of lives.” Hank looked at Sheila and felt a sense of gratitude that his college deferments and high draft lottery number saved him from the military. Shortly after college graduation, they were married and able to start a life together. “Do you know where my yearbook is? I think I’ll take it with me.”

Donnie lived three doors down from Hank’s house. Behind their houses was a drainage ditch that ran to the San Francisco Bay. During heavy rains and high tides, the ditch would fill with water, often a smelly, brownish liquid mud in the summer. One July, when they were eight or nine, Donnie suggested they build a raft from whatever scrap wood they could find and sail the raft out to the bay. They found several discarded pallets in an empty lot, which they used as the base for their going-out-to-sea vessel. After tying two of them together with some slightly worn sisal rope, they launched their watercraft and were pleased that it floated with each of them manning their respective sides of the pallet-raft. They used a pair of old golf clubs to pole the raft along, Donnie with an ancient Patty Berg hickory-shafted driver and Hank with a Sam Snead two-iron.

There was not much of a current, but they managed to push the raft along a few hundred yards before the ropes gave way and the pallets became unstable. Both boys slipped into the gunky water and found themselves standing chest deep in the stink. They pulled themselves up the muddy embankment and trudged home. Hank’s mother saw them walking up the block and called out, “Where have you been? You’re both a filthy mess!” She told them to stand on the front lawn while she hosed them off. “Donnie go home. Hank take your clothes off in the garage and get into the shower.” They both stood there drenched and with the pride of adventurous accomplishment.

Sheila handed Hank his yearbook already opened to the black and white senior pictures. The photographer dressed the boys with the bow ties and white tuxedo jackets and the girls with plain black tops adorned with a single strand of white pearls. Those were the days of strict conformity. Donnie’s picture didn’t show his gingery red hair and multitude of freckles but did highlight his large ears and gap-toothed smile. Many called him “Alfred” after Alfred E. Neuman of Mad Magazine fame. Donnie wore the nickname with a kind of infectious pride. Both Donnie

and Hank wore their hair cut short with the front pushed up straight with butch wax. "I always loved that picture of you, Hank, and Donnie's always made me smile."

For his fourteenth birthday, Hank gave Donnie a white, knicker's-style golf hat. Neither played golf, but Donnie thought it would be a great hat for driving a car. That's when Donnie suggested that they sneak out one night and take his parents' Renault - "town horn/country horn" - Dauphine out for a drive. Hank, with his natural disinclination to take risks told Donnie that wasn't a good idea. That didn't keep Donnie from waking Hank with soft midnight knocks at his bedroom window and coaxing him to come out for a drive. Hank snuck out the front door and they walked to Donnie's house, slowly opened the garage door, and silently rolled the Renault into the street and around the block before starting the engine.

"Donnie, it's a stick shift. We don't know how to drive a stick."

"Not a problem. I've watched my father."

With that, Donnie pulled down his golf cap and managed to lurch forward and stall the car several times before he was able to get it moving. He crept along several blocks before pulling over, having never gotten the car out of first gear.

"Your turn, Hank."

"No, I think we need to turn and go back home."

"Your turn, Hank."

Hank managed to herky-jerk the car forward to the next intersection, where he stalled the engine at a four-way stop just as a patrol car pulled up on the side street to their right. Hank's right leg began shaking uncontrollably and Donnie whispered, "Be cool." The police car moved along without taking notice of the boys. Hank said, "Let's get back home." Apparently, the engine was flooded, and they ended up pushing the Renault three blocks and back into the garage. Hank slunk back home and woke Sunday morning without anyone else being aware of the evening's prank.

"Sheila, I guess I have everything I need. I'll see you Sunday night."

"Oh, Hank, give me a call if Bunny or Mike show up. Remember, they were the homecoming queen and king. I wonder what happened to them. Also, call if Donnie is there."

She gave Hank a hug, patting him on the shoulders, and a lingering kiss, which Hank never took for granted.

Hank guessed that about 90 or so from his class of slightly over 300 showed up for the Friday night reunion dinner. Bunny, Mike, and Donnie were not there. And they didn't attend the Saturday afternoon picnic. No one seemed to know what ever happened to Bunny and Mike. There were a few salacious rumors that Bunny was pregnant at graduation, hastily married Mike soon after, and divorced when their daughter was two or three.

There was slightly more information about Donnie. Their mutual friend Kevin told Hank that Donnie had enlisted in the Army immediately after graduation. He trained as a paratrooper, but never went to Viet Nam. He was stationed in Germany for his entire hitch. After serving eight years, he settled in Nevada and worked for the U.S Forest Service for over twenty years where he was a smoke jumper and later a trainer for new forestry service recruits. After he retired from the Forest Service, he started a sport jumpers' business outside Reno where weekend warriors could get their thrills jumping tandem on Donnie's or one of his other employees' backs. He did a big birthday, anniversary, and other special occasion business. Kevin knew he had several wives, but no children. Hank wondered why Donnie had never stayed in touch.

When Hank called home later that evening and told Sheila about Bunny, Mike and Donnie, she remarked, "I'm not surprised about Donnie. He was such a goof. He was always a risk-taker. I'm sure his wives never felt secure with him. I've always felt safe with you."

On his drive home through the San Joaquin Valley, Hank noticed a billboard offering parachute jumps for the "truly adventurous." The jump, kept secret from Sheila, was exhilarating.

## Jolly Rollie

Some think it's easy to predict how one's childhood will become their adulthood. The problem with that theory is how one's resiliency is formed. Those experiencing the most wretched early years might still turn out emotionally stable and socially successful. And yet there are those of extreme privilege who end up being the surliest grown-ups. We all know this; it's common sense for any student of human behavior. And it's interesting to follow a boy who becomes a man who goes through several name changes, follows his own path, and eventually takes an interest in being a self-taught mycologist.

Roland was a big boy. He was the kid who was called names by the other kids: fatso, stupid, dummy, retard, idiot. He never seemed to mind; in fact, he appeared more curious than put-off. From his earliest school days, he would ask the name-callers questions: What do you mean? How come you are saying that? Where did you learn those words?

More often than not, his taunters became confused and stopped when they didn't get the anger or tears they expected. Perhaps Roland was disarming in his own unique way. His size seemed to dissuade any physical abuse. Little did the bullies know that Roland was not apt to engage in physical combat. He just asked questions and smiled in what appeared to be curiosity, although curiosity can sometimes be thought to be a cover-up.

His parents said he was an early smiler based on the growth and development books they had read. Because of his continuously happy countenance, they called him Jolly, as in Jolly Rollie. Otherwise, he was an average child. He crawled, stood, and walked at the predictable ages and stages. He began talking with invented language and eventually intelligible speech just like other average children. In addition to his early smiles, his only other non-averageness was his size. That was hardly predictable, as his parents were both less than average at barely over five feet tall and just tipping the scales at slightly over 100 pounds. Jolly's size was a surprise.

He found school to be easy but didn't achieve high grades. His parents told him to always sit in the front row and look interested, which went along with his early ability to seem curious. They told him that the mere appearance of interest would guarantee passing grades. He loved reading, but not the books assigned to him. He loved writing, but not the kind

teachers expected of him. He dutifully completed his homework and followed his parents' advice to sit up front with a finely developed look of interest on his smiling face. He received passing grades with an endearing attitude but not much effort.

When he was in sixth grade, he decided that he wanted to be a storyteller, or most likely a journalist. He began keeping a journal of imagined biographies of his schoolmates, especially about those who treated him unkindly. He wrote dispassionately and with an objective point of view. His ability to separate himself from the most affective stories would serve him well in his later career when he became a reporter for his city's newspaper.

He never shared his early stories, a collection that grew through middle and high school, which later in life he reflected back upon as his observational diaries and believed it was all the training and experience he needed to become a journalist.

Rollie grew to be six foot seven and over three hundred pounds. By his sophomore year in high school he stood six foot five, weighed over 250 pounds, and the football coach tried in vain to recruit him. Instead, he chose to spend all of his free time working on the school newspaper and yearbook. By his junior year, the name-calling by his peers had stopped. He began referring to himself as a self-made nerd who kept company with other nerds. He shared his at-home nickname of Jolly Rollie with his nerd friends which they shortened to Jolls. That name stuck. Jolls Ryan would eventually become a writer of some notoriety.

After high school, he attended the local community college before transferring to a state college and earning a degree in English. The college had long since dropped journalism as a major, but Rollie, now known as Jolls, used his love of writing to find summer internships at two local publications: The City Times and the Neighborhood Shopper. The City Times eventually hired him as a cub reporter where he commonly wrote human interest stories and took charge of important obituaries.

Jolls was not a hobbyist, but one day the science writer Sydney Low at The City Times asked Jolls if he'd like to go mushroom hunting. Jolls was hooked. He and Sydney made regular weekend jaunts looking for several varieties of edible fungi and learning which ones to avoid. Jolls spent much of his free time online and at the library studying all he could about mushroom

facts, fantasies, superstitions, and interesting recipes that he enjoyed cooking. He was becoming something of a mushroom gourmand.

A few years passed, and Jolls achieved senior status with The City Times. Sadly, his parents were killed by a hit-and-run driver shortly after his last promotion. Jolls wrote their obituaries even though they were not considered important people by The City Times standards. Jolls inherited his parents' home, a tidy sum of money and other assets. His parents were savers, not spenders. They were also clever investors, and Jolls found that he didn't need to work to live comfortably. He requested part-time status, and the paper was more than happy to oblige. Jolls had loftier, more meaningful, plans.

The neighborhood Jolls grew up in and where he now lived again, was a typical suburban tract of mostly three-bedroom, two bath ranch houses with two-car garages. Fiesta Shores was a pleasant community of over 400 homes with its own shopping mall and a desirable purchase for first time homebuyers. Quite a few of the original owners still lived there. Jolls even recognized a number of former schoolmates who lived in the old neighborhood. Over time, several homes had been remodeled with additions creating two-story houses almost twice their original size. Some homes were gutted to create an open floor plan with new chef's kitchens open to living and dining rooms. Joll's family house still maintained the original floor plan with separate rooms and a small galley-style kitchen. His parents had kept it in immaculate condition with regular maintenance: fresh paint, new carpeting, roofing, incidental repairs and upgrades and well-manicured gardens. The only change Jolls made was to move in his own furnishings, which better fit his size. He also hired a gardener because he didn't see himself as the green thumb type.

By working part-time at The City Times, Jolls planned to create The Fiesta Shores Gazette, a local news circular focused on neighborhood stories. It would be a four or five-page paper, free of charge and without advertising. He would publish it every four to six weeks with the majority of the content being neighbor biographies drawn from interviews and his own observations. It would be a natural extension of his childhood journals, his "observational diaries." In fact, he decided to begin by interviewing those families he knew from his school days. His bigger plans were beginning to materialize.

He posted flyers announcing the new publication on the community bulletin boards at the local mall and a few other business locations. He invited inquiries by phone or email and was immediately contacted by over a dozen Fiesta Shores neighbors enthusiastic about being interviewed and featured in The Fiesta Shores Gazette. "What a great idea! It'll really give us a greater sense of community. I'd love for you to interview me and my family." In his experience, those wanting to be questioned were often the ones who made for the least favorable interviews; however, he scheduled appointments and spent the next month in conversation with all of the initial contacts. After a series of mundane conversations, he concluded that most folks were living common and predictable lives. There were the usual gossipy stories of marriage, divorce, affairs that others were having, financial problems, and the difficulties of raising children in an increasingly dangerous world. While these stories would not have been fodder for The City Times, he thought they would generate neighborhood interest. After all, in a world where neighbors hardly speak to one another anymore, The Fiesta Shores Gazette would create a sense of interconnectedness.

He was just finishing an interview inside Sweet's Coffee Shop when he was approached by Steven Mueller. Jolls recognized Steven from high school and also knew him from elementary school when he had been one of Jolls's chief tormentors.

"Well, look who's here! Rollie. I heard you were back and living in your parents' place. I heard they passed. You look like you've gotten even bigger since I saw you last." Jolls stood, towering over a much shorter Steven.

Looking down at one of his former nemeses, Jolls asked with diminution dripping from his question, "Still living at home, Stevie?" Jolls smiled.

"No. I bought the house next to my parents'. They're old and I can keep an eye on them. And I work from home, so it's easy."

"Are you in contact with many of the old crowd?"

"Yes, quite a few. It's remarkable how many are nearby. We get together from time to time. Want to join us?"

"Sure." And with that, Steven was on his way and Jolls ordered another coffee, sat at a round table by the window and began making notes. Later that afternoon, he went to the

library to do a bit of research on some local mushrooms. Even though the Internet was an easy and convenient source for any references he might pursue, he still favored the touch and textures of real books. There were several local guides that Jolls found useful when scavenging for mushrooms and choosing the safe ones.

A few days after their chance coffee shop meeting, Steven called Jolls and invited him to meet at a local brewhouse for beers. He mentioned that three others from their schooldays would be there, too. Jolls said he'd look forward to joining them and also conducting interviews for The Fiesta Shores Gazette. Jolls had already published three editions, and they were very well received. Local merchants inquired about placing ads, but Jolls said he wasn't considering advertising "at this time." He explained that the publication was simply a gift from him to the neighborhood. Word circulated that Jolls might be setting himself up for other endeavors. Perhaps a political future? While most of the community thought Jolls was just being a "nice guy with money," some held the view that he was "up to something."

Jolls met Steven and his three other friends at the Black Horse Brew Pub on Thursday evening. Jolls listened as they reminisced without once mentioning how they used to bully him. It was as if their collective memories had expunged mean-spirited histories and what was left were carefree and innocent stories.

"Thanks for inviting me out for a beer. How about I have you over to my place for dinner? Then I could do some interviews for the paper."

They collectively nodded acceptance and Steven said, "That would be great."

"How about this Sunday. I've become something of a mushroom aficionado and would love to prepare a specialty meal from what I forage this Saturday."

One of the other former bullies asked, "Is that safe, Rollie?"

"Oh, yes, I've become something of a fungi expert." Jolls didn't bother telling them that he now went by Jolls. He didn't think that would make any difference, especially with what he had in mind.

Jolls spent most of Saturday finding and collecting several species of fungi. It had been rainy and damp for much of the preceding week, which made for good mushroom hunting. He filled several large grocery bags. When he returned home, he cleaned and sorted his bounty. He

began preparing for the dinner Sunday morning. He planned a three-course menu where each course featured a medley of mushrooms. The appetizers would be mushrooms stuffed with crabmeat; the main course a mushroom stew; the dessert course would feature a recipe he found with a Google search. It was the most difficult and time-consuming dish that he diligently worked on and to which he added a few special touches. He believed that the Candy Cap Ice Box Pie would be the pièce de résistance.

After Steven and the others arrived, they were immediately seated and served a moderately priced champagne. Jolls explained what they would be eating and served the appetizers. His guests were quite impressed.

“Rollie, where did you learn to cook like this? These stuffed mushrooms are fantastic!”

“There are many things we don’t know about each other unless we inquire and take a real interest. For example, I’ve always wondered how all of you would turn out. After all, you weren’t the easiest to be around when I was growing up in the neighborhood.”

“Oh, Rollie, we meant no real harm. We were just being kids. And, admit it, you were always different from us. You’ve always been the big one.”

“True,” said Jolls. “But I was always curious about all of you while putting up with your abusive behavior.” The four guests paused and put their forks down. Jolls continued, “Ready for a special mushroom stew?”

He dished out the stew, which he served with a medium-bodied Beaujolais and thick slices of crusty sourdough bread. Again, his guests marveled at how tasty the stew was. Steven, who took the conversational lead for his guests, stood and offered a toast. “To Rollie, a big guy with a big heart and awesome chef skills! Thanks for having us, and we are looking forward to being interviewed.”

“Dessert first,” said Jolls.

The pie was delivered with a smile and a flourish. His guests looked at beautiful rounds of what appeared to be chocolate cake covered with a rich swirl of buttercream and topped with a red-capped mushroom. “These look so good, Rollie.”

After they finished, Jolls said, “You don’t know how difficult this dinner was for me to prepare. I kept thinking of all the harmful things you did to me over the years. You are really

just a gang of ignorant, mean-spirited people. Did you know that red-capped mushrooms are highly poisonous?”

The next day, Steven called to tell Jolls that they had all rushed to the hospital and had their stomachs pumped after what they thought had been a fantastic dinner. They were relieved that none of them became sick, but it was nonetheless a cruel thing for Jolls to have done. Jolls smiled to himself and thought the red food coloring on otherwise harmless mushrooms was their just desserts. The stories he wrote about them for The Fiesta Shores Gazette were even sweeter.

## Jackie's Domain

Jackie Gleason raised his huge pinniped head and looked over his harem. Mahalia Jackson and Ethel Merman barked and actively flaunted their readiness. There was no doubt about their intentions. The Central California Coast offered elephant seals several sandy expanses for their breeding and pup rearing activities. Local marine biologist Byron McCoy had spent years studying what he came to affectionately call clownish, oddball and lovable characters. And he enjoyed naming them. Besides Jackie, Mahalia, and Ethel, whom he had now observed for the last three years, he had noted on his last visit that Michael Jordan and Adele were nowhere to be seen. He thought that perhaps they had found another comfortable beach with more fruitful possibilities.

As Byron crested another sand dune and looked over a recently populated section of the shoreline, he thought about his own romantic failures. He had drifted from one relationship to another and his friends referred to him as a serial monogamist. Relationships lasted from weeks to months, and rarely more than a year or two. His most recent having ended the night before, when Rhonda told him to leave her apartment shouting, "Go back to your blubbery beasts and try to figure out how it really works! You're such a loser!" Byron had been trying to explain how alpha males breeding with their harems might be a lesson for a human world where females outnumbered males. "Seriously, Byron, you haven't a clue. You're not around to simply service women!"

Byron sat on the warm sand, pulled his notebook and camera out of his backpack, and continued to observe Jackie's domain. Jackie and the harem were at rest. Some of the females tended to their pups while others basked on the soft sand. Byron made a note that even elephant seals required peaceful interludes. He began taking pictures, especially of the new pups, whom he had yet to name. He was thinking rap stars Tupac, Cardi B, Jay-Z, but wouldn't even consider Kanye and his terribly vain personality, when a woman approached from behind and asked, "Do you mind if I share this spot with you? I'm doing a study of elephant seals."

"Sure. I'm doing the same." Byron introduced himself, and after an hour or so of getting acquainted, with Byron sharing the names of each member of the pod, Gloria asked about

Jackie and his skill as the alpha male. Byron gave a detailed account of Jackie's prowess with the cows and the many pups he had sired. Gloria listened intently and asked only a few relevant questions. At one point, Byron paused and was struck by Gloria's green eyes, which seemed to look at him with open curiosity. She had a welcoming and genuine smile.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to share this spot with you for a while, maybe a few weeks or so. I think there's a lot we can learn from elephant seal behavior."

Byron replied, "I think you may be on to something."