

THE UNEXPECTED
— NEW —
BEST FRIEND

IF THERE'S A BROKEN ONE ON THE SHELF,
I WILL BE THE ONE WHO ENDS UP WITH IT.

MICHAEL E. DUBY

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Publishing Services provided by Paper Raven Books LLC

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing, 2022

Paperback ISBN= 979-8-9851806-0-2

*This book is dedicated to my two GREAT children, Tobin and
“Gretchen” (name changed for her privacy). You are wonderful! I
love you more than life itself!*

WITH EVERY BOOK SOLD, A DONATION WILL
BE MADE TO AN APPROPRIATE ORGANIZATION
THAT SERVES RETIRED MILITARY VETERANS
OR ACTIVE MILITARY.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. The Man	1
2. Running With Mow Fly.....	7
3. Here Comes Not-So-Little Gretchen!.....	11
4. Is There Something Wrong Here?.....	18
5. Is This Really Happening?	24
6. More Hell To Come.....	29
7. A Light At The End	33
8. Operating Mow Fly	37
9. The Black Walnut Dilemma.....	40
10. The Lovely Landscape	67
11. Forever Fighting Kung Fu Footbridges!	69
12. Snacks And Steaks And “Carlton Of The Bow Tie And Corinthian Leather Shoes”.....	71
13. None Shall Pass	74
14. The Heaving Haunted Fence	76
15. The Halloween Buzzer	78
16. The Shed Of Stories And Memories Long Since Forgotten	87

17. Tora Tora Tora	93
18. Edgar, “The Fat Groundhog,” And The Garden Of Capitulation.	96
19. It Was The Best Of Times.	100
20. Oh So Tasty, Oh So Tough, Oh So Wrong	103
21. A History Of Heroics.	106
22. Young Children Alert	109
23. No Man’s Land.	117
24. Venturing Into The Adventure	119
25. Wrestling For The Nestling.	121
26. Bring Out The Big Guns	129
27. Uncle Jim’s Worm Farm And The Squirmy Red Wigglers	136
28. The Morning After	144
29. You Can Call Me Jay	148
30. Up, Up, And A What?	151
31. Wow!	155
32. The County Fair.	158
33. Give Me Some Food, Baby.	185

34. The Whistle Trick	187
35. Seeing Is Truly Believing.	190
36. Going Hunting With Jay-Rob	194
37. Jay-Rob Gets Lost!	196
38. It's Been A Hard Tuesday Night. Was In A Car Crash With My Dog	202
39. Epilogue.	212
Acknowledgments	225



THE MAN



One day, 16 years ago, June 12 to be exact (it was a beautiful Saturday mid-morning, about 10:30), “The Man” went outside to mow the lawn. The Man was an average but muscular guy. He wrestled in high school and college for six years, studied martial arts for several years, and had refereed high school and college wrestling for some 15 years. He’d had all the athletic injuries and surgeries along life’s journey to age 48 and carried the battle scars to prove it. He had not served in the military. The Vietnam War was winding down when he was in high school and he decided to take a different path than his father, “The Old Man,” and his brother, “The Bro Man.” He stood just under 6 feet tall. 5 feet, 10 ½ inches to be more precise. (He preferred to say 6 feet minus.) He weighed in at about 180 pounds and he had light brownish hair, slowly turning gray. (But he chose to call it white.) He kept his hair just long enough to where it reached about halfway down over the ears. In the back, his hair went just above the collar. On the left side of the back of his head, his hair was straight. On the right side, however, it was wavy. He had noticed many years prior that The Bro Man had the same type of wavy hair, but HIS hair was wavy on the left side and

straight on the right. The Man never quite figured that one out. The Man had piercing blue eyes and was quick with a smile, joke, comment, or word of encouragement. He sometimes cried at movies (especially when Bambi's mother died), but always put his right elbow on the armrest of the chair next to him, bent his arm up, and put his thumb on his jawbone. With his forefinger on his temple, he wiped the tears off his cheek with his middle finger before anyone could notice. He had a wicked sense of humor (at least HE thought so), and people generally liked him. He liked other people as well, and he loved animals. Dogs, birds, not so much cats, but most animals caught his favor. The Man did not care much one way or the other about goldfish, but he was always a sucker for a lost, injured, or abandoned animal that happened to cross his path.

He had a dog. But not just ANY dog.

It was a German Shepherd dog.

It was a very beautiful long-haired German Shepherd dog named Lucas. He was the fourth in a line of four German Shepherds. The Man had been honored that they all had allowed him to be their master across 30 years. And he loved this dog more than all the others.

One year at a Christian leadership camp that The Man and his son, Tobin, were attending, Randy Simms, one of the speakers said something that stuck in The Man's head. "When Adam sinned, God changed everything...except for the Dog, because God felt sorry for the man." While not quite scriptural, The Man tended to agree with the thesis.

The Man also held to the idea that the German Shepherd can be traced all the way back to the beginning. This dog was the first dog of creation. All the other breeds are simply genetic degradations of the mighty German Shepherd.

Looking back at his life, The Man had drawn a conclusion about something. He didn't discuss it much and had just mentioned it to only a few close friends and relatives. He had determined through many years of experience and keeping detailed records that there was a predictable "quirk" in how his life usually played out in practical everyday events.

He had found that life had "blessed" him with a constant. It was reliable and it was predictable. He summed it up in one short sentence: "If there is a broken one on the shelf, I will end up with it."

There were other less obvious manifestations of this anomaly as well. The most common one had a variable built into it. It was similar to a mathematical formula. In short, it goes like this, “The odds of a GREEN light turning RED, JUST before you arrive at the intersection, are directly proportional to how late you are for your appointment.” Other variations and iterations usually involved policemen and tickets.

It is important to keep in mind that The Man wasn't angry about it, and it didn't make him sad. He simply had resigned himself to it. It didn't matter what kind of product he was purchasing nor how much it cost, but it was usually something that would fail at the worst possible moment and be inconvenient to replace. Nor did it matter if it had been purchased locally, like at a big-box store, or if it was purchased directly from a major manufacturer.

And that is just how his life worked. He had accepted it with humor and with grace. He called it “The Life Theorem,” or just, “That's my life.”

It had been a couple of weeks since The Man had mowed the grass and it was unusually tall. The people in the homeowner's association, Blanch, Brunhilde, Butch, and Bruno (Brunhilde's brother from a rather long chain of unimaginative parents when it came to naming children. Their mom and dad

were “Betty” and “Bob”), were beginning to look at The Man suspiciously. He decided to get the job over with before “The B Squad” from the HOA came to the door bearing a tape measure and a copy of “THE RULES.”

It was a beautiful day outside. The sun was shining and there were large clouds overhead to provide some shade. Birds were flying around and dive-bombing the yard looking for insects and worms and perhaps a potential mate. Some of the more irritating birds seemed to be competing to see who could poop on the most cars while hitting the prime target areas, which were driver’s side windshields (front and back). It would seem to the casual observer that they generally preferred to aim for the front windshields of *moving* cars. Upon closer observation, The Man saw that they also seemed to like bombing the more expensive cars and the ones that had just been washed and waxed. He decided that it likely had something to do with some fine-feathered point-keeping system.

All of this was going on against a backdrop of 78 degrees, a light breeze, and a deep blue sky, if you please.

The Man’s “adventure supply” had long since run dry. It was running on fumes, and even the fumes were faint, fond impressions of the ancient past.

The Unexpected New Best Friend

Today, everything would change for The Man.

2

RUNNING WITH MOW FLY

The Man had recently purchased the new zero-turn-radius Hustle Model B-9 lawn mower from the local Hustle dealer. He had liked driving the new mower up and down the street in front of his house, but today would be the first time he would actually mow the grass with it, and he was just a bit nervous. But not the bad kind of nervous. The mower was five feet wide and it had a 42-horsepower turbocharged engine. (Not really, but he surely would have liked for it to have been so. The turbo engine was not an available option at the time. A 42-horsepower model became available three months after he purchased this one. OUCH!)

The Life Theorem in action.

The Man knew that THIS was the mower that he would have from the moment he saw it.

The mower had a 21-horsepower engine with a muffler that made the ride a lot less noisy, even quiet. He'd even had the tachometer option installed, simply because he liked the idea. The rear tires were the knobby type so the mower could go uphill

more efficiently and would not slide around on the turns. They were pneumatic and larger than the front tires, which allowed the turns to be very sharp. The mower was bright yellowish orange in color and had black lettering. The Man put some racing stripes on it using black electrical tape to make it look a bit “cooler.” He also added some flame decals for embellishment. For safety’s sake, there was an automatic feature that killed the blades and the engine if the driver exited the mower either expectedly, or not so much. It also had two cup holders. With room for only one person in the mower, The Man thought that was a bit curious, but he had gone ahead and spent the extra \$25 for the second cup holder anyway. Why? Simply because he wanted to be prepared in case he got extra thirsty while mowing.

For fun, he had named the new mower “Super Mow Fly,” or just “Mow Fly” for short. He had painted the name on the side along with the racing stripes.

When he bought the mower, The Man had also purchased one of the new, plastic, fire-engine-red, five-gallon safety gas cans. It was one of the brand new, RECENTLY ENGINEERED, plastic, fire-engine-red, five-gallon safety gas cans.

It was the kind of gas can that comes with a manual...

After fumbling and fidgeting, fussing and fuming and figuring out for hours just how the nozzle in the fire-engine-red

safety gas can actually worked, he took a break and had two Diet Fanta colas.

One for each cup holder.

Finally, after destroying the can and its nozzle while trying to open it with a pipe wrench, The Man had to go back to the store and buy a new one.

After going through the previous ritual...again... eventually, The Man decided that it would simply be easier to cut the nozzle off the can with a hacksaw. He went back to the store yet again to buy a big funnel and a hacksaw and blade. He was able to get the hacksaw. They didn't carry funnels. He had to go to a different store to get one.

THAT store was out of funnels. He had to go to ANOTHER store. He finally made it home with everything he needed and got to work. Halfway through separating the nozzle from the gas can with the hacksaw, the blade broke.

The Man was getting off to a slow start.

He was not nearly as happy as he had been when he woke up that morning.

Eventually, about four hours later The Man got the new can, funnel, and hacksaw. He stopped at the gas station to put five gallons of high-octane gasoline into the new gas can. Once home and without further mishap, he managed to pour 4.2 gallons of the high-octane gas into Mow Fly's high-capacity tank. He checked the oil and climbed up into the nicely padded seat.

He hit the starter switch, pulled the choke button, and VROOM the mower sprang to life! The man checked the tachometer for some reason, throttled the engine speed up to 11, engaged and lowered the blades and waited for them to get up to speed. He then slammed the padded steering handles forward, which caused Mow Fly to pop a short wheelie, which launched him into warp drive.

And then, he began...the...ignominious...task.....
of.....mowing.....the.....grass.....again.

As The Man was beginning to mow the lawn, he was reminded of another beginning when he glanced up at the back window and saw his daughter, Gretchen, sitting at the dining table, reading one of her favorite books, *Lassie Come Home*. Every time he looked at her, he couldn't help but think of the time she was born, and how lucky he was to have such a wonderful daughter.



HERE COMES NOT-SO-LITTLE GRETCHEN!



Thirteen years prior, The Man found out that he was going to be a father, and he was ecstatic! He held the news from Tobin for a few moments and decided to take his seven-year-old son, Tobin, out for an ice cream cone to celebrate. The two of them got Keeper (The Man's dog at the time) into the car and then into the cargo area in the back. Off they went!

When they got to their favorite ice cream place, the three of them got out of the car and The Man ordered up three cones. Two scoops each. (They NEVER got double scoops and Tobin noticed the difference right away. Keeper NEVER got ice cream, on purpose, at all.)

Tobin asked about the ice cream. "Dad? Why did we get two scoops? We ever only get one..."

The Man sat Tobin down on the bench at the ice cream stand.

"Well, we're celebrating! YOU are going to be a big brother!"

The Unexpected New Best Friend

Tobin was THRILLED when The Man broke the news! FINALLY, he would have a sister! He couldn't believe his ears! He had wanted a playmate for several years, and now one was on the way! He even started making plans for things to do with her when she came.

All that was left was the waiting.

The ice cream was especially good that evening. Keeper seemed even more enthusiastic about his cone than one would reasonably expect.

They drove back home singing Weird Al songs along with the car radio. Keeper howled right along with them.

In the back of his mind, The Man was remembering the time when Tobin was born and how happy he was upon HIS arrival.

Seven years prior, The Man was THRILLED to learn that he was going to have a baby boy. He had gone to (most of) the doctor's appointments and ultrasounds. He had gone to prenatal

classes and when the time came, waited for the baby to come. He sat in the delivery room through most of the labor. When it became obvious that an episiotomy would be necessary, he was not quite prepared for what he saw. He nearly passed out on the floor. The Man took a couple of hits from the oxygen bottle in the corner of the delivery room and got back with the program. Tobin popped out few moments later. He didn't seem too happy about the situation and had a pretty bad attitude about it all.

Now, seven years later, The Man was going to have a baby girl! Tobin wanted to be in on all the action. After all the classes had been taken, the books had been read, the films had been watched, Tobin was ready for the big day: the arrival of his little sister. And, while Tobin could have been a bit jealous about all the attention that was being given to the new baby, he would turn out to be the big brother to her that every child wished they had.

A few months later, it was finally time for the baby to come! They were in the delivery room when the midwife noticed something that warranted her attention. It seemed that the baby's neck had gotten wrapped up in the umbilical cord! The midwife somehow managed to get the baby unwrapped from the cord and was able to get its little head out and facing it the right

way. She looked up at The Man and sweetly said with a smirk on her face, “Dad, it’s your turn now.”

After a bit of a pause and a stammer, the shocked father-to-be looked back at the midwife and said, “Uhhhh. Huh? What?”

“Put your hand under the head and catch the baby on the way out.” (The Man had been in on Tobin’s birth, but THIS was taking it to a different level!)

“Huh? Are you kidding me?” The Man asked.

“Nope. Time to man up here, Mr. Man. The baby will be slippery, but you can handle it.”

“Uhhh, okay. If you think that’s a good idea,” he replied.

“You’ll be great!”

(Perhaps she was thinking that the referee shirt The Man was wearing somehow qualified him to be a temporary midwife.)

WELL, that was a big responsibility for The Man. Was he up to the challenge? He quickly ran through a mental checklist of the scary things he had done in his life. Asked a girl to go out on a date for the first time. Climbed up Half Dome in Yosemite. Bungee jumped. Flown an airplane. Landed said airplane, safely. Climbed the Dardanelles Cone in California. Parachuted out of an airplane. Scuba dived. Sat on the ocean floor. Rolled a car over and over down a cliff and lived to tell the story. Refereed thousands of wrestling matches. And kissed a girl for the first time. He had even driven to Winslow for the express purpose of standing on a corner there. He could certainly catch a baby sliding down the chute.

The Man put his left hand behind the little baby's head. With his other arm, he reached over and put his right hand underneath her tiny shoulder and waited a moment. It seemed like an hour, but a few seconds later the baby squirted out, exiting the first door of her little life. Once both of her shoulders came through, the rest of her shot out like a little greased pig at the county fair trying to escape a captor.

The Man was surprised but focused as he wrapped the tiny little newborn in his big, strong arms. He held her close to his chest, held up his right index finger, and called out, "One point

escape! One! Gretchen is here!” (He had momentarily reverted to “wrestling referee mode.”)

The Man could not resist the urge to start kissing Gretchen’s little head, despite being soaked in slippery stuff. He looked into her blue/green/gray eyes and he was smitten with their beauty.

It was AMAZING!! ABSOLUTELY AMAZING!! There was nothing that The Man could compare to the thrill of now seeing the births of both of his children! First, there was Tobin, and now, actually DELIVERING Gretchen! The Man began to think about it. All was well in the world. A new life was born. She was safe in his arms. And he would not allow ANYTHING to harm her. He would protect her forever. And to make things even better, Tobin was there when it happened. He was right there on the business end when his little sister...the one he had waited for so long...was born. It was a day that would be long remembered by everyone involved!

After a couple of days at the hospital, it was time to go home. Gretchen was a 9-pound, 9-ounce baby and the family was eager to get back to some sort of normal. As they were

leaving the hospital, The Man asked Tobin what he thought about being so close to the birth. Tobin replied, “Well, it was interesting to see, and I’m glad I was there, but I don’t think I need to see THAT again.”

4

IS THERE SOMETHING WRONG HERE?

At 10 days old, it was time to schedule the two-week checkup. Gretchen appeared to be doing well, and with the exception of a bit of a weak cry, everything else seemed to be good. The big day came and The Man took Gretchen to the hospital for her two-week checkup. Tobin stayed home with Nanny.

Little did The Man realize that this day would be the beginning of one of the hardest seasons of his life. Not to mention Tobin's as well. It would be a living Hell.

The pediatrician was a very nice lady. She checked little Gretchen for all the things that needed checking. During the checkup process she mentioned that Gretchen seemed to have a bit of a murmur in her heart and suggested that she see a pediatric cardiologist. She didn't seem to be overly concerned about it, but she thought it would be prudent to have Gretchen's heart checked out.

An appointment with a pediatric cardiologist was made for the upcoming Friday afternoon. It was two weeks after Gretchen was born. The Man didn't know that Thursday night would be the last time Gretchen would sleep in her own little bed for a long time.

The cardiologist listened to Gretchen's heartbeat for a moment and decided that an electrocardiogram be done on her. A technician came into the office pushing a rather impressive-looking machine ahead of her. She wired up Gretchen with lots of leads and clips and wires and other things and began looking at her heart on a monitor. She looked for a few minutes. Then a half an hour. Then 45 minutes. She got up and walked out of the room, muttering something about bringing someone else in to look at the screen. She came back in with another technician in tow. A minute later, they began to look at Gretchen's heart together. They were at it for another 30 minutes. The first technician walked out again and came back a couple of minutes later and said that a different cardiologist was coming in.

A specialist.

Gretchen was beginning to get a little fidgety but was being relatively good about it.

The Man, who was usually rock steady and a bit stoic, by this time was not. Over an hour and a half had gone by and not a word from either technician.

Twenty minutes later another woman came into the room. She introduced herself as a pediatric cardiologist. She told The Man her name, walked over to the electrocardiogram machine, and sat down. The two techs stood on either side of her, whispering things. Another 20 minutes went by.

The Man had had it. Silence no longer. He said to the cardiologist, “Either you are looking at two hearts that are unnaturally perfect and you are admiring them, or something is very wrong.”

(The Man wanted to break the tension. His remark did not have that effect.)

The cardiologist simply said, “There is a problem, and we are trying to determine how bad it is.”

“What’s the problem?” he asked. (The Man had a system for evaluating problems. He generally wanted a “worst-case scenario” when confronting problems that came his way. This allowed him to decide how to respond to problems. If he could live with the result, he would respond one way. If not, he would proceed in a different way. It was his way of surviving in an uncertain world and it seemed to work for him. Everything boils down to a yes or no decision.)

The doctor explained that this problem was very serious. Gretchen had what is called an “interrupted aortic arch.” (The aortic arch carries blood up from the heart and down the left side of the body.) She said that it was a very rare condition and was VERY serious and would need to be surgically repaired.

IMMEDIATELY.

The Man asked about setting up an appointment for the surgery. The doctor grimly said, “You don’t understand. We will be admitting her this afternoon and operating on her in the morning.”

It was four in the afternoon by then.

The Man asked with a bit of a quiver in his voice, “Is she going to die?”

The doctor realized that The Man was a give-it-to-me-straight kind of guy.

She said very matter-of-factly, “If we don’t operate on her NOW, she will die. If we do operate on her, she might live.”

The Man’s ears began to ring. The world as he knew it was caving in on him. With those 19 words, that doctor completely emasculated that man. There was nothing he could do. This was a situation that did not allow for a yes or no decision. The decision was made FOR him. He could no longer protect Gretchen. From ANYTHING. He could no longer hold her close. Or put her to bed at night. Or feed her. Or protect her from harm. In those seven seconds of dialogue, all of those things were unceremoniously and viciously ripped away from him. His manhood had been destroyed. He was built from birth to be little Gretchen’s protector. At this point, he couldn’t even tuck her into bed.

He felt utterly and completely useless.

When The Man handed the helpless little baby over to the nurse at the hospital, he had to come to grips with the fact that he might never see her again. It was almost more than he could take. He checked out emotionally. It was as if he had been kicked in the groin from behind...on a hot day...wearing only boxers.

He felt like throwing up.

He couldn't even do that.

He managed to find his way to a corner of the room. He leaned back into the corner and slowly slid down to the floor. At the bottom, he ended up lying in the fetal position. There was nowhere else he could go. He had hit the absolute bottom and then some and he had nothing left.



IS THIS REALLY HAPPENING?



The next time The Man saw Gretchen, she was in the pediatric wing of the hospital in a bed surrounded by some 25 medical pumps, hoses, and instruments. He asked a nurse if he could hold her. She cleared a path through the hoses and monitors and put the helpless little baby into The Man's arms and helped him sit down with her in a nearby rocking chair.

Several close friends who had been notified of Gretchen's condition came to the hospital that evening. Mike and Lisa came in about 7:15. At 7:30, Charlie and Martha came in. They had brought pizza with them. Trent and his wife, Josie, came after the hospital had closed, but Trent was not one to be bothered by locked doors. He, Josie, and another friend Rose walked all around the hospital until they found an unlocked service entrance. They sneaked inside through the service door and somehow found their way into the pediatric wing. Trent immediately asked if there was some way to hold Gretchen. (He was VERY fond of babies.) The nurse lifted her out of The Man's lap and had Trent sit in the chair. Trent immediately began singing lullabies to her.

After all the friends got chased out of the hospital by the staff, The Man tried to hold Gretchen for a few minutes more. He tried to sing to his baby daughter but all he could do was cry.

The next morning, the surgery began at eight.

Prior to the surgery, several people came to talk with The Man. The pediatric cardiologist met with him for a moment as well. The anesthesiologist was next. He explained the overview of the entire procedure. The pediatric heart surgeon came in and he gave him some more details about the surgery. He was very helpful in The Man's understanding of the procedure and the risks involved.

The surgeon did not tell The Man that this particular procedure was one of two of the most rare and complicated procedures that he did. One of the procedures involved re-plumbing a heart that was operating in the backwards. The other one was the one that Gretchen needed. He also mentioned that operating on a newborn's heart is much like operating on a ping-pong ball through a straw.

“I hope you're VERY good and steady, Doc.”

Someone came in to take Gretchen to the operating room.

The Man kissed her warm little forehead, knowing that he may never see her again.

Then came the waiting. Throughout the very long day there, friends came by the hospital to offer moral support. The hospital chaplain came by. Many others called in on the hospital phone offering moral support. The teddy bears and balloons started coming in as well.

The day crawled on. The surgery took almost 12 hours. It was 12 hours of tears, anger and, most of all, fear.

The surgeon finally came out. He looked very exhausted, and he gave an update. He said that there was some good news and some bad news. Gretchen had come through the surgery quite well. Good news. They were taking her into the recovery room now. The Man could see her briefly if he wanted to.

The bad news was that they would need to operate on her again in two weeks. She could not be taken home.

When The Man caught up with Gretchen, he could not believe his eyes!

Little Gretchen's blue/green/gray eyes that were so disarmingly beautiful at birth were swollen shut. She was bruised. She was wrapped in all kinds of bandages and medically paralyzed. She was unconscious and bloated. She had all kinds (literally) of monitors, pumps, and anything else that the doctors and nurses had access to plugged into her. A hose going into her lungs was attached to a machine that breathed for her.

The Man couldn't believe what he was seeing. He didn't even recognize his precious little girl.

The Man was in shock. He retreated into a safe place. There was nothing else he could do.

“Where are you, God?”

The anesthesiologist told The Man to kiss Gretchen on the forehead and that they would be taking her to the pediatric intensive care unit (PICU). The Man kissed her. She felt unnaturally cold. The sweet smell of a newborn baby was gone. She smelled like antiseptic spray. He would meet with the

anesthesiologist again in about an hour, once they got Gretchen situated and stable.

The Man could feel himself going into shock again. He had to sit down. He felt sick. He had to find a bathroom... quickly.

An hour later, The Man went up to the PICU. He had to stand in a corner and keep out of everybody's way. After several very long minutes, a PICU nurse quietly came over to The Man and put her hand on his shoulder. She could tell that The Man was at the end of his rope. She told him that Gretchen was stable and that he could slide a chair over and sit next to her if he liked. It was like a bad dream. The Man sat down next to the little baby girl who was fighting for her very life, and he started to cry.

The Man received no solace from sitting next to his little girl and watching her mechanical breathing rhythm.

6

MORE HELL TO COME

A second surgery was scheduled for Gretchen at the four-week mark. The doctors and surgeon felt that now that she was a little older and a little more stable, there was some “minor cleanup” work to be done on one of the valves in her tiny little heart. The plan was to keep her in the PICU for another two weeks, do this second surgery, wait a couple of days, and then send Gretchen home.

In the meantime, The Man made dozens of trips to and from the hospital. There were seemingly hundreds of teddy bears by now and dozens of get well cards being delivered to Gretchen. (Flowers were not allowed in the PICU. Nor were latex helium balloons. The shiny, foil-type balloons, however, WERE allowed. Something about the rubber balloons losing their “lift” and coming down into the baby’s bed...) It seemed like hundreds if not thousands of doses of medicine and bottles of fluids were pumped into the tough little newborn.

At four weeks old, Gretchen had to go in for another heart surgery. While this one was still quite serious in nature, it was at least expected. However, that didn't mean that it was any easier on everyone involved.

At one point during the surgery, one of Gretchen's lungs started to fail. It had collapsed and the doctors were having trouble getting it inflated and breathing again. The Man offered up one of his lungs for the cause. He would have given both of his to her. The powers that be, for medical reasons, informed him that HIS lungs could not be used for such a process. (They were too big.)

The Man felt completely powerless to help with anything. All he could do was wait.

“God, can you hear me? Do you even care?”

Miraculously and without explanation, four days later, Gretchen's lungs started functioning on their own! A silent cheer went throughout the entire PICU! The swelling was going down

as the accumulated fluids in her little system began to drain off. She still had a long way to go, but this was a start in the right direction.

“THANK YOU, LORD!”

Gretchen was released from the PICU a couple of weeks after the surgery and then was released from the hospital a couple of days after that! She had been in the PICU for over two months. She was only two and a half months old. Nobody but family was allowed to even be near her for several more weeks. A new normal was formed. Tobin spent most of his time being sweet to his little sister. (He never showed even a bit of sibling jealousy toward her.) He would sing to her for hours and dangle little hanging toys over her crib for her to look at and even smile some.

When leaving the hospital, The Man was given permission to call the cardiologist at any time, day or night. Gretchen was quite the celebrity at the hospital and at the doctor's office. The nurses stood up and clapped and cheered for her when she was released. It was very emotional and quite overwhelming!

The Unexpected New Best Friend

There would likely be another surgery before Gretchen's first birthday. More surgery. More cutting. More angst and more doctors.

It was not over yet. It might never be.

But there was progress. And hope. A slight flicker of light, but it was there.

Thank You, God!



A LIGHT AT THE END



When Gretchen was 10 months old, she was scheduled for her third open-heart surgery. The surgery was to correct some more issues with her heart valves and other things. It had been scheduled for some time. Even so, it was stressful to see the date come closer and closer.

Not knowing if your child will make it to their first birthday is extremely taxing.... All day and all night.

The Man and Tobin were sitting on the floor together playing a game one evening. Gretchen was asleep. Tobin was a very thoughtful young man, even at age seven. For several months, he had worked very hard. He earned money by mowing lawns for The Man and neighbors, did some other yard cleanup both at home and for theirs as well. He also walked dogs for the neighbors. For a seven-year-old, he had not only learned a lot about responsibility, but had worked very hard and amassed a fair amount of money.

He asked, “Dad, how much will the surgery cost?”

The Man looked at him and said, “I don’t know, but it will be a lot.”

Tobin then said, “I have \$257 that I’ve saved up, and I would like to use it to help pay for Gretchen’s surgery.”

That statement hit The Man like a thunderclap. He looked at his seven-year-old son and burst into tears. He reached over and pulled the little man into his lap and hugged him. Tobin became a hero to his father that evening.

Tobin stayed especially close to his little sister over the next few days.

The surgery this time was to correct some blood flow problems in the heart and through the valves. It was masterfully done and after a few days Gretchen was able to be taken home. She would not require another open-heart surgery until she was about five years old when she would also have a pacemaker installed.

As time at home went on, Gretchen began to grow at a very fast pace. After the five-year surgery, her new pacemaker helped her little body to grow at an accelerated rate. Tobin would take her on imaginary journeys and do all the things that children do together. Within weeks, Gretchen had even learned to ride a tricycle and rode it all over the house!

At one point, Tobin built a makeshift submarine out of cardboard boxes in the basement for the two of them to play in. In one of their undersea adventures, Tobin, after watching an old rerun of *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* on television one Saturday morning, had decided that HIS submarine should crash into something and start to sink. This meant that sparks and explosions would be necessary. He accidentally lit the submarine on fire with a sparkler and a firecracker. (The Man usually had a supply of fireworks on hand and Tobin knew where they were.) He dragged Gretchen out of the smoking, sinking, sparking, stinking submarine and stomped out the smoldering fire.

It wasn't until several years later that Tobin related that story to The Man.

The Man thanked God for the wonderful and dedicated surgeons, cardiologists, nurses, and Candy Stripers who tended Gretchen in her hours of need. He was especially thankful for

The Unexpected New Best Friend

Pediatric Cardiologist Dr. Celia Flynn, Pediatric Heart Surgeon Dr. Robert Fortune, Pediatric Cardiologist Dr. Roy Jedioekin, and Pediatric Heart Surgeon Mike Teodori, and the wonderful staff of a Pediatric Intensive Care Unit in Phoenix, AZ.



OPERATING MOW FLY



In his return journey back to the present time, The Man jerked a bit as he was mowing the grass when he thought that he was smelling a bit of smoke. Startled, he looked around and realized that he was no longer with Tobin and Gretchen in the submarine, but rather was smelling the smoke that was being produced by the new Mow Fly. The Man realized that after starting the mower, he was supposed to deactivate the full choke once Mow Fly was warmed up and the engine was up to speed. He unchoked Mow Fly and got back to the task at hand.

Since this was the first time that The Man would actually use the new mower to cut the grass, with the blades spinning and all, it would take some time to get used to Mow Fly's controls and operations. The grass was already quite tall, so he decided to set the blades to the middle depth setting and see how that worked.

In the past, with other mowers, The Man usually liked starting the job in the side yard of the house side of the creek.

Cutting the grass in the side yard usually went pretty fast as it was the smallest patch of grass on the lot. And since there was a lot of shade on that side, the grass wasn't as tall as it was in the front yard or The Other Side in the backyard. Today was no different. Back and forth, back and forth, up and down, up and down he went in the side yard. It took about five minutes or so to cut the not TOO tall grass in that area.

The final cut on the side yard was right next to the creek, so The Man had to make sure that he didn't get too close to it and slide his brand new Mow Fly into the water. As he transitioned from the side yard to the house side of the backyard, he turned Mow Fly to the left and close to the house to start the back and forth, cutting parallel to the house. Since the grass along the back side of the house was always in the shade as well, The Man decided that he would lower the blades a bit on Mow Fly. He lowered the "lower level leveling lever" (on the left), dropped the blades down about two inches, and off he went. The Man was still a bit on the groggy side as he returned to the mowing task. He took a hit from the bottle of Fanta cola that was in the cup holder. This brought on a bit of a caffeine jag, and he goosed the throttle a bit, and went back to the business at hand.

He hadn't gotten more than a couple of feet closer to the house when he heard (and felt) a big BANG! The Man nearly

jumped out of his seat and was no longer one bit sleepy. He stopped the mower and looked around to see if anybody else was watching. He backed up Mow Fly a couple of feet. It seemed that he had run over a brick that was sticking up a bit out of the ground and the blades were set too low to now miss it. All that was missing from the brick was a chunk that had broken off and flown to God only knows where. The sound that the mower made on impact reminded The Man of the sound that a large firework might make. It sounded like a cherry bomb or maybe an M-80.

Doug, the next-door neighbor, came out to check on the situation. On this Saturday morning, he had likely been watching an old rerun of *Lost In Space* and heard the noise. He wanted to make sure that The Man was okay. The Man laughed, waved him off, and continued mowing.

The loud noise that had just come from Mow Fly reminded him somehow of a similar sound he had been impressed with when he was a child (The Little Man).

9

THE BLACK WALNUT DILEMMA

The house that the family had moved into upon The Old Man's retirement from the Air Force was a nice four-bedroom suburban home with a fireplace and was within the city limits. There was a concrete driveway at the end of the house, which The Old Man quickly converted into a family room. He poured footers for the floor and new walls. He built a secondary fireplace with bricks and mortar and covered it all with a new roof that matched the existing roof and structure. (He wanted to make the addition actually LOOK like it belonged there and that somebody actually cared.) He built a laundry room off to the side that contained a washer and a dryer (that The Little Man could hide in from time to time) with room for a deep freezer. At the end of the family room was a place used for a sewing machine and an ironing board. There was also a place for more shelves and a *World Book Encyclopedia*.

The Old Man built seats around the outside wall perimeter, which doubled as storage space underneath them. The television was moved into the family room along with a couch, recliner

chair, and ping-pong table. The ping-pong table was right behind the couch and against it.

Not long after completion of the family room, The Old Man threw out the old and busted black-and-white TV set and brought in one of the brand new hotness COLOR TV sets! It was GREAT! It had a clicker-type remote control and everything!

Against the back of the original fireplace stood a wire birdcage painted white, where “Peety Boy” lived. (Peety Boy was the family’s blue parakeet.) The family room could be accessed via three steps down from the main house, or through a back side door “breezeway” that led to the newly designated carport. At the back end of the carport was the workshop. It was built by The Old Man and The Bro Man. He had built it while converting the original driveway into the family room.

Anything that had to be repaired or built or otherwise bent, folded, or mutilated ended up in the workshop. Inside was a ShopSmith table saw and virtually any type of hand tool such as screwdrivers, pliers, wrenches, drills, and soldering irons or propane torches. There was also a lumber pile made of boards left over from the construction of the family room and new carport.

Also inside the workshop was the workbench.

The workbench was the centerpiece of the workshop. For ANYTHING that made its way into the workshop, the workbench was the first stop in the journey. The workbench was a monster. It was built of 4x4 redwood fence posts. The top was made of 2x6x2 planks. It stood about 3 ½ feet tall. (To The Little Man, it seemed like a skyscraper.) It had black legs and a blue/green painted top. On the left end was a bench vise. Many things were held very tightly in its jaws at one time or another. Underneath the top were two sliding drawers. Underneath the drawers was a platform used to store power hand tools. At any given time, there were Skil saws, jigsaws, power drills, etc. waiting eagerly for the next job. Above the workbench and attached to the wall was a large piece of Masonite pegboard. Sticking out of the pegboard were gazillions of metal hooks holding screwdrivers (Phillips and flat head), pliers of all shapes and sizes, coils of baling wire and telephone wire, and spools of solder, soldering irons for said solder, hammers, vise grips, and the list goes on. Most of the tools had been purchased at Sears. The Old Man's favorite item was a collection of cans of Liquid Wrench (not necessarily purchased at Sears). With that stuff, most anything that had been overtightened or rusted shut could be loosened...except perhaps rusty cross-threaded bolts. Those things were IMPOSSIBLE to unscrew.

Years after The Old Man died, The Man still insisted on keeping the workbench. It was something that simply did not belong with anyone else. He kept it for many decades, and it moved right along with all of the other household belongings whenever The Man relocated. There came a time when The Man passed the workbench on to his son, Tobin, where it sits in HIS workshop, tall and useful as it had been for decades prior in The Old Man's workshop. Hopefully, it will stay there for decades longer to come and be passed down to his children as well.

Entering the main house from the family room, coming up three stairs and through the door, put you immediately into the living room on the left and the dining room on the right. Turning to the right and immediately on the right wall was a black walnut hutch. Inside the hutch were the plates, glasses, and "good" silverware and other serving utensils that were reserved for company, special occasions, and holidays.

Next to the hutch and on the left were the drapes that covered the large glass window and sliding glass door out to the patio, which was fairly large (at least in The Little Man's eyes when he had to go out and sweep it).

Going out through the glass door from the dining room, there were a couple of steps that led down to the patio.

The two steps down led to a selection of poured concrete 8-by-8-foot squares. They had been painted rotating tints of blue, green, and gray. There were a couple of chaise lounges directly in front of the door and about 10 feet away. Going down the steps and around the lounges and to the RIGHT was a wooden fence that separated the patio from the garbage area.

Built into the fence, there was a swinging wooden gate. Going through the gate took you into the garbage area. It was full of the material that the area was named for. There was a second old lumber pile (likely left by the previous owner), broken lawn mowers and rakes, and a couple of garbage cans. The garbage area was half as long as the new driveway that The Old Man had built.

At the end of the garbage area was another wooden gate. Going through the gate led to a small patch of grass and a path that was used to get the garbage cans out to the sidewalk and street to be emptied on garbage day.

Usually on Saturday mornings.

When everyone was asleep.

But not asleep after the garbage was picked up.

From the glass door, down the steps and around the chaise lounges, and to the LEFT led to an archway into the backyard. The archway was usually covered in ivy or some other exotic creeping vine. Going through the archway was usually a magical experience for The Little Man. That archway led to the fallout shelter immediately to the right. Farther down the fence line was a eucalyptus tree. The Little Man wanted to somehow get a koala from Australia as a pet (he LOVED the Qantas Airlines commercials) and let him live in the eucalyptus tree in the backyard. (Koalas LOVE eucalyptus leaves for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Note: Koalas are not bears. They are marsupials with very sharp teeth, and they get annoyed when being referred to as “bears.”)

Walking on a little farther, you came to The Magic Apple Tree. This tree had at least five different types of apples growing from it thanks to the curiosity and determination of The Old Man. (He had grafted at least five different apple types to the main trunk.)

Turning left from The Magic Apple Tree and along the fence line was the first of three cherry plum trees. The Little

Man was not very fond of plums, and the cherry plums were no exception. One of the only real joys that he had from those trees was that before the plums were ripe, they were EXCEPTIONALLY sour. They could pucker up a lemon farmer like no other sour thing could. Lemons were sugar candy compared to these unripened plums. (The only thing that might compete now is AirHead candy, but that didn't exist at the time.) Accordingly, they could be used in "sour eating contests." The challenge would be something like, "Who can chew up the most unripe plums and keep a straight face?" The other thing the plums were good for, in his eyes, were for throwing at each other when there were other kids in the backyard and they had nothing better to do.

Farther down the fence line was a spot where an English walnut tree came hanging over the fence from the neighbor's yard (Billy's) into the backyard. It was a bit messy when the leaves started falling off the walnut tree and into the swing set area. The Little Man had to rake up the leaves. However, it was very handy during walnut harvest season, when large, perfect, English walnuts started falling into The Little Man's backyard. The *neighbor* had to climb up onto his roof to gather whatever walnuts had fallen off the tree on *his* side of the fence. The nuts that fell on The Little Man's side, however, belonged to The Little Man's family. The English walnuts were easy to shell and very tasty.

Where the English walnuts fell was a 20-by-20-foot area. There used to be cornrows in this spot but The Old Man decided

to sterilize the ground with salt and put up a swing set. This area was then covered in a three-inch deep layer of gravel. The swing set itself had two metal swings hanging from linked metal chains. The chain links were the perfect size to catch the end of a child's fingers and tear them open. OUCH!

Across from the walnut fence and against the house, there was a smaller area that was approximately 20 feet long and 2 ½ feet wide. It ran along the side of the house and was used by The Little Man to plant tomatoes, carrots, watermelons (seedless), and squash (the yellow ones). He also planted gourds. These weren't your standard namby-pamby everyday gourds. These bad boys had lots and lots of bumps and warts on them. They looked like someone had dipped them into a jar of white glue and then rolled them across a gravel driveway. (The Little Man had given several of the gourds to his Aunt Marguerite and Uncle Frank, who were visiting from Claude, Texas. When the Man visited Texas decades later, she still had the gourds on HER "shelf of interesting things." She said that the only thing holding those gourds together was the layer of varnish that she had put on them decades earlier. The Man was happy that she still had those gourds.)

Not far from the little garden and continuing along the house was a black walnut tree.

Black walnuts are quite popular in many areas of the world. In The Little Man's world, they were not only a nuisance, but a big, fat, gooey, hot mess.

However, the nuts can be quite tasty if one wants to put forth the effort. Or one could simply go to the store and buy them if they didn't mind paying their exorbitant price tag.

The problem with black walnuts doesn't stop with the gooey, black hot mess. That is only the beginning. There are essentially two problems with the black walnuts.

Problem 1. Getting the hellish hull off.

The unripe black walnut hull is relatively easy to deal with. If one fell out of the tree, you would simply pick it up and throw it away. It serves virtually no useful purpose. The trouble begins after it ripens.

Black walnuts are a notoriously messy breed. They have a thick hull around the nut. When the ripe nut falls out of the tree, the hull turns into a black, slimy, smelly, gooey material.

When one picks them up off the ground, their hands will soon become slimy and stained...black. The stains quickly live up to their name. They are very hard to clean off and usually remained for several days, unless one scrubbed them off with one of the wire brushes in the workshop. If any of the goo got onto one's clothing, they just threw the clothes away.

The Old Man had tried a number of ways to get the hull off the nut. He tried slicing it off with a knife. No luck, the hull just degraded but would not let go of the nut. He tried boiling the hulls off. Nope. Just another hot mess. He tried drying them in the sun. The hull simply dried onto the nut and became absolutely impossible to remove. Slamming them onto the ground? No joy there.

Finally, in an act of desperation, The Old Man put several hundred of the nuts into a mesh potato sack and tied the sack shut with some baling wire from the workshop. He then threw the sack out into the street and ran over it several times with the car. Yes...really. Cross my heart. The "Brutality Method" didn't work either.

One night, in an epiphany-type dream, he came up with an idea. The Old Man woke up with renewed vigor and determination. It was a Saturday morning and in a stroke of sheer genius, he put the idea to the test.

He went out into the backyard and gathered up 40 or 50 of the offending nuts and put them into a large bucket. He marched his ex-military butt into the house like a man on a mission. He went to the Hi Fi and put on the latest Rolling Stones album, *Out of Our Heads*. He turned the volume up to 10 (11 didn't exist on the Hi Fi record players at the time. While stereo was invented in the 1930s, it was not available to the public until 1957 and was not accepted by the general public until 1958 or so. Many families held out until several years later to accept the new consumer stereo equipment).

The Old Man then marched into the kitchen. After saluting at his reflection in the window and saying, "Reporting for duty, SIR," he moved all the dishes out of the sink and up onto the left side of the counter. He put the bucket down on the other side of the sink and above the dishwasher. In a last ditch effort to win The Battle of the Black Walnut Hull, he turned on the cold water valve and pointed the spout down the right side of the sink.

The side with the garbage disposal.

(During his lifetime, The Old Man had learned the axiom, "There are fewer things in nature stronger than a cross-threaded

bolt...except perhaps, a *rusty* cross-threaded bolt.” It was true. He had an addendum to that, which is also true. “There are fewer things in nature that are harder than a ripe black walnut shell.”)

He flipped on the switch, and then turned on the water.

With great delight and determination boiling in his eyes, he shoved a black walnut into the garbage disposal (“The Destruct-O-Hole”). It made a noise like nobody in that neighborhood had ever heard before. It was even louder than the Kirby vacuum cleaner that the lady five doors down used (which could compete with the sound that a jet engine makes). It sounded like a group of tanks rolling down the street. He wasn’t finished. Why, he was just beginning! He shoved another nut down the open maw. The noise grew louder. Another nut down the hatch. Then another. And another. And still another.

As he shoved the 10th nut grenade down into The Destruct-O-Hole, the entire house started to shake. Decorative things started jumping down off the mantle in the living room. Babies in neighboring houses began to cry. Police sirens started sounding off as the cars whizzed by. People up to a block away

in any direction started screaming, “TURN THAT RECORD PLAYER DOWN, OLD MAN!” (It seemed that *they* were having knickknacks drop off their mantles and shelves as well. They had no idea that the noise they were hearing was actually louder than The Rolling Stones music being played at full volume.)

The Old Man simply waved off their complaints as if it was just so much background noise.

A miraculous thing happened with the 11th nut. As he waved off all the complainers and told them to mind their own damn business, a black walnut popped up and out of the rubber-lined rim of the disposal. It was about the size of a ping-pong ball and it danced around in the sink for a bit. The Old Man’s determination suddenly became a passion. He pushed another nut into the hole of the hungry “In-Sink-O-Rator,” and another couple of nuts were vomited back out of it. He put the escaping black balls up onto the counter and out of the way. He continued to push the walnuts down into the disposal. The neighbors had stopped yelling when a couple of police cars pulled up at the corner. The police were trying to figure out just where all the ruckus was coming from.

About the time that the police were homing in on the source of the cacophony, The Old Man turned off the disposal and water. Dead silence covered the neighborhood once again. Birds began singing their songs. The policemen scratched their heads and left. The Old Man looked vindicated with no small amount of satisfaction (proving that Mick Jagger was wrong. Satisfaction is indeed possible.).

After having a celebratory drink or two (screwdrivers), The Old Man decided to “turn up the volume” a bit and do the rest of the bag full of walnuts. For this task, he decided that he needed a different kind of music to play. He carefully made his selection and he turned off the Rolling Stones music. He took a different LP out of its sleeve and then out of the paper envelope. He wiped off the LP with a damp paper towel and wiggled it onto the record-stacking post on the player. He turned the Hi Fi back on, checked to see that it was still on the “record player” function, and hit the start button.

The player clicked a bit and the record dropped down onto the turntable, skidded some, and then the needle arm majestically swung into place. The needle dropped down onto the record. After a pop or two, the needle grabbed the record groove.

Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” began to play.

At full volume.

The Old Man went back into the kitchen and turned on the water at the sink. As the water started pouring down into the open abyss, he again turned on the garbage disposal and gleefully started shoving black walnuts into the open mouth of the waiting utensil. He again asked the disposal to do something that it was absolutely not designed to do. The Old Man turned everything off again and decided to remove the rubber grommet from the rim of the opening in the disposal. This grommet was the only thing that kept the spinning garbage from being vomited back up into the kitchen and hitting the ceiling. He didn't care. Wagner was playing!

He marched back out to the living room and tried to turn up the volume a bit more. He couldn't. It was already at 10. As Wagner's crescendo began, The Old Man marched back into the kitchen and started feeding black walnuts into the hole with a fury never before witnessed. This time, the noise was louder and clearer without the rubber grommet. In fact, instead of a loud low rumble, it sounded more like someone was trying to push a tree or maybe a small boat down into the determined disposal.

Or at least a 2x4.

Or perhaps a large frozen turkey.

(Second addendum to the “cross-threaded bolt” axiom: “There are few things in nature that make more noise than trying to shove a frozen turkey down into a garbage disposal... except, perhaps, a live volcano erupting in your living room while Wagner is playing at level 10 right next to you.”)

Whole black walnuts began belching up and out of the hole. Some of them even hit the ceiling and ricocheted off the refrigerator. One of them hit the kitchen window in front of The Old Man, shattering it. Another one of the nuts bounced off the wall behind him and hit him on the back of the head. He was momentarily stunned but was able to shake it off. He reached back and confirmed that his head wasn't bleeding. The Old Man was possessed! He just kept feeding walnuts into the disposal until there were no more. Ironically, as the last walnut was pushed in, “Ride of the Valkyries” ended its playback. He picked up the nuts from all over the kitchen and put them in a sack.

The Old Man's mission had been mostly completed. He had cleaned every last one of the black walnuts that he had. All he had to do now was to clean up the kitchen before “The

Wow Mom” (The Little Man’s very pretty and patient mother) returned from her shopping trip.

He had trouble explaining the shattered window in a way that made any sense at all.

Problem 2. Opening the black walnut.

Opening a black walnut would be only marginally harder if it were made of stainless steel. Thankfully, stainless steel walnuts do not exist in nature. On the Mohs hardness scale, the black walnut is somewhere between quartz and diamond. In layman’s terms, the black walnut is somewhere between nails and masonry drill bits in terms of hardness.

In other words, VERY hard.

Armed with this knowledge, The Old Man decided to solve the problem that men have pondered down through the ages: “Why is it so hard to get into a black walnut when it seems

so effortless for squirrels?” He set his sights on figuring out how to open a black walnut without losing one’s temper.

The Old Man sometimes had a short fuse.

The Old Man had unwittingly eliminated one possible method when he tried to clean the hulls by running over them with the car. It was obvious from the get-go that if running over them while the husks were still on didn’t work, then giving them the same treatment without the husks would likely not have any noticeable difference in results. “BUT...why not give it a shot?” he mused. He backed the car slowly out of the carport and down the driveway. When the car got to the gutter, he stopped, put the car in park, and set the parking brake. He got out of the car and proceeded to get a large double handful of freshly cleaned nuts from the kitchen. While walking them back outside, a couple of the nuts dropped out of his hands and onto the ground. He kicked them out of the way and they were never seen again. (Black walnuts are not like English walnuts, which are oblong and don’t roll very far. Black walnuts are round and spherical, like golf balls and will just keep rolling after they hit a hard surface.) He continued his quest for knowledge and walked out until he was behind the car. He had about 16 nuts left and divided them into two little piles. One pile of eight behind the left back wheel, and one pile of eight for behind the right back

wheel. He flattened them out so that they were no longer in little piles but were all directly on the ground behind the wheels.

The setup was complete. Time for the experiment! The Old Man got back into the car, put his foot on the brakes, and released the parking brake. He wanted to get this right. He knew he would probably get only one shot at it. With his left foot on the brake pedal, he put the gear shift into Reverse. He put his right foot on the accelerator and EASED his left foot up and off the brake. The car moved just a bit. It seemed that the car had backed up to the nuts, and the nuts were just stubborn enough to not roll out from under the tires. He sat for a moment and waited.

Nothing happened.

The only thing left to do was obvious. He needed to give the car some gas. With his left foot now hovering over the brake pedal, just in case the car wanted to get away from him, he gingerly started to push lightly down on the accelerator, left foot at the ready. The car started to move. A little more gas. The car started to rock forward and backward a bit. A *little more gas*. Just about to start rolling...and then it happened.

The car had managed to climb up on top of the nuts just as The Old Man pushed down on the gas pedal. It was a bit too much for him to keep it steady. The car rolled over the nuts. All of them. Like the pellets out of a double-barrel shotgun, some of the nuts shot out from under the tires, squirting sideways out from under the rubber! Others shot forward back toward the house. (One of them hit the front wall in the carport and it bounced back at the car, cracking the windshield.) Some even came out the back behind the car and headed down the street. They rolled for more than a block!

Of all the 16 nuts, The Old Man was able to find 6... and they were unscathed. Since he couldn't find the other 10, he figured that they had either shot up into orbit or had fallen into a rip in the space-time continuum somewhere right near where he lived.

The next time, The Old Man decided to try a more direct approach. A bit more aggressive. With an actual hand tool.

It's called a "nutcracker." Nutcrackers come in a variety of styles, colors, and efficiencies. There are decorative nutcrackers, hand nutcrackers, and industrial nutcrackers. Some screw. Some squeeze. They come in all shapes and sizes. Some are even made in the likenesses of public officials, animals, or British King's guards.

Let it be known that nutcrackers in general are made for opening your everyday, pansy-style nuts. English walnuts, acorns, pecans, etc. But the black walnut introduces an entirely different set of parameters into the mix. If one tries to use a *standard* nutcracker on a black walnut, he/she will be sadly disappointed with the results. It is likely that they will end up, not with an opened delicious nut, but rather a bent and useless piece of scrap metal and a bruised hand. A completely stunned-looking piece of junk. A device that thought it was up to the task, but instead was doing the walk of shame in front of its peers as it landed into the repository that we all call the kitchen junk drawer never to be used again.

The Old Man decided that he would try a number of other different types and sizes of nut-cracking devices. The first one that came to mind was a standard pair of pliers. He grabbed a few of the newly cleaned nuts, went out to the workshop, and grabbed the first pair of pliers he saw. It happened to be the pliers he had owned for years. He was very proud of how long they had lasted and how useful they were. They were Sears Craftsman pliers. He put a black walnut between the jaws of the pliers and wrapped his hands around the handles. As he squeezed the pliers, his hands began to tremble and shake. He squeezed harder. Nothing was happening, except that his hands were starting to hurt. One last effort. Nothing. He held the pliers just a bit tighter and gave them one last try. The walnut shot

sideways out of the pliers like a bullet from a rifle and bounced off the opposite wall. The Old Man had to duck as it came flying back at him. He never saw it again. At the same time, the pliers came snapping shut. Unfortunately, The Old Man's fingers were now in the way of the rapidly closing pliers. Fortunately, The Old Man's fingers were faster than the snapping shark-like jaws. Fortunately again, he had brought several more nuts with him from the kitchen.

The next effort would involve a tool with fewer moving parts (in fact, NO moving parts) but with a lot more punch to it. A hammer. A carpenter's hammer to be exact. He put the next nut on the concrete floor of the workshop and held it there between his index finger and thumb and started tapping the new challenger. Tap. Boing! The hammer bounced off the nut like it would if he had just tried to crack open a super ball. He tried it again. Tap, boing! This time the hammer seemed to bounce straight back at The Old Man's forehead. He barely dodged a full cranial concussion. On the way by, the nut just looked at him as if to say, "Come on, old man. You can do better than that!" The Old Man, not to be outsmarted by a walnut, wound up the hammer and down it came again. The hammer hit the nut. It also hit that little piece of skin on his forefinger. That piece that "flows" around the target object when one tries to hold the object in place. And then it bleeds. For several days.

Yes, THAT one.

(There is a medical term for this spot. Physicians call it “The Hammer Magnet” (The THM). There are six of these THMs in the human body. Two on the inside and outside edges of the index fingers and one right in the center of the left and right ends of index fingernails.)

A tear came to The Old Man’s eye. A curse word came to The Old Man’s lips. It was a word that The Little Man had used...once. The Little Man did not like the aftertaste.

The Old Man shook the blood off his hand, which did little more than spray blood in a line onto the ceiling, across to the opposite wall and down across the cement floor. It left a little puddle of blood on the floor at his feet. He wrapped his other hand around his stinging finger and made his way back into the kitchen, where he turned on the water and began to tend to his wound. When the water hit the open wound on his finger, the blood REALLY began to pour out. As he dried and wrapped the injured finger, he began to think about his situation and his purpose in life. He came to the conclusion that it wasn’t HIS fault that his finger was looking like he would soon need a transfusion; it was the fault of the black walnuts sitting there on the counter. THEY did this to him. It was a conspiracy, and

THEY would regret it. He would find a way to wreak his savage revenge on them. His finger was throbbing, and they would PAY!

The Old Man had a finger ache that had turned into a headache as well. He took a couple of aspirin and sat down in his easy chair for a while. He restarted The Rolling Stones album and listened to it in its entirety (on level 5).

The next day, The Old Man decided to take a different direction in his attack on the black walnuts. He moved the battlefield out into the open. Out into the front yard where everyone could see. He brought several of the offending nuts out onto the front sidewalk. He went back into the workshop and picked up an anvil and carried it out and set it next to the nuts. Then, he went inside and came out with...

BIG DADDY.

The Old Man had rummaged through the pile of lumber out in the workshop and there he was. Big Daddy. Big Daddy was a 30-pound sledgehammer with a 40-inch, 100-year-old solid hickory handle. Big Daddy had battle scars from 100 years gone by. He had driven stakes into the ground through reinforced concrete, knocked down chimneys, and yes, even

taken down interior and exterior brick walls of entire buildings. No sweat. Big Daddy had even helped with some of the early railroads along the way. He had been handed down from The Little Man's great-grandfather, The EXCEPTIONALLY Old Man, to his grandfather, The REALLY Old Man, and then to The Old Man. The Little Man hoped that one day HE would swing Big Daddy at some future foe.

Today, Big Daddy was being called upon once again.

The Old Man carried the anvil from the workshop and into the middle of the sidewalk. He put a black walnut onto its battle-scarred, flat surface. He dragged Big Daddy over to the sidewalk and stood it on its head. He stood there for a moment thinking about Sto-vo-kor. "It is a good day to die!" went through his mind. He picked Big Daddy up off of the ground and held the head up with his right hand. His left hand, with a big bandage wrapped around his left forefinger, slid down the handle. He started to swing the massive sledgehammer up into the air and his hands met at the end of the handle as if he were swinging an infinitely destructive baseball bat. Around the back, over the shoulders the 30-pound sledge flew. On its downward flight The Old Man put every bit of strength that he had into the stroke. The neighborhood went silent. A squirrel that was

prancing across the street on the telephone wire stopped to watch the event. Within a second, it all would be over.

As The Little Man watched, Big Daddy came down like a sonic boom at a Blue Angels demonstration. It hit squarely on the back of the waiting black walnut. As the two were becoming one, the walnut shot out from under the hammer at the speed of sound. It sounded like an M-80 going off right next to you on the 4th of July. It reminded The Old Man of the bullet that had come through the cockpit of his aircraft years prior. There were sparks flying from the anvil as it cracked in two. The nut went flying backward between The Old Man's legs and right toward the squirrel on the overhead wire. The unwitting squirrel was knocked off the telephone line. It was instantaneous. The hapless little squirrel felt nothing and fell unconscious onto the street 25 feet below. At the same time, the handle of the mighty Big Daddy broke into two 40-inch-long pieces.

The walnut was never found.

Later that afternoon, and after taking a bit of a nap, The Old Man went back outside to survey the damage. Big Daddy was lying on the ground in three pitiful pieces. The anvil was destroyed, and there was a chunk of the sidewalk missing.

There were also several squirrels on the street seemingly tending to their friend. They were bringing him one of the remaining black walnuts that was lying on the sidewalk. (To The Old Man's surprise, they had just opened one for their friend and it took them seemingly little effort.) They had moved him to a spot near the gutter, which had water running down it from a sprinkler at Billy's house next door. They were doing their best to help their friend get a drink.

It was over. The Old Man had decided that enough was enough. He had been bested (and almost killed). As The Little Man watched, he had absolutely no way to know that he, too, would have to surrender at some point in time. He eventually would have his battle. But his battle would be with a groundhog named Edgar some 50 years later.

The Man still keeps a black walnut and a sliver of Big Daddy's handle on the "Shelf of Interesting Things" in his office.

10

THE LOVELY LANDSCAPE

Back in the present day, the backyard was a bit on the large side. Not an acre, but large enough to have warranted the purchase of the new riding mower. There were several large trees on either side of the creek. The apple tree was the dominant one. There were others, but the core of this story revolves around the apple tree. The yard was divided into two major areas. There was the house side and there was The Other Side.

Sometimes, odd things happened on The Other Side.

Along the back side of the house, on the left end corner, were some rather nondescript bushes and weeds. A chimney was on the back side and there was also the obligatory brick or two on the ground...the ones left by the original construction crew decades ago. You could turn left and also see the side yard. If you turned right, you could see a basement wall that had a couple of dirty windows peeking through at ground level.

Facing the backyard from behind the house was an area between the back of the house and the creek. It was artfully named “the house side.” The house side took up roughly a third of the backyard. Connecting the house side and The Other Side was the footbridge.

The creek ran downhill from the far-right end of the side yard, across the property on down to the left, and then into the great unknown. Things that made their way into the great unknown rarely returned.

The creek was more of a drainage ditch than a creek, but it was pretty, nonetheless. It was especially pretty when it had water running through it, which was most of the time. The Man could usually hear the sound of water trickling down the creek when he had the basement windows open. Sometimes the creek, during a good rainstorm, even flooded and overflowed its banks, which was particularly exciting.

Especially when the water reached the bottom of the footbridge.



FOREVER FIGHTING KUNG FU FOOTBRIDGES!



The footbridge, which connected the house side to The Other Side, was 10 feet long from end to end. It was built by some unnamed and long-forgotten craftsman of ages past. It was made of redwood 4x4 beams, pine 2x4 cross pieces, and various nuts, bolts, and screws. Along the sides were smooth oaken handrails. It was 4 ½ feet wide, 4 ½ tall, and it sat on four 6x6 landing posts. It was VERY sturdy and had never been painted.

Several years prior, during a severe rainstorm, the creek overflowed. The water came up over the banks and nearly got all the way up to the house. Much more rain and the water would have flowed into the basement through the windows and basement door. It was very exciting for all involved, but not in a good way. It was not just a deluge, but a delHUGE. The next morning, The Man got up only to find that the otherwise very sturdy unpainted footbridge was missing! Gone! Disappeared!

Away on a vacation somewhere without telling anyone! It was indeed a mystery!

Going out on a one man search and rescue mission , The Man found himself wading in ankle-deep flowing water where there should not have been. He went downstream only to find that the footbridge had floated down and into the great unknown. Not far, but it had evidently declared war with the bridge next door during the deluge. It had crashed into the similar but weaker bridge. As The Man surveyed for damage, he became very proud of his little footbridge. It showed virtually NO damage. However, the bridge it had the fight with was broken into several pieces.

The fight had been a bit one sided , and The Man's footbridge had been victorious in its crusade.

12

SNACKS AND STEAKS AND “CARLTON OF THE BOW TIE AND CORINTHIAN LEATHER SHOES”

A few days after the flood, several of The Man's friends came over to help carry the footbridge back upstream. It was very heavy, and he needed help putting it back into place so that people could once again cross the creek from the house side to The Other Side without getting their feet wet. Bill was there. He was an accountant. Fred, whose last name was Flintstone... really... came as well. George, who had a very interesting part-time job doing jungle tours in Africa was there as well. Tobin, The Man's son, home from school for the weekend, also helped. Tobin was learning to be a screenwriter. There was Tom. He was a drummer in a local band. Daryl and his brother Larry also helped. His other brother, oddly also named Daryl, had to work and couldn't come. Even Doug, the next-door neighbor on the upstream side, came out and brought his shovel, just in case.

And then, there was Carlton of the Bow Tie and Corinthian Leather Shoes. He just wanted to be in charge.

Under Carlton's "directions," the men began the task of carrying the footbridge from its current location out in The Great Unknown back into the backyard. Carlton had brought along some bright orange safety cones and some flares to help guide the men who were actually working. The men essentially ignored him and had the footbridge back where it belonged in short order.

Gretchen was 13 years old at the time and had long blondish hair. She was 4 feet, 7 inches in height and weighed about 90 pounds. She had sky-bluish, green-gray eyes and she was very pretty. The Man loved her beyond description. He would have sacrificed anything for her, including his freedom and his very life if he was called to do so. She was a beautiful young lady, and much loved.

At lunchtime, Gretchen had prepared snacks and ice-cold lemonade for the helpers. She had also made ham sandwiches with optional tomatoes, carrots, watermelon (seedless), and squash slices (the yellow ones), all from the garden. There was also lettuce, mustard, mayo, relish, and Miracle Whip. There were potato chips (plain or BBQ) for lunch as well. There were even some fresh blackberries (thornless) right off the vines near the shed.

About that time, Carlton of the Bow Tie and Corinthian Leather Shoes decided that HE would go somewhere else to get

lunch. As he was leaving, he slipped on the slimy muck that was the creek. He slid into the creek and ended up with one foot in the greasy goop and the other in the mud about three inches deep. As he was sinking deeper into it, the foot that was in the slime slipped down to join the other foot. As Carlton pushed down with one foot trying to extricate himself, the other shoe made a bit of a sucking sound and came off, leaving him with one foot deep in the mud covered only in a silk sock and the other waving around in the air. As the others desperately tried to stifle their laughter...without much success, he somehow managed to drag himself back up onto the lawn and collect what was left of his dignity. He dug around in the goo and found the missing shoe and brought it up. The appearance of the shoe was too much for those around him. They burst into applause mixed with sincere laughter.

Carlton decided to hose himself off and get some lunch on his own. He went to a local restaurant to get a steak. He came back an hour and a half later (after the work had been done, and everybody else had gone home). In the following morning's local newspaper, there was an article written by Carlton of the Bow Tie and Corinthian Leather Shoes telling the story about how helpful he had been in fixing the footbridge.

Sterling, his father, owned the town newspaper.

13

NONE SHALL PASS

Driving Mow Fly across the footbridge was an impossible feat without doing severe damage or performing a complete redesign of either the footbridge or the mower itself. The footbridge wasn't quite as wide as the mower. This meant that The Man had to drive "Mow Fly, the over-wide mower" upstream on *his* property and cross over the creek as well as the property line and onto Doug's property. He did so with speed, dexterity, and alacrity, as if to DARE Doug to catch him in the very act of committing class 3 criminal trespass. "HAH!" he would say under his breath, so as to not appear to be unneighborly while crossing back over the property line and into the safety of his own land. He and Mow Fly would then scurry back downstream into The Other Side. It was quite the maneuver to say the least and rather exciting, if only in his mind. (Of course, he could have just gone next door and asked Doug if it would be okay to cross over in this way, but what would be the fun in that?)

And yet, there was still more to add to the problem. If during the process of the trespass maneuver he and the mower were to slip off the edge and slide into the creek, that would have ruined not only the day but very possibly the mower and The Man as well. That would have been an adventure in and of itself, but it is not the adventure that was in store for him today... even though it would have made an excellent story for future generations.

Having successfully navigated the long way to The Other Side, The Man began the tedious task of turning tall grass into short grass. He usually mowed in a clockwise direction with the creek on his left. (He paused for a moment and pondered... “If I lived below the equator, would I be mowing in the other direction?” Hmm...) Today was no exception. He liked getting the first circuit done and over with because the odds of sliding into the creek sideways went down precipitously after the first time around.

THE HEAVING HAUNTED FENCE

MANY years before The Man and Gretchen lived in the house, an unknown person built a split rail fence on the far-left corner of the property. It had eight posts that seemed to be *hanging* from the rails more than actually holding them up. Several of the posts had spread horizontally in a way so as to appear to be desperate to have a purpose in its waning life. As a result, only a few rails actually had both ends secured into two posts. Other rails leaned diagonally onto the ground as if waiting for the final call. It was likely the fence had been very pretty in its day. However, about all it was good for now was to live on borrowed time.

It had never been painted.

Every time The Man tried to mow near the fence, he felt that it was somehow leaning away from him. When that happened, an inexplicable chill went up The Man's back. It

caused him to involuntarily shudder a bit. Much like the chill one would get at a Halloween party when confronted by a person in a particularly convincing laughing mask of Vincent Price with well-done makeup accented by a guillotine and a talking head lying in the basket. It was something that he simply could not explain. It was as if the fence was frightened and fearful and knew that coming into contact with Mow Fly in any way would completely knock it down.

Perhaps it was correct in its assumption.

Around Halloween time, The Man would sneak out of the house with an armload of creepy Halloween decorations while Gretchen was sleeping. He would, with great stealth and fast beating of the heart, take the decorations out into the house side, over to The Other Side, and approach the fence. Oddly enough, it was usually a full moon outside. At least it seemed to be that way. He would gingerly approach the fence. In his mind the fence was sleeping, but The Man didn't think it wise to make TOO much noise...

He thought of a Halloween trick The Old Man had played many years prior. The Old Man was especially creative with his neighborhood Halloween tricks.

15

THE HALLOWEEN BUZZER

On Halloween Day in 1965, The Old Man decided that he would have some fun with the neighborhood miscreants who wanted free candy in exchange for not trashing his front yard. Some might call that extortion.

It took several days of thinking thoughtful thoughts about how to pull off a stunt that would go down in neighborhood history. It had to be quick. It had to be loud. It had to be startling. The design had to be cheap, simple, and hard to see. It had to be easy to install. And, it would have to send the scared little brats running off crying to mama.

In short, it had to make a kid wet his pants. He came up with a plan and went to work.

He went out on the hunt for materials. The first thing he needed was a motor. Not a namby-pamby little slot car-type motor, but a BIGASS one. Right out of a heavy duty appliance. He scrounged one out of an old washing machine. He stripped

out the motor and what he ended up with was a heavy, high-powered, high-speed motor with an axle sticking out of one end and an electrical cord out the other.

Now, he needed something to tie the motor shaft to a noise-making device. During his hospital stays for continued fixes on his leg from his Air Force days, he had gathered several feet of surgical tubing, which he kept in the junk drawer. That would work nicely. He needed about four inches of the stuff.

For the third item, he needed a twirly party noisemaker. One whose sole purpose in life was to irritate people. Like the one that one would wave around above their heads to get it going, and then works it until it runs everybody else out of the room. He drove down to the local Sprouse-Reitz store and got a very nice one for 50 cents. He also picked up a roll of Walnettos candy while he was there. The Old Man was going all in for this one!

He got some scissors from the family junk drawer, and SNIP! He cut about four inches off the piece of rubber tubing. He artfully and skillfully cleaned the business end of the motor with a rag that had been doused in lighter fluid to get it nice and clean. He didn't want the hose to slip off the shaft just as a victim of the prank was trying to run away.

He slipped the other end of the rubber tubing carefully over the shaft of the noisemaker.

There! The only thing left to do was to mount it and to make sure that the noisemaker didn't fly off and knock somebody's eye out. He got the ladder out of the workshop and set it up on the porch. He carried the heavy "Let's Scare the Daylights Out of the Little Ingrates Machine" (LSTDOTLIM) up the ladder and then proceeded to mount the machine under the eave of the porch where it couldn't be seen. He then ran an electrical cord from the motor to the porch light fixture next to the front door. It was controlled by the porch light switch inside the house.

Of course, The Old Man had to test the device before the little kiddos came in to extort candy from him that evening.

He disconnected the rubber tubing from the shaft on the motor (he didn't want to alert the neighborhood of his plans by making noise too soon). He reached inside the door and hit the front porch light switch. The motor sprang to life. He turned the switch back off and reattached the tubing to the motor's shaft.

He gleefully giggled while he rubbed his hands together.

Later that afternoon as it was getting dark outside, the family had dinner together and waited for the doorbell to ring. The house lights were turned off. The trap was set. All that was left was to wait. There would be no more testing of the LSTDOTLIM. The family dog, Missy, was lying in her basket, quivering. She seemed to know that something was up. Being a small terrier/Chihuahua mix, she was ALWAYS quivering and ALWAYS thought something was up. To go ballistic, all Missy needed was something...a trigger. And she had a hair trigger.

This evening, she would have a lot of them.

At dusk, the fun began. The kiddos started slithering out of their houses and walking around the streets in costume. The children wore skeleton outfits. They dressed up like princesses and thugs. There were ghouls and ghosts. Superman showed up by special request. He landed right in the front yard. There were cats and dogs, witches, and even warlocks. The older kids had their water balloons at the ready. They would lie in wait for the younger kids with enough candy in their bags to make what they did next be worthwhile. As a young child with candy in his bag

walked by, the older kids (who would be hiding in the bushes along the sidewalks) would walk up behind them, hold a water balloon over the young child's candy bag, and pop it. The water would gush into the candy bag, and a few seconds later, the entire bag would be completely useless as a container of any sort.

Everything that had been inside the bag was now outside the bag and on the sidewalk or even out in the street. It all became fair game for the older kids. It was a tradition that was hilarious for everybody but the younger kids and the parents, and it had been passed down for generations.

At last, some little ones came to the door. The doorbell rang and Missy went absolutely ballistic. She barked, scratched at the door, barked some more, spun around in little circles for a bit, and then banged her head on the door several times. The Old Man and the family looked out the window and the kids were gone. They had run off. They didn't want anything to do with a crazy, head-banging dog.

Oh well.

The next doorbell ring had the same effect on Missy, but THESE kids were a little braver. Since the indoor house lights were turned off, the family could see out, but the kids could

not see in. The Old Man was at the switch. The rest of the crew was watching out the window. The Old Man, all at the same time, yanked open the front door, yelled “BOO!” as loud as he could, and hit the LSTDOTLIM switch, causing a cacophony of terror aimed right in the faces of the little beggars. The effect was magical. There had been five of the little ones standing there before the front door flew open. In a shorter time than can physically be measured by any known scientific instrument, there were none. Their little eyes had grown into big eyes, and they simply vanished. It was as if they had disappeared from the face of the planet. Or fallen into a black hole or a rip in the space-time continuum and found a black walnut or two.

The doorbell rang again. Missy went through her normal routine. But THIS time, it was the police. The family decided not to answer the door. Instead, they sneaked out the back patio door and climbed down the ladder into the fallout shelter for a few minutes...until the heat blew over.

After a while, they all climbed back up the ladder and quietly went back into the house to wait for the next victim.

The doorbell rang. Missy was getting hoarse. This time it was some older kids. There were seven of them. They had formed

a gang. Their bags were already full of other smaller kids' wet candy. These guys were the ones who should have known better than to mess with the last house on the left. These were the ones in the third and fourth grades and they knew everything...until they came home from college and then they REALLY knew everything.

The Old Man again yanked the door open and yelled "BOO!" Combined with the noise from the LSTDOTLIM, the two still standing there suddenly had wet pants. The Little Man couldn't figure out how that could be. Where had the other five kids gone?

The two that had stood their ground said, in quiet, shaking voices, "Ttttricck oor tttreat?"

The Old Man made them stand there, in their wet pants, and said, "Who's Your Daddy!? Who's the King!? Who DA MAN??"

"Yyy yooo arrr, sssir," they groveled.

"Now, you're talking. That's what I wanted to hear!" said The Old Man. "Here! Take some candy!"

“Nnnooo ttthhank yyou, sssssir. Weee’re good,” they whined. “You won.”

They slithered off. Defeated in no uncertain terms.

Dripping.

The Little Man never found out what happened to the other five kids.

This pretty much set the tone for the rest of the evening. Kids who weren’t quite ready to grow up yet had to that night. The Old Man was laughing his head off. The Wow Mom wasn’t quite so impressed. The Sis (The Man’s sometimes obnoxious big sister) thought that the little kids were cute and wondered where they had gone. The Wow Mom had to give Missy some doggy tranquilizers. Both she and Missy were unconscious in The Old Man’s easy chair. Missy was still quivering. The Old Man and The Little Man stayed up for a while watching the old version of *The Mummy* and waiting for any stragglers to scare off. Together, they ate what candy was left and fell asleep on the couch.

The Unexpected New Best Friend

The Little Man was awed by The Old Man.

16

THE SHED OF STORIES AND MEMORIES LONG SINCE FORGOTTEN



Next to and overlapping the blackberry vines (thornless, of course), The Man and Mow Fly came up next to “The Shed of Stories and Memories Long Since Forgotten (The Shed). The Man had purchased the shed and it was installed on the property by employees of the shed vendor. It was put in the back left corner of The Other Side. It was gray with blue-and-white trim and was 12 feet wide by 8 feet deep. It was 7 feet tall plus the angled roof, and it had two sets of windows. Standing in the door of the shed and facing the house, one window faced out the far-right side and the other one was on the right front. There were two large 2 ½-foot-wide swinging doors in the left front of the shed that opened like a wide maw and one could walk into and out of the shed through them. There was a ramp leading up to the opening that was designed to allow (barely) Mow Fly to be driven up and into the shed.

The shed door had a padlock on it that had rarely been used.

As he drove Mow Fly toward the shed, The Man noticed a reddish mark on the white trim next to the window that hadn't been there before. He had seen the window many times before but today, the window seemed different. Upon further investigation, he figured out that there was a large hole in the glass this time. There were a few glass shards on the ground, but not many. He didn't know just what to make of it.

The Man turned Mow Fly off and cautiously went into the shed. The first thing he noticed as he walked up the ramp was that there were broken glass bits literally everywhere inside. The little pieces were reflecting sunny spots throughout the interior. There was a big ole honkin' chunk of red brick on the floor.

There was a theme developing.

Mow Fly's Big BANG!

Brick.

Broken glass.

Swell.

The Man had to mow the grass today lest the HOA B-Squad come after him. He would get to cleaning up the broken glass another day.

Inside the shed was standard shed fare. There were spades and shovels and sledgehammers that had been purchased over the years. Most had broken or split handles. One of the sledgehammers was Big Daddy of black walnut lore. It was somewhat of an heirloom for The Man in that it was now 155 years old. Even though the handle of Big Daddy was split, The Man could not bring himself to throw it away.

Immediately inside the shed's door and to the right were four bags of instant concrete neatly stacked up against the wall. They had been purchased for the purpose of shoring up the fence. That project never came to fruition and the bags had long since hardened into fossil material. They could NEVER be used for anything except to keep the shed from blowing away in a tornado.

There were other gardening supplies and tools as you entered. There were empty cans of pesticides, hard, dry containers of chemicals, and other undefinable stuff without labels that The

Man simply couldn't part with and were stacked neatly inside. Scanning left, there were some blue/gray steel shelving units that The Man had purchased at the big hardware store. Most of the shelves were bent in at least one place. (He had completely ignored the weight limit posted on the shelf packaging.) The shelves held the things that The Man didn't want on the floor, like power tools that had only been used once, cans of paint that were either completely dried out or, at best, had a thick skin over the paint.

The manuals for each piece of home electronics, stereo, or camera equipment along with tools (power or manual) were also there. They were still neatly sealed in their original envelopes and plastic bags.

Unopened, unused, and unread.

He even had an old rotary power tool that he had purchased through a television show years prior and now didn't work any longer. (It had a bad switch.)

There were fixed shelves to the left and above the window, which held camping gear on the odd chance that he and Gretchen might go camping one day. The gear included three sleeping bags, a tent or two, a gas camp stove and lantern (of course), and other camping accouterments. There were a few coiled up climbing ropes as well. No self-respecting shed is without its ropes...expensive climbing ropes.

Along the front side of the shed were boxes and boxes of other “stuff”—model trains, model planes, model automobiles, gas engines, Christmas ornaments, ham radio gear, old stereo speakers with torn cones, more coils of old wire than can be counted, purple and pink pool noodles, and of course, the obligatory dollhouse.

Also, on the floor in the shed there was a military footlocker. It had been spray-painted blue on the sides and it was extremely well traveled. The lid had some silver paint on it, but in the middle of the lid there was a name. The name had been stenciled on with spray paint. The name on the lid of the silver-and-blue footlocker on the shelf in the shed was the name of The Old Man. The Man’s father and hero. No matter where The Man moved, no matter where The Man lived, this footlocker was ALWAYS in tow. Inside the silver-and-blue box, among other things, was an ammo box from WWII. In it were medals and decorations. (They had since been moved into a framed shadow box and hung on the wall in The Man’s place of work.) There were pictures and letters from The Old Man to The Wow Mom written from faraway places during the war.

There was another treasure that had since been moved to The Man’s place of work and placed in a prominent position on his “Shelf of Interesting Things.” It was a 20 mm cannon shell

The Unexpected New Best Friend

casing like the one that had fired the bullet through The Old Man's shin. Next to the casing was a medal. A Purple Heart. It speaks volumes to The Man every time he walks into his office. It stands in honor of those from the Greatest Generation who answered the call and fought for this country during WWII and Korea. We will be ever grateful for these brave men and women and the Tuskegee Airmen who fought alongside them.

17

TORA TORA TORA

One day, after The Little Man had turned into “The Teen Man,” The Old Man took him down to the local movie theater. Just the two of them. The Teen Man couldn’t wait for them to get to their destination! The movie was playing at The California Theater (The Cal).

The Cal was a landmark theater in the town and somewhat crowded for a Saturday matinee. The movie they were going to see was called *Tora! Tora! Tora!* It was playing in some time 1970 and was supposed to be a pretty good film. (Unlike the more recent remakes.) The Old Man pointed to a couple seats about a third of the way up and in the dead center. He went back to the snack bar and got some popcorn, Jujufruits, and a couple of Fanta colas. The Teen Man sat down in the appointed seat and waited for his father to come back with the goodies.

The obligatory previews and animated feature began to roll. The preview was for a film called *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* with Pia Zadora (before she became every high school boy's heartthrob in the Dubonnet Wine commercials). Next was a Bugs Bunny cartoon. This animated short film starred Bugs in a military-type short.

The cartoon was funny. The movie was not.

It turned out that *Tora! Tora! Tora!* was a historical film. It tracked the events leading up to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, which brought the United States into WWII on December 7, 1941. From a young teenager's perspective, the movie was exciting and entertaining. It had all kinds of airplanes flying and crashing, explosions, and lots of gunfire.

As to The Old Man, he was reliving the nightmare that was WWII.

The Teen Man never forgot what The Old Man said as they walked out of the theater that afternoon. "Teen Man, no matter what anybody else tells you about how WWII started for the United States, this movie shows EXACTLY what was happening at the time.

“I was there.”

The Old Man didn't say much on the way home. But they DID stop and get an ice cream cone.

18

EDGAR, “THE FAT GROUNDHOG,” AND THE GARDEN OF CAPITULATION

Edgar, “the Fat Groundhog,” lived underneath the shed.

On the ground along the outside of the shed was the woodpile. It consisted of not quite full-length 4x4s, 2x4s, and multiple pieces of wood that had been lying there seemingly since before the house was purchased by The Man. Perhaps even since the house had been built. Every house that The Man had lived in had one. It was a constant in his life. He could always depend on there being a woodpile wherever he might move to. He would simply leave the last one where it was for the next owner, and eagerly anticipated a new woodpile wherever, whenever, he moved to a new house.

There was a nondescript tree next to the woodpile. It occasionally provided some shade while The Man was mowing the grass.

The Man liked the shed, but then there was Edgar, "the Fat Groundhog." Edgar came out on this day presumably to visit The Man as he went by on Mow Fly. This was a bit disconcerting to The Man. Edgar did something that he thought that groundhogs couldn't, or shouldn't do and this made The Man very nervous. Edgar had climbed up into the tree next to the shed apparently to say hello to Mow Fly in his own little groundhog way. The Man worried about what might happen if Edgar fell out of the tree at precisely the wrong time. He did not want to run over Edgar. That would be one very hot mess and it might severely damage the new mower. Not to mention Edgar!

Gretchen had discovered Edgar under the footbridge one morning long after it had been washed away in a storm and replaced. She had figured out that Edgar had at least two tunnels in the yard that originated under the shed. In the interest of full disclosure, neither Gretchen nor The Man knew if "Edgar" should really be called "Edgarette," "Edgarine," or even "Edgaretta." Neither one wanted to figure out just how to go about finding out which it was.

Edgar looked mostly like any other common everyday groundhog. He had a beautiful light brown fur coat that glistened in the sunlight and shimmered when the moon was full and bright. He had beady little jet-black eyes that lit up like flares when the night-lights hit them.

It was a bit disturbing for someone when those eyes were staring at them. They wouldn't know if Edgar was happy to see them and wanted a scratch behind the ears, or if he was wondering what they would taste like if food suddenly became scarce.

Edgar was a relatively large groundhog as groundhogs go. He was about the length of a football and a half and was quite big around the middle. But he was slightly more around the middle than the football being used by the New England Patriots during the Super Bowl. He didn't really walk as much as waddle from side to side with a forward motion.

His teeth were like razors, and he could shred food like a brand new garbage disposal in seconds. Edgar would make his teeth chatter when threatened. The chattering was faster than a person's teeth who was caught in a snowstorm wearing only a t-shirt and shorts. It was creepy to listen to, but it meant to whomever heard it, "Back off or I'll tear your nose out by the roots."

The Man tended to back away when Edgar started to chatter.

Edgar had pretty much free range and accessibility to The Other Side and at least partial access to the house side as well. His network of tunnels was astounding. He could appear virtually at anytime, anywhere on the property, and disappear with equal dexterity. When the garden came into season and Edgar was hungry, tomatoes, carrots, watermelons (seedless), and squash (the yellow ones) were eaten or damaged with speed and ferocity.

Edgar's home base seemed to be under the shed. As a result, it was impossible to get close enough to even TRY to chase him away. And nobody in their right mind would dare reach in under the shed and try to drag him out.

The Man and Gretchen had decided that the only way to try to coexist in harmony with Edgar was to accept that he was a wild animal and not a pet. They would have to either keep away from any attempt to form a friendship with him or have him removed from the property.

Permanently.

They chose to let him stay.

19

IT WAS THE BEST OF TIMES

The swing set was a little farther on and near the shed. The Man had purchased and assembled the swing set for Gretchen. It was 10 feet wide and made of 4x4 redwood support posts. There were two swings attached to the frame, and it was 10 feet wide. On the left end was a sort of “fort extension” that had a slide built into it. The swing set was painted bright blue and green, and it was for the exclusive use of Gretchen and her friends.

Sometimes in the late afternoon, Gretchen and The Man would go outside together to swing in the summer evenings and watch the lightning bugs light up and the lightning storms build until the first lightning bolt struck and it began to rain. They would look at each other knowingly, laugh, hunch down, and jump off the swings. They would then race each other back to the house, leaving the swings to swing on their own in the high wind and the rain. It was time to break out the ice cream maker and have crushed Oreos with caramel and nuts. When

in season, they added fresh blackberries (thornless) to the mix.
YUM!

It was a happy time.

It was a happy time indeed.

Near the swing set and a bit closer to the house was the garden. The garden would sometimes yield tomatoes, carrots, the odd watermelon or two (seedless, of course), and squash (The Man preferred the yellow ones). Most of the time, however, it just grew weeds. (The Man wasn't very interested in gardening. Edgar's eating habits and fondness for the foods are likely the reason.)

Next to the garden and back in the far-right corner of The Other Side was a very large mulberry tree. During the summer months, the mulberry tree provided a nice shady spot for Gretchen and The Man to have picnics and sit in the shade together and chat.

The Unexpected New Best Friend

In the fall, the big green leaves changed to a very bright yellow. They were beautiful and certainly worthy of magazine cover pictures. At the end of the season, on one particular day every year, a very large flock of birds would gather in the neighborhood and near the house. The next day, the leaves on the mulberry tree started falling like raindrops. All day long. By the next day the yellow leaves had all changed from hanging in the tree to a very large collection on the ground.

It was time to get out the rake and plastic garbage bags and clean up the big, beautiful mess.

Nothing could be more pleasant than swinging on the swings and spending time with Gretchen!

20

OH SO TASTY, OH SO TOUGH, OH SO WRONG

The apple tree was on The Other Side close to the creek. It was in the right corner near the property line. The apples from this tree were usually tasty, but they were hard as rocks and the large ones were about the size of a golf ball. They were a bit on the dry side and upon doing some research, The Man found that the name of the apple was “Tiddly Pomme.”

The Man was careful to not just chomp down on one and potentially crack a tooth or dislocate his jaw. If he was to eat one at all he had to work his teeth into the apple and slowly tear it apart that way. He had to spit out the skin.

During this particular trip around The Other Side, something occurred to him that he hadn't given much thought to for many years. Some time ago, years before even thinking of planting the blackberries (thornless), The Man had purchased this particular apple tree (as a sapling) from a well-known, and well-thought-of, flower and garden mail order house. Which

one escaped him. (Oddly, it wasn't well enough known that he could remember the company's name, but he seemed to think that the name reminded him of someone burping.) He had ordered a tree called a "Northern Spy apple tree." He loved the name and he was thrilled when it came in. He quickly dug a hole, conditioned the soil, planted the tree, and began watering it regularly. He could not wait to take the first bite of this highly thought of little apple when it became ripe. He had to wait several seasons until the big day came.

The apples FINALLY burst forth from the tree! The Man reached up and picked one. "Hmm," he thought. "I thought that these would be a bit bigger. Oh well, maybe the first crop on new baby trees is a bit on the smaller side than normal. It'll be better next year." "Next year" turned into "next many years" until he finally gave up and forgot about it.

On THIS particular day, The Man remembered those earlier years and something occurred to him. He HAD to get the answer to the long past question. Being a bit on the impulsive side, he shut down Mow Fly, grabbed an apple, and chomped into it. He then ran into the house and turned on the computer. While the computer was coming up, he got some ice from the freezer and put it on his nearly dislocated, aching jaw. He logged in to Firefox, did a bit of research, and determined that, while he had ORDERED a Northern Spy tree, he must have

RECEIVED a Tiddly Pomme tree. All these years the tree had been producing the proper apple, given the genetic makeup of the tree, but it was not the tree that he had ordered. Go figure!

The Man often wondered what had become of his original Northern Spy tree. Perhaps it had been planted on a golf course somewhere in Florida.

The Man smiled and while shaking his head slowly, with a private grin, he whispered to himself...

“That’s my life.”

21

A HISTORY OF HEROICS

The Man trudged back to the sleeping lawn mower. On his way there, another fonder memory of his father, The Old Man, found its way to the surface. He called him “Old Man” sometimes, not out of disrespect, but out of the deepest respect and love that he had for that man. He missed him. The Old Man had died when The Man was in college.

It was a very hard time for The Man.

When The Man was younger, he was called “The Little Man.” The Old Man was retired from the Air Force at the rank of lieutenant colonel after serving 20 years and as a pilot for 12 of those years. (He had been taken out of the pilot job after evidence of a mild heart attack showed up in a physical.)

The Old Man had LOVED to fly. He didn’t care what he flew, bombers, pursuits (fighters), or transports. He simply

didn't care. He just loved to fly. He had fought in WWII and Korea, among other engagements. Upon his retirement he and the family moved from the air base where they were living to a town a few hours away. The Little Man was five years old at the time.

This was during a time in history called the Cuban Missile Crisis. (JFK was the president at the time.)

At that time in history, many people were building bomb shelters and fallout shelters to hide in if things REALLY went south. Having served in the military, The Old Man was one of those people. One of the first things that The Old Man did upon arrival to his new home was to build an underground fallout shelter. Fortunately, the only action that *that* shelter saw, except for an, ummm awful "misunderstanding" on Halloween one year, was use as a storage area and as a clubhouse for The Little Man and his friends to play in and sometimes spend the night.

The next thing that The Old Man did was to plant a tree in the backyard. Almost immediately after planting it and as soon as he could, he toyed with grafting several additional types of apples onto the newly planted tree ("The Magic Apple Tree"). The Little Man could not wait for the apples to come. He dreamed that when the apples finally arrived, he would go

out into the backyard and pick an apple at will. He would bite into it and enjoy all the mouthwatering juicy goodness that only a fresh ripe apple right off The Magic Apple Tree could hope to deliver.

Throughout the years, as The Little Man ate the apples from The Magic Apple Tree, it grew bigger and bigger.

Eventually there were so many apples on The Magic Apple Tree that The Old Man had to support it with 2x4 boards braced under the branches in order to keep the sagging, productive tree from breaking due to the weight of the delicious fruit. The Magic Apple Tree produced different types of apples for years and years. Hundreds of apples were given to neighbors, friends, and teachers. Gallons of applesauce appeared on the tables of various families. Some apples were thrown at neighborhood friends, picked up, and thrown right back.

Until the mothers found out.

“It’ll knock your eye out if one of those hits you!”

It was a wonderful time.

22

YOUNG CHILDREN ALERT

The Man was also reminded of another adventure from back in the day. The Little Man was about nine years old when he found himself telling Billy from next door a story that The Old Man had previously told him. It was about The Old Man's days in the Air Force. He was relating a story about the day The Old Man flew on a bombing mission over Korea. He was flying over enemy territory and released his payload.

“As he was flying the plane up and out of the mission area, The Old Man encountered an area of heavy enemy ground fire. 20 mm rounds. BIG bullets!! The Old Man and his crew were coming home and doing their best to get out of firing range. In the process, a 20 mm bullet came up and through the cabin of his plane. It went through The Old Man's shin, shattering it, and killed The Old Man's navigator, who was also his best friend. The Old Man didn't even notice the wound until he pulled up on the stick and the bones in his leg started to shift around. ‘YEOUCH!!’

“Even under duress, pain, and shock, he managed to get the plane back to base and down on the ground relatively safely,”

The Little Man continued. “The plane had both wingtips shot off, the rudder was shot off, and there were 250 holes in the plane!” he explained to Billy.

At this point The Old Man, who had been listening intently but quietly to The Little Man’s rendition, stepped in on the story. He quietly said, “Little Man, there were 256 holes in that airplane. Please don’t forget about the other six...and there were no other casualties.”

The Old Man refused to allow the doctors to remove his destroyed leg. Nor did he want to take the morphine that was offered to him, lest he become addicted to it. (His leg eventually healed enough that he could walk on it unassisted.)

The Little Man, now grown into The Man, never forgot that story. Even now, The Man is awed at The Old Man’s tenacity and fearlessness under pressure. Such was the mindset of those from the Greatest Generation.

And he is still incredibly proud of him.

The Man was also reminded of an exchange that he had with his brother, The Bro Man.

The baby boomer generation had its share of heroes as well.

The Bro Man was 10 years older than The Little Man. The two, because of the age difference between them, didn't interact much. When The Bro Man was 19 or so, he left home. The Little Man didn't see much of him again for quite a while. The Bro Man had decided that he would join the Navy, and after some very hard training and extensive psychological testing The Bro Man was accepted into the submarine service.

This happened during the Vietnam War era and was in the years around 1968 and 1970 that he served in the US Navy Submarine Service. By the end of the Vietnam War, some 58,300 US military men had lost their lives.

It was a very hard time in United States history.

The Little Man was much older when he had the following conversation with The Bro Man. In fact, The Little Man had turned into The Man long before this conversation took place.

At a family reunion, The Bro Man nodded to The Man and motioned for them to go outside onto the deck. He looked very somber, pensive, and even sad. He apologized for not “being there” for The Little Man while he was growing up.

After some hugs, tears, forgiveness, and making up for lost time, The Bro Man related the following story from the time that he was in the Navy on a submarine mission out in deep waters.

The Bro Man described what life was like in a sub.

First and foremost, it was very crowded and cramped. There were three work shifts, and at any given time one-third of the crew was in bed. (For the sake of illustration, if there were 300 men on board, there were approximately 100 bunks, and each bunk was assigned to three different sailors on a rotating eight-hour schedule. The bunks were so cramped that turning over while sleeping was impossible. If the sailor in bed wanted to turn over, he had to slide out of the bunk and then climb back into it. It was a very busy and very cramped place.)

It made for a somewhat creepy “living” space.

In addition, and to make things even creepier, there were closet rods across the space in the closets where the sailors hung their clothes. When on the surface, the rods were straight and rigid across the opening. When they were “at depth,” the rods, due to the tremendous water pressure from the deep water, sagged several inches.

It was a constant reminder that one is always at risk in a submarine.

One day while on a mission out in deep water, doing whatever is done on a submarine, the diving planes got stuck in the down position! (The position of the diving planes basically controls whether the sub is going down, running level, or going up. Diving planes are like the elevators on the back end of an airplane.) When this happens, sometimes the submarine can simply go to the bottom and sit there until the problem gets fixed. But in DEEPER water the safe descent is only as far as the “crush depth.” Crush depth is determined by how the boat is engineered.

An average “crush depth” can be in the 400-meter range (1,312 ft) for a sub. (For an unprotected human, crush depth is about 40 to 60 meters. About 165 feet.) 1,312 feet is something over four football fields end to end. A little over a quarter of a mile.

A very, VERY long way from home.

As The Bro Man’s story goes, he was piloting (driving) the submarine on that very memorable day when the diving planes got stuck in the down position. As the sub began to dive, apparently most of the loose stuff inside started sliding, and then began falling. Forward. This exacerbated the problem exponentially. The crew became tense and fearful beyond any training that they had had. The farther down they went, the worse the problem became. Something, ANYTHING, had to be done! Quickly, and NOW! Like two minutes ago! The sub got to crush depth and then went beyond it. The sub’s infrastructure began to creak and groan under the pressure.

The Bro Man, acting on instinct and without orders, disengaged the screws. (The screws are like the propellers on an airplane except, on a submarine, the screws turn both forward and backward.) After disengaging the screws, he reversed their

rotation, and then re-engaged them. This would be much like throwing a car into reverse while it is rolling forward.

This single action reversed the direction of the thrust and literally “backed up” the nearly crippled submarine and moved it back up and out of crush depth.

When the sub returned to running depth and then to the surface, it headed back to port. Upon examination, there were dozens of cracks in the hull. If the sub had gone much deeper it would have been crushed, and it is very likely that the entire crew would have died.

The submarine was decommissioned as it was beyond repair.

“Well, that was quite a story!” The Man thought. He was suspicious about the details and about the “hero” of the story that he had just heard. Over the following years, try as he might, he had been unable to neither confirm nor deny any part of the story. However, at a birthday party sometime much later and after The Bro Man had died, The Man ran into a Vietnam veteran. As they chatted, The Bro Man’s story came up in the conversation. The vet was familiar with this particular submarine incident and confirmed that there had been a very

serious accident on The Bro Man's sub about that time. The sub had been crippled in the way The Bro Man had described, had limped back to port as described, and was also immediately decommissioned as described.

“Hmm,” The Man said to himself. So his brother HAD been there on that particular day, in that particular submarine, in that particular part of the ocean, and in that particular war. He realized at that moment that he might actually have TWO men in his immediate family who were certifiable heroes!

The Man continues to search for more clues.

23

NO MAN'S LAND

The Man called the rest of the yard “No Man’s Land.” It was an open area covered only by grass. He called it that for little more reason than he thought that it had a kind of groovy sound to it. “Let’s go out to No Man’s Land and have a picnic” sounded infinitely cooler than, “Let’s go sit in the grass.”

Overall, it was a pretty backyard and on this day, on The Other Side, mowing this particular yard, with this particular new lawn mower, this particular man’s worldview would be rocked for the rest of his life.

The Man continued the task at hand by mowing around the apple tree and was now maneuvering through No Man’s Land. The Man moved Mow Fly forward, not thinking about it. His mind was on other less important things. When he came to, he realized that something much more significant had happened right in front of him and it now commanded his full attention

and inspired wonder. He was heading back toward the creek where the adventure would soon hit him head on. As The Man began to navigate the right-hand turn that would get him going parallel to the creek again, something caught his eye.

He moved on, and right in front of him, the adventure began to unfold.

24

VENTURING INTO THE ADVENTURE

As he continued mowing, something that wasn't there the first time around (or at least he hadn't noticed it) was there now! As he looked, it occurred to him that he was looking at what appeared to be a bundle of leaves, much like one would see whilst cleaning out rain gutters...that glob of wet goo, wet leaves, and slime. But NO! The Man was staring at a nest! An item not of passing interest, but of MUCH interest.

Upon further investigation, he had noticed something else that was even MORE interesting, as if that were even possible. After he took his pulse, he found himself looking at something about two feet from the nest. It was a ball of feathers! It appeared to have an eyeball in it! A beautiful blue/green/gray eyeball. And the eyeball was staring right at him! And it moved a bit as well! It was a baby bird! A nestling! And it did not look to be very happy. In fact, it looked quite grumpy, sad, angry, and frightened, all at the same time. It took The Man a moment or two for him to realize the ramifications of what he was seeing.

(Some very old memories awakened in The Man. As he looked at the helpless little bird, its eye drew his attention. He couldn't get past it. He couldn't stop looking at it. The eye was EXACTLY the same color as little Gretchen's eyes were at birth. At that moment, he knew that he had to do whatever it took to save this little bird.)

IT WAS AN ADVENTURE! AND IT WAS HAPPENING RIGHT NOW AND IN REAL TIME!

FINALLY!...Something fascinating, brand new, and UNBROKEN had literally fallen into The Man's life!

25

WRESTLING FOR THE NESTLING

The Man hit the kill switch on Mow Fly. He yanked the throttle back down to zero and upon a backfire and a puff of smoke, he leaped from the mower. On the way off, the sleeve on the shirt he was wearing hung up on one of the steering handles and was torn off. He didn't care. It didn't even slow him down. He just kept on moving. In the next second he was confirming that it was indeed a nest and a live baby bird that had evidently fallen from the apple tree! His entire focus was now on the stranded little creature.

WHOSE BIRD WAS IT?

WHAT CAN BE DONE FOR IT?

WHEN DID IT FALL OUT OF THE TREE?

WHERE DID THE NEST AND BIRD COME FROM?

“WHY ME?”

“Why me?”

“Why not me?”

Why not him indeed. All these things and more were whizzing through The Man’s head. He had read once in “The Book of All Relevant Knowledge” (“The BARK”) that one should leave a fallen nestling alone...that the mama and daddy birds would somehow get a fallen nestling back up into the nest. But THIS little guy’s nest was on the ground! HE was on the ground! How could that possibly work?

Should he try to build another nest by himself? How would he feed the little bird? Did the bird need water? Nothing like this had ever happened to either the nestling or The Man before.

“WHAT DO I DO?! Was this a message from God somehow? Should I pray? Should I call a vet? Should I do both?

“Should I consult Firefox and look for a ‘How Do I Rescue a Bird Who Has Just Fallen Out of a Tree and Desperately Needs Help or He Will Die’ video? Where is The BARK now?!”

The Man was on the verge of a full-on panic attack! He felt like he was going to wet his pants! His bladder was going nuts...

almost out of control! He had literally lost his last wit. All of his other wits had run away. He recognized the emotions from his ordeal when Gretchen was in the hospital.

He pulled himself together and did what any good and loving father would do.

“GRETCHEEEEENN! GREEEEETCHEEEEEEN!!” he called out.

He heard a faint, “What? What happened?” (He was on The Other Side, in No Man’s Land, and she was on the house side, in the house, and couldn’t hear him very well.)

“COME AND SEE THIS! AND WOULD YOU PLEASE BRING ME SOME WATER IN A JAR LID?”

“What?” she said.

“PLEASE COME HERE!”

“What’s up?”

(This was not the way The Man wanted this conversation to go.)

“PLEASE, JUST COME OUTSIDE! COME OVER
HERE!”

“Where are you?”

“LOOK OUT THE WINDOW!”

“Where?”

“THE OTHER WINDOW! OVER HERE!”

“Okay. Coming.”

It seemed like forever for her to get to him.

As Gretchen strolled over to The Man, she glanced at Edgar for a moment. He was on the other side of the yard chewing on a carrot.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“WHAT’S UP? WHAT’S UP? CAN’T YOU SEE WHAT HAS HAPPENED HERE?” he thought to himself. “Please just go into the house, find a jar lid, put some water in it, and bring it out here. And please bring a couple of paper towels with you as well.” (The Man always tried to use good manners, especially when he was talking with Gretchen.)

It seemingly took forever, again, for her to follow his directions and get back to him with water and paper towels. While waiting for her, it dawned on The Man that it was now quite warm outside, and the bird would probably prefer being in the shade rather than out in the sun with that big bright light shining in his little eyes. He VERY GENTLY picked up the tiny birdy in one hand, grabbed the nest in the other hand, and carried them both across the yard and over to the shady part of The Other Side. He set them both down on the grass and waited for Gretchen to come back.

About the same time, The Man also began to wonder what the little birdy would eat. He only had a hard butterscotch candy in his pants pocket, and that probably wouldn’t work for his immediate purposes. He needed worms. He looked around and his gaze fell on the back side of the house. His brain shifted into “High.” He stood up and ran toward the creek. He was a man on a mission. Like a track star running the 100-yard hurdle, he

threw himself over the creek, completely forgetting about using the footbridge. He also forgot that he was approaching 50 years old. He made it over the creek, most of the way, and slipped on a slippery spot! He made a less than graceful recovery though, without doing too much damage, waved to the crowd, and got to the “weed and brick garden” behind the house.

He immediately reached for the brick that was stuck in the ground and missing a corner. He yanked it out. No worms under there! Only a muddy smell. He then went after a large dandelion nearby and tried to rip it from the moist soil. It tore off at ground level! Strike two! Finally, he grabbed another, smaller weed, held his breath, and slowly exorcised it from the moist dirt. Out it came...

In his hand was a weed with a dirt ball attached to the roots. Stuck in the dirt ball was a worm. A hapless little guy, who had quite literally been caught with his pants down, was squirming around half inside the dirt ball and half outside. If worms had faces, this one would certainly have had a surprised look. The Man immediately wrapped his hand around the entire concoction. Brushing away the dirt, he pulled the still-wriggling worm out of the dirt ball. As he started running back to the little birdy, he decided to slow it down a bit, veered to the left, and trotted across the footbridge. He was still breathing hard from the first jump across the creek. Keeping his eye on the little

birdy, The Man approached it slowly. He didn't want to frighten him any worse than he already was. And he waited for Gretchen. She finally got there.

The work had begun.

It was going to be a wrestling match. It would be a match unlike ANY he had participated in during his life. It would be a life and death match! However, with THIS match, BOTH had to win, or BOTH of them would lose. And The Man did NOT want to lose. So, with a couple of paper towels, a jar lid, an eyedropper (which Gretchen had thoughtfully brought along), and a pair of strong, gentle (if not so steady) hands, The Man began fighting, quite literally, for the little birdy's life. The birdy might be broken, but The Man was going to do ANYTHING he could do to fix him!

It was not a cool afternoon. Hotter than warm, but not quite boiling hot. The Man knew that the helpless little birdy probably needed water. NOW! He had read that much in The BARK. BUT he didn't want to give him too much water at the risk of him drowning. He had read THAT in The BARK as well.

With his left hand, The Man held the birdy's head firmly, but just hard enough so that his little head couldn't move. With his right hand, he pried the little guy's mouth open, but just a bit. Gretchen was tasked with getting one single drop of water into the birdy's mouth. The Man held the worm and slowly put it next to the birdy's beak. Gretchen squeezed one drop of water from the dropper. The worm he had uncovered and the water disappeared like magic. Like a shred of tissue paper getting sucked into a vacuum cleaner's hose.

Gretchen then gave the birdy one more drop of water.

Birdy fell asleep instantly.

The nestling was fighting for his very life. The Man was determined to do everything he could for the helpless little bird. In some ways, the bird's determination reminded him of his son, Tobin.

26

BRING OUT THE BIG GUNS

Tobin was six years old when he found out that there was going to be a new baby in the house. The first thing he said was, “I want to be there when the baby is born.” The second thing he said was, “I’m glad you told me. I thought Mom was dying.” (Because of the morning sickness, he hadn’t said anything about it, but he was worried sick.)

He was eager to be involved and so there were books to be read, films to be watched, and other preparations to be made to welcome the newcomer.

A week before the big day, Tobin’s grandmother (“Nanny”) came in for the celebration and to offer assistance in caring for the newborn baby. (She and Tobin were best buds and it was time for a visit anyway.)

Gretchen was going to be born at a time of year when RSV is prevalent. RSV is a respiratory infection that is particularly hard on newborn babies. It seemed that every winter, RSV was in the news. As the time drew closer for Gretchen's actual BIRTH day, it became apparent that some of the baby plans were going to have to change.

As RSV came into the picture, the powers that be said Tobin would not be allowed to be there for the birth after all.

At least that's what the doctors, nurses, and administrators thought.

They had never run into anybody quite like The Man before. He would have nothing of this nonsense. Tobin wanted to be part of the birth of his new sister, and he would be. The Man would make it happen. He went about inquiring as to what could be done to solve the problem and to make this all happen...in spite of the "regulations." He pestered the midwives about it. They said to talk to the nurses. The nurses said to talk to the doctors. The doctors, whom he pestered mercilessly, threw up their hands and said that he would have to talk with...

THE ADMINISTRATOR.

The administrator did NOT know who he was dealing with. He thought that HE was The Boss Man. The Big Kahuna. Large and In Charge. When The Man made a suggestion, the administrator shot it down. The Man made another suggestion, and he shot THAT one down as well. When the administrator said no the third time, The Man walked out the door and back to see the nurses. Again. They had been talking amongst themselves and had come up with a plan. They would test Tobin for RSV and go from there. The test called for a doctor to jam a wire up Tobin's seven-year-old nose and get a scraping from the back of his sinuses. The Man cringed at the thought of Tobin having a wire stuck up his nose but presented that option to him anyway. Tobin thought about it for about a second and said "YES!" (He was obviously committed to being there, come Hell or high water, for his sister's birth.)

The nurses did the test. It came out negative for RSV. The midwives and nurses were elated. (In fact, they had been plotting to hide Tobin in a large ice chest and sneak him up the back stairs to the delivery room if necessary.) The doctors kind of yawned about the whole issue, but there was still the final step. They had to run it by the administrator.

The administrator was not on board...at all. “Nope. No way Jose. Ain’t gonna happen.”

To repeat, these people had never run into anybody quite like The Man. Never. The Man had grown up on superheroes. Truth, justice, and the American way and such!

It was time to bring out the big guns.

The Man figured that it was time for him to man up or shut up and get this issue settled once and for all. He and Tobin decided to take on the hospital administrators. They took the elevator up to the top of the ivory tower that was the administrative office. They sat in the waiting room for an hour to finally see the administrator and present their case. The head honcho said that his hands were tied. There was nothing he could do. What they wanted to do was against hospital policy and not possible.

The Man said that there HAD to be something that they could do. Tobin had already submitted to a highly intrusive test.

“Sorry, the decision is final. There is nothing I can do.”

Well. Not interested in being outwitted by a dimwit, The Man stood up and started walking ominously toward the door. The administrator was sitting in his big, soft, thousand-dollar chair and pretended to go back to the important crossword puzzle that he was working on. The Man grabbed the highly polished knob on the administrator’s door. He started to turn the knob but stopped. He slowly turned around and looked at the administrator. With Tobin’s little hand still in his, The Man stared into the eyes of the obstacle before him. Right into the vacuum where a soul should be. The man approached the administrator’s desk and began spelling it out for him.

The Man put both hands on his desk and leaned in toward him. “Listen carefully to what I am saying. Either this young man is in the delivery room with me, or we will do a home birth...or go down the road to your competitor at the other hospital in town where they don’t have this rule in place,” he said with fire in his eyes. “I will make it my personal life goal to get you fired. I will make your life miserable. I will write an article for the newspaper and I will contact the local news stations and give them the story. They will put it on the national news. You’ll be famous. Young children will scream “stranger danger” and run away from you. Your wife will be disappointed in you.

Other women will ignore you! Your children will lose respect for you and will be embarrassed to have YOU for a father. You'll die of old age, alone and drunk in the gutter. If you have a funeral at all, there will be a clapalooza party at it with everybody cheering. Old ladies will drive hundreds of miles JUST to pee on your grave! I will absolutely RUIN your life!" he hissed through clenched teeth.

Well.

The Administrator stood up.

He walked toward them like a cowboy getting ready for a bar fight.

And then...

He CAVED!

Not only did he cave, but he ordered up a couple of ice cream sundaes for them. The Man said, “Make that TRIPLE scoop sundaes with hot caramel...and black walnuts...and sprinkles...and a large Diet Fanta cola for me and a large regular Fanta cola for my son...to GO!”

The administrator whimpered a bit and then apologized for the “misunderstanding” and not only that, but he also modified the hospital policy on the matter...right then and there...permanently.

The two victors walked proudly out of the administrator’s office. The door seemed to close a bit harder than usual.

As Tobin and The Man walked down the hall to go to the car, The Man threw the uneaten sundaes and colas on the floor outside the administrator’s door. The two left the hospital to go home. On the way, Tobin looked at his father and protector and said with a bit of a quiver, “Thank you, Dad.”

The two stopped for a large milkshake and some fries on the way home.

27

UNCLE JIM'S WORM FARM AND THE SQUIRMY RED WIGGLERS

The little bird chirped, startling The Man out of his dreamy state and back into the present.

The Man and Gretchen knew that they had to move quickly if they were to provide any meaningful help for Birdy. The BARK was turning out to be quite a helpful book indeed and the two of them knew that they were going to have to make a shelter and get some food for Birdy.

The Man decided that the little guy was going to need worms. Lots of them. Worms were the only things that baby birds naturally ate, but would this baby bird be able to eat *whole* worms at this age? The mama and daddy birds were the ones who gathered worms and fed them to the babies.

Were Gretchen and The Man up to digging up lots of worms, chewing them up, and spitting them down the little Birdy's throat? Probably not, but they were both willing to try to be suitable surrogates.

Birdy needed worms. How many would he need? Could Birdy eat them at all? Was it worth the effort? Absolutely! Yes! HELL YES! It was worth a try!!

Now...where to GET some worms.... The Man thought of a website that he had seen on the internet...www.UncleJimsWormFarm.com! Uncle Jim might know! He HAD to know!! He had a website and everything! There is just one problem though. It could take several days to get the worms. Too long! The Man needed...Birdy needed them RIGHT... FREAKING...NOW!! The Man would need to do it the old-fashioned way. Get a shovel and a spade and start digging! The Man ran off to the shed while Gretchen went into the house to look for something to act as a shelter. As The Man was running back from the shed, he spotted Edgar and did a double fist pump. He waved the shovel and spade triumphantly at Edgar (who had inexplicably climbed up the tree again). Just as The Man thought might happen at some point, a startled Edgar fell out of the tree, "PLUGH," and scurried back to safety under the shed. The Man returned to Birdy and waited for Gretchen to come back.

The Man sat down for a moment to collect his thoughts. As he was unwinding, he heard a faint sound. He couldn't quite place it. As he took a well-needed deep breath, he looked up. With a thoughtful and rather lazy gaze, The Man turned his

head to the left and saw the blackberry (thornless) vines. He slowly, without even thinking about it, continued to scan his dominion. At the shed, Edgar was starting to peek out of his hole. (He seemed to be breathing a bit harder than normal.) Turning his head a bit more he saw the swing set, the garden, and the mulberry tree. As his gaze reached No Man's Land, he suddenly noticed something out of the corner of his eye that was out of place. Something in this scenario that shouldn't be moving...but it was. It shouldn't be moving. It Shouldn't Be Moving! IT SHOULDN'T BE MOVING!! His brain felt somehow unhooked and disconnected from reality. It was like being jerked out of a dream and being unable to deal with reality. He was paralyzed with fear. He was frozen to the spot, unable to move for several seconds.

The mower.

The Mower.

Mow Fly.

MOW FLY!

MOW FLY WAS MOVING!!

That's IMPOSSIBLE!

The Man's stomach jumped into his mouth! He swallowed hard. How the... He jumped to his feet. His blood began rushing to his lower body. He got dizzy and almost lost consciousness in the process. He started moving forward as it sank in. He realized that Mow Fly was near the creek, idling somehow, IN GEAR, and rolling around in tight, almost concentric, counterclockwise circles.

Very slowly.

The Man began moving toward the wayward lawn mower. He was calculating just how he was going to get up into the mower and stop it before it ended up in the creek. Mow Fly somehow was jiggling itself closer and closer to the edge each time it made its little circle.

Still confused about how this could even be happening in the first place, The Man took one more step toward the mower and stopped. Stopped just in time to watch Mow Fly's right front wheel slip off the edge of the creek. Both front wheels were now in the creek, while the back wheels were spinning in the air. Thankfully, the blades were not spinning. The Man jumped down into the creek and turned off Mow Fly's power switch. It seemed the automatic shutdown feature had failed. On the

bright side, however, Mow Fly was built to be very sturdy and did not seem to be the any worse for the wear.

The Man would need to call his friends again to help him get the heavy machine out of the water. Tobin would not be able to come, but the others would be. The Man did not call Carlton of the Bow Tie and Corinthian Leather Shoes.

For obvious reasons.

Carlton heard about it through the grapevine, though, and came anyway.

He left about noontime again and had a steak for lunch. He wrote another article about himself for the paper.

Gretchen had found an old birdcage and brought it outside. It was a wire cage painted white. It had a couple of water and seed cups, and a swing (with a bell) was hanging from the top center of the cage. She had also brought paper towels with her and some more water in the jar lid. She met up with her dad walking back to Birdy.

“What’s up?” she said.

The Man started digging furiously into the closest damp spot he could find. With dirt clods flying high he finally hit pay dirt. Three worms!! Like a noble hunter bringing home a dozen fish or squirrels with which to feed his family, The Man brought home three worms for his new charge! He and Gretchen got Birdy to eat two worms before he went to sleep.

The Man’s focus was now on refurbishing the makeshift shelter for use.

Using several of the paper towels that Gretchen had brought, The Man fashioned a padded little bed for Birdy to rest on. He placed it into the cage. He went back over to the house side to retrieve some leaves and small branches to put into Birdy’s new bedroom. (Gretchen and The Man had decided that “Birdy” was an appropriate name.) It didn’t occur to The Man to simply get Birdy’s existing nest that was still sitting on the ground under the tree and use THAT for a bed. He was too excited to be thinking that lucidly. Besides, he was determined to get the very BEST for his and Gretchen’s new project. He and Gretchen carefully put Birdy into the makeshift bed, and took him into the house to be warm, toasty, and safe all night long.

The next morning, The Man's attention was back on Birdy's food. Birdy had awakened from his last night's two-worm dinner and was probably getting hungry, what with those two giant bipeds making such a fuss about something. "Bring me some worm goo, please. To go."

The Man went outside and to the spot where he had been successful the day before. He quickly dug up another couple of worms for the hungry little Birdy.

The Man once again held Birdy's head while Gretchen dribbled the water into his beak. This time though, the process had to be repeated two additional times...and then, The Man was out of worms again. As before, Birdy fell asleep almost instantly after downing the last worm.

Where was The Man going to get the food for tomorrow? How was he going to get enough worms for this little "food vacuum"? How many worms would he need? Could Birdy even eat enough whole worms at this age? The Man looked down at the fragile little creature that had been placed into his life. As he stood there and watched Birdy sleeping, his helpless little body barely but bravely breathing on its own, he asked himself, "Was it worth the effort?"

The answer came quickly. "Not only YES, but HELL YES! OOH RAH!"

The Man continued digging for worms for another couple of hours, energized by the prospect of saving Birdy from certain death. It was becoming apparent that it was going to take a lot of work, and a lot of worms each day to give Birdy a fighting chance at survival. The Man had no comprehension of what the task ahead would be, nor the sheer magnitude of it.

Nor the absolute delight that it would be.

After consulting The BARK again, The Man found that while worms would be a staple for the bird, birds could eat other things as well. Sooo, he trotted himself off to the grocery store. He came back home with a basket full of tomatoes, carrots, a watermelon (seedless), some squash (yellow), strawberries, assorted nuts, and some grapes. All of this for a baby bird that weighed all of an ounce and a half. He didn't care. THIS bird was going to get whatever he needed.

This had already been decided!

28

THE MORNING AFTER

The next morning, The Man was eager to get up and see if Birdy had made it through the night. He had had bad dreams about a giant mama pelican. In the dream, The Man was on a beach holding a very sizable worm in his hands. The giant mama pelican was tugging on the other end of the worm with her beak. An enormous blue-footed booby was also in the dream. The pelican was trying to take the worm out of The Man's hands while the booby kept slapping him in the face with his big, flappy feet. It was a slapping tug of worm war, with each side wanting the worm for its own purposes. In between the two was Weird Al Yankovic singing the "Jerry Springer" song and leading the group in "The Safety Dance" on a makeshift stage out on the beach. And for some reason, everybody kept looking at their hands. Edgar was waddling around on the stage carrying a "Rodent Lives Matter" sign with one paw and eating a carrot with the other. With his extra front paw, he was brandishing a spade. All the while the audience cheered Edgar on, yelling, "Ed Gar! Ed Gar! Ed Gar!"

Go figure. The Man suspected that the dream must have been the result of a snack that he had the night before. It consisted of the dipping of wet carrots into a crushed Oreo sundae, rolled in caramel with nuts and sprinkles.

It must have been the sprinkles.

The Man had an especially gifted palate.

Putting aside the previous night's nightmare, The Man looked in on Birdy. Birdy was awake but since he couldn't lift his head quite yet, he just glared at The Man. His clenched little beak was opening and closing slightly as if saying, "If you don't give me some worms right NOW..."

At least there were no giant pelicans in sight.

Taking that as a good sign, The Man rushed out the back door. Oops! He almost tripped on Lucas, "The Flying Wonder

Dog,” The Man’s German Shepherd who was sleeping on the back porch.

The man ran out through the open back door and grabbed the shovel and spade. In all the excitement the day before, he had not bothered to put them away in the shed. He got to the creek where Mow Fly was still waiting forlornly and started digging. He had found that worms are quite a bit smarter than one might expect. If they saw you coming or heard you, they would disappear. AND if you tried to just pluck them out of the ground, they would slither out of your fingers and hit the ground running...so to speak, or they might just rip in half altogether as you pulled on them. The Man also learned the hard way that one needs to wear tennis shoes in order to push the shovel all the way into the ground and turn over the soil. (NEVER do this barefooted.) One can then catch the little food tubes as the dirt falls away.

The Man could dig up 15 to 20 worms in a couple of hours and have enough for most of the day. Sooo...he got his calculator and figured out that this rescue project would require about 40 to 45 worms per day. This is 315 per week, and almost 1,500 in a month. Maybe more.

He quickly saved himself a whole lot of work. He called Uncle Jim's Worm Farm and ordered up several thousand red wigglers.

29

YOU CAN CALL ME JAY

In the meantime, The Man found that he rather liked digging for worms. And as Birdy grew, he liked to carry the curious little guy out to the creek and beyond with him. He would place Birdy gently in the grass, make sure that Lucas or Edgar didn't get too close, and dig worms with his new best friend.

After a week or so went by, The Man noticed that Birdy was losing his pretty, puffy baby feathers, and was starting to grow new little pin feathers! This was exciting news and it indicated that Birdy was growing! As the pin feathers grew into "regular" feathers, they took on a bluish tint. Upon seeing this change taking place, The Man and Gretchen decided that Birdy was a little baby blue jay and that they would change his name from "Birdy" to "Jay."

About a week later, The Man noticed that the bluish feathers had started to turn a different color. This came as a

surprise to him and Gretchen. As the week progressed, the feathers continued to turn into a burnt orange, and they decided that Jay was not a blue jay at all. He was a robin! So, his name morphed into “Jay-Rob.”

There they were, The Man, Gretchen, and Jay-Rob. An odd but solid association of brand new best friends had formed.

At the same time, Jay-Rob began hopping around and flapping his baby wings, looking about as excited as one would expect for a baby bird. It seemed to The Man that perhaps Jay-Rob was exercising or something better. He seemed to be trying to FLY! The Man had been teaching him to sit on his finger and shoulder. Jay-Rob had done very well with his lessons. He was seemingly ready to fly. The Man was not ready for him to fly... but he knew in his heart that it was right for Jay-Rob.

After some thought, The Man decided he would do a little experiment with the bird. He had heard about others doing similar things with pets and this would be a good time to try it on his own. The Man would whistle every time he went outside and every time he fed Jay-Rob. He would have some strawberry slices or tomato bits in his hand and he would whistle a special sound. (For the musicians, it was a slide up A E, two-note combination.) He did not use a wolf whistle sound though. He thought that would be a bit crass.

The Unexpected New Best Friend

Over several days, Jay-Rob started to respond to the whistling. When The Man stepped out the door, he would whistle. Jay-Rob was all over that. In fact, he even learned to whistle back! It was a kind of grindy, grating sound that wasn't very pretty...to the unaccustomed ear...but, to The Man, it sounded like the New York Philharmonic!

He was LOVING the interaction.

30

UP, UP, AND A WHAT?

The big day came. The Man put Jay-Rob on his shoulder and he and Jay-Rob had a nice breakfast together with lots of bird-to-man conversation. Sometimes, Gretchen would join in. The Man was a bit concerned about just what might happen on this day. Was Jay-Rob ready to fly? Would he leave without saying a word? Or would he continue to hang around here?

While standing on the deck, The Man reached up and plucked little Jay-Rob off his shoulder. He held him for a moment, kissed him on his little head, and whistled. He could hardly wait to see what would happen. Jay-Rob returned the whistle with his grindy tune.

The Man realized that he had been holding his breath.

And a tear was starting to form.

He did not want to let Jay-Rob go.

The Man put little Jay-Rob onto his left forefinger. He kissed him on the forehead for what could end up being the last time. Jay-Rob squawked and squeaked a bit. The Man slowly raised him up into the air and brought him down rapidly.

The Man brought little Jay-Rob down rapidly, but not too rapidly. Not too fast, but just fast enough to make the little guy flap his wings...just a bit. And Jay-Rob seemed to like it! Again and again the man did this little “flapping lesson” with him. When Jay-Rob had enough, he jumped off The Man’s finger and onto his chest. The Man resisted the urge to swat at the bird in spite of the fact that his little toenails were sharp as needles and were digging into his sensitive skin through his thin t-shirt. Jay-Rob climbed back up to The Man’s shoulder. In spite of the pain, he was laughing and stroking the bird’s beak.

The daily flapping lessons continued for more than a week. Every morning The Man would go through the breakfast ritual with Gretchen and Jay-Rob. They would then walk down to No Man’s Land and Jay-Rob would take his “Flapping Lessons and Exercise 101 - A” class with them.

After a few days of “flap training” on the deck and hanging out together, it was time for The Man to again risk losing his little friend. Jay-Rob might just fly away on his first try. OR he

might fly for a few yards and take a tumble and hurt himself. Since The Man had been doing the “flap training” on the deck off the back porch, he hadn’t given much thought to the bird actually leaving. The BARK didn’t have much to say about this situation. NOTHING in fact. (The Man gave some serious thought to contacting the BARK people and telling them to remove the “All” from the title and change it to “The Book of *Most Relevant Knowledge*.”)

Change it to “The BMRK.”

The next morning, the Man put Jay-Rob on his shoulder and fed him a nice big worm. He called for Gretchen to join them, and they all walked across the footbridge out into No Man’s Land together.

As they arrived, The Man felt that there was something different. Perhaps something in the air. It was an anticipation of sorts. He felt it but couldn’t quite describe it.

Nor can he. Even now.

Jay-Rob was riding on The Man's shoulder as he had learned to do. As they got to No Man's Land, The Man stretched out his hands in front of him, palms up. This was Jay-Rob's signal to jump into The Man's hands. The Man lifted his hands high and at the same time spread them apart, "tossing" Jay-Rob into the air.

Immediately upon leaving The Man's hands, Jay-Rob started flapping his little wings. His wing speed matched that of a hummingbird's wings...for a couple of seconds. As soon as he was free, he frantically flew eight feet straight up into the air! He flew upward for half a second with his wings flapping in perfect harmony with each other. He appeared to stop for a bit and "hang" in the air. It made him look somewhat like a small floating missile. He then turned, fell back and to the right until he was pointing at the ground. At that moment, his wings started flapping again and he aimed his little body back at The Man.

Flapping like his life depended on it (it probably did), Jay-Rob came back down out of the sky and landed on his little feet, right back in The Man's cupped hands!

31

WOW!

The Man was surprised! He was stunned! He was shocked and in awe of what had just happened right before his eyes! He began to laugh a bit. At the same time tears began flowing out of his eyes and down his cheeks. Not only had he witnessed the first flight of a young bird but had actually instigated it AND assisted in the only way he knew how. And it had been a successful flight at that! He tossed little Jay-Rob back up into the air again! And Jay-Rob flew, again!

The Man even let Gretchen hold the bird in her hands and “launch” him into space. But Jay-Rob always landed back into The Man’s hands.

Several more tears started making their way to The Man’s face.

Gretchen offered her father a tissue.

The Man accepted it.

The three continued this exercise several times. One right after the other. With The Man and Gretchen laughing and cheering little Jay-Rob on each time. Every time that he launched Jay-Rob, the bird seemed to be going just a bit higher, and just a little bit faster.

But not TOO high. Not TOO much faster. Not TOO much farther away.

A few days later, after eight or nine of these short flights, The Man decided that they all had had enough excitement for the day. The Man put Jay-Rob back onto his shoulder. The little guy was breathing hard and quietly chirping, almost purring if one used their imagination. They made it back to the shade of the house side and quickly broke out the jar lid with some water. The Man carried Jay-Rob while the three of them went over to the creek to dig for some worms and bugs.

Upon sitting down by the creek, The Man took the little bird down off his shoulder and held him belly up. Gretchen

Wow!

gave Jay-Rob a couple of drops of water, which he seemed to appreciate. The Man grabbed a spade, rammed it home into the moist soil and brought up several worms. He was getting pretty good at digging up worms by now. After all, he had been doing it for several weeks. Jay-Rob did not need to be asked twice when The Man offered him a worm.

Or two. Or three. Or even four! He ate them up like people would eat potato chips at a picnic.

Just one would not suffice!

32

THE COUNTY FAIR

The Man, Gretchen, and Jay-Rob had had a busy morning ahead and needed to rest a bit. Gretchen put little Jay-Rob into his cage along with some strawberry slices and a lid full of water. The Man decided to take a bit of a nap.

As The Man began to doze off, he started dreaming about the time when The Old Man and The Little Man (at nine years old) went to the local county fair.

By the time The Little Man was nine, he had been to a number of county fairs. The small “local” fairs were usually pretty weak. They maybe had a clown or two selling balloons that didn’t even have any helium in them. They were on sticks. If the local fair was REALLY on its game, the clown would be accompanied by a whiny little rat dog or a trained funky little monkey that would pester the attendees into giving it money. There might also be a row of booths where you could literally throw money away (nickels, dimes, and quarters) and hope to win a glass or a plate or mug worth about a half a cent. That is, IF you could throw the coin in such a way that the money would not bounce or slide off the slick, flat glass plate that you were

aiming at. There would also be a greasy, skeezy old man who never took showers whom you actually PAID to feel you up and try to guess how much you weighed. If he guessed correctly, you lost your dignity right along with your money. If you managed to stump him on the weight, he gave you some worthless prize like a sawdust cigar the size of an elephant's trunk or a "highly useful" miniature pool ball. (Either way, you lost out.) The cheapo fair might even have a Ferris wheel that looked like it had been built before the Industrial Revolution and would fall over in the slightest breeze. That was it.

But THIS fair was not like the small ones. It was a LARGE, ANYWHERE COUNTY FAIR! It happened every year about this time and was indeed a fun event. There was a demonstration where there were cowboys and cowgirls riding and doing tricks on horses, bull riding, and other rodeo contests to go to. One night, they even had a demolition derby! How fun was THAT!! There were exhibition buildings where people could show off their gigantic tomatoes, misshapen carrots, gargantuan seedless watermelons, and eye-popping yellow squash right alongside the wartiest gourds The Little Man had ever seen. The Little Man was especially fond of the Hall of Flowers where the beautiful roses and daisies and lilies were displayed. There was usually a pleasant scent in the Hall of Flowers. It was like a clean dirt smell.

Outside of the buildings were rides, games, and lots and lots of food items. Every time The Little Man went to the fair,

he headed to the food booths. As he got closer to the booths, his mouth began to water at the smell of the hot dogs and french fries. Cotton candy always tasted better at the fair than anywhere else. The popcorn had a special flavor and smell that matched the smell at the movie theatres. It was kind of a skunkish smell (but in a good way). And the taste and pleasant odor of the caramel/chocolate-dipped apples could simply not be ignored.

The Little Man stared in awe at the machine that magically turned ice cubes into snow!

The Little Man didn't know that one day in the not-too-distant future he would join the adolescent tradition of "The Fence Hop." It was a rite of passage for when you either turned 13 or especially when you turned 16. At 16 you got your newly acquired and much-coveted DRIVER'S LICENSE! The carrier of said license would gather up a number of his/her buddies and have them climb into his father's perfectly safe open pickup truck. After finding a parking space the group would run across the highway and to the fairgrounds. They would then begin the climb over the seven-foot-high chain-link fence at the far end of the grounds. This act allowed the group to dodge having to pay a quarter to get into the fair. However, there were risks. There were those athletically blessed who could seemingly fly over the fence and dodge the Rent-A-Cops on their way into the fair. Others

might make it up to the top of the fence but not have quite enough steam left to get all the way over. There were several things that might happen if one didn't make it completely over the fence. Some would get their hand caught up in the chain linking or barbed wire at the top. When this happened, there was usually skin loss on the hand or belly accompanied by a lot of screaming and a fair amount of blood running out of the person who was hanging there. There were others who attempted to "fly" over the fence but weren't quite big enough or were WAY too big to even consider it. There were also those who tore their pants and shirts in the process. They would have to answer to their moms and make up a story about being attacked by a tiger or something. There were the few truly unfortunates who made it MOST of the way over the fence but were left hanging upside down by their belt. To add to the shame of missing the mark, some of the less muscularly endowed participants hung there screaming.

They eventually fell out of clothing altogether. They had been pantsed by a chain-link fence!

(Pantsing was a time-honored activity of summer camp or the first day of seventh grade gym class. The pantsER would sneak up behind the targeted and unsuspecting pantsEE, who was standing out on the playground, in his shiny new gym clothes in a brand new virgin jock strap, in line, minding his own business. He was where he was supposed to be, doing what he was supposed to be doing, which was waiting for the coach to come out.

The pantsER (see: predator) would stand behind the targeted victim, quietly waiting for the girls' gym class to come out onto the playground. At the appropriate time, when the girls came out, the pantsER would grab the pantsEE's new gym shorts and yank them down around his ankles.)

It was all great fun. The other boys laughed. The girls squealed and pretended to close their eyes.

The only person not laughing was The Teen Man. He was mortified.

Note: Pantsing is not to be confused with another time-honored tradition generally associated with camping settings and women's dormitories. The Panty Raid (PR). The goal of the PR is to sneak into the said residences and hijack the underwear of the victims without actually encountering them. Hence, the raids would usually be done while the victims were doing legitimate camping things...like the predetermined activities or during college classes.

The PR is typically done when the women's dorms and camping tents are empty. Tests show that if a PR is conducted with live victims present, there is more bruising about the eyes of the raiders themselves.

The Old Man was too old to do “The Fence Hop” and The Little Man was too young, so The Old Man coughed up the dollar needed to get them both into the fair.

At the fairgrounds fence, the pantsEE was left with choices.

1. Submit to being carried off by the police (half or maybe completely naked and in restraints) and be driven home to their parents to explain the situation.

OR

2. “Streaking” wildly throughout the fairgrounds, flailing their arms while helplessly hoping to find an opening in the fence...somewhere. Anywhere. “Please, God! I need a miracle!! Show me the way out!!”

Still others might land hard and crooked, sprain or break an ankle or arm, or break several teeth.

No matter what the entry method, they all (except the broken bone guys) seemed to somehow manage to race to the predetermined meeting spot inside, like the men's room (which presented its own set of problems), thereby escaping the seemingly usurious entrance fee of 25 cents.

It was a wonderful time to be alive.

The Little Man had no idea that today would be a very impactful day on him and his future interests.

The two headed off to the horse ring for a demonstration of something that was near and dear to The Old Man's heart. Flying machines! In his career, The Old Man had flown bombers, fighters, transport planes. Whatever the USAF asked him to fly, he flew. He LOVED being in the air. BUT, because of a heart attack that he'd had in the Air Force, he was grounded. He would never legally fly again.

In spite of his being grounded, he was still very interested in flying machines in general.

On this particular day, at these particular fairgrounds, sitting in the bleachers with his father, The Little Man was to catch it.

“The Flying Bug.”

The Flying Bug is very, very small. It takes a powerful microscope to even begin to see it. But its effect on people can be extremely strong. Once bitten by it, there is only one treatment.

Flying.

The Old Man and The Little Man walked up into the bleachers and sat down about a third of the way up and in the dead center. (Coincidentally, this was the same seat location that The Little Man would choose to sit in in every movie he would attend. Best seat, best view, best sound.)

The horses came out first. Their riders had polished up all the silver decorations for their horse’s tack. They had cleaned up the saddles with saddle soap, put bells on the horses, and

some had tied little bows on their manes and tails for the demonstration.

Next came the cowboys with their horses. They roped hapless little doggies, threw them on the ground, and then let them go. All this seemed a bit odd to The Little Man, but when the bull riding started, he found that to be more interesting. Especially when the cowboys flew off the bulls. Some of the cowboys even flew out of the ring.

After the horses came the greased pig contest. Whoever came up with the idea that watching people trying to catch little greased pigs that were released into a makeshift pen could be a form of entertainment was exactly right! (Little did he know that this “sport” would morph into the greasing up of watermelons and throwing them into a pool and directing contestants to dive in and get them out. That was fun...unless you were underneath the watermelon.)

FINALLY, the animal stuff was over. There was a break in the action that lasted a few minutes (for the national anthem, and the cola, popcorn, and hot dogs to be sold).

Suddenly, everything went quiet except for a faint noise in the background. As The Little Man looked to his left, he could hear something coming his direction. It was something out of place. It was coming from slightly higher than ground level. Little did he know that the sound he was hearing was the sound that a very tiny little bug makes. The people around him didn't seem to be paying attention to what was going on. They were ignoring the sound or did not seem to notice it. It was a buzzing sound that grew louder and louder. It seemed that it was coming directly at him. All at once, he was not only hearing something, but he could also now see where it was coming from. It hung in the sky.

At the same time, there was a bit of a stinging sensation in his left arm. At that moment the thing that he had been watching FLEW past the showgrounds. It FLEW by. Not rolling or running, IT WAS FLYING! And it looked like there was a man sitting in it. It looked like a bathtub! With propellers!

The sting in The Little Man's arm began to bother him. He scratched at it. When he looked at his arm, there was nothing there. Little did he realize that he had been bitten by the smallest of all bugs. It was The Flying Bug and it had penetrated the little boy's arm and would affect him for the rest of his life.

As the flying machines buzzed past the grandstands, The Little Man was enthralled. He could not take his eyes off those flying machines. He learned later that they were called “gyrocopters.”

The Little Man immediately put “gyrocopter” onto his Christmas wish list, and it effectively stayed there well into adulthood.

Little did he realize that he would, one day, have the opportunity to fly.

Forty-two years later, while perusing the internet, The Man found a paramotor manufacturer in California. His left arm had been itching quite a bit from the bug bite at the county fair long ago and he decided that he would at least look into some details about what it would take to get and fly a paramotor. The folks in California explained that flying in a paramotor is statistically MUCH safer than driving or riding in a car. Their equipment was very safe to operate if properly set up and used for its designed purpose.

The Man weighed the pros and cons of such a purchase using a “risk and reward” way of thinking that The Man had adopted. (It was similar to the “worst-case scenario” philosophy that The Man was so familiar with. Were the benefits of flying worth the risk of doing so?) He decided that the answer was yes. The Man finally contacted a local paramotor pilot/dealer/instructor and ordered up a smoky black quad paramotor with a 21-horsepower, two-cycle engine and a beautiful 33-foot-wide, orange-and-black wing.

While waiting for the paramotor to arrive, The Man began to add what he already had learned about assembling the paramotor, flying safety, and the relatively short history of paramotors. He learned that “paramotor” is a blanket term for a type of flying vehicle. A broader term would be...

“Paraglider.”

A paraglider is a device that a person would carry or drive or climb up onto a high area or mountain. They would spread out a large wing that is similar to a parachute and don a chest harness attached to a seat. They would then attach themselves to the harness by way of very high quality carabiners and run into the wind down the hill. Once the wing filled up with air and was flying above the pilot, everything (including the pilot) would

begin to lift up into the air. It can be very thrilling if you have the cojones for it and don't run into a tree, a rock, a building, or another person that you didn't see standing there right in front of you.

Add an engine and propeller to the mix and you have a powered paraglider, or paramotor.

There are basically two types of paramotors. One is called a "foot launch" paramotor. The other is called a "wheel launch."

The foot launch method involves several stages:

1. Find a suitable place to launch from. One might launch at a private airpark, schoolyard, or beach. If launching from a private airfield or farm, it would be prudent to ask permission first. Flying from a private field without permission could encourage bullets to be hurled in your direction. Or at least some policemen being one *Adam-12*'d to see the man at your location.

2. Make sure that you have enough two-cycle fuel to make the trip worthwhile. There is little more irritating in your life than performing a perfect launch and 50 yards into the flight you remember that you had forgotten to remember that you needed to purchase fuel at the gas station on the way to the launch area. The kicker under THESE conditions is possibly having to perform an emergency landing wherever you can. (This could include an active playground or baseball field.) After the landing, you will be obliged to hike back to your launch location...CARRYING your harness, wing, motor, and whatever dignity you might still have left.

3. Check all places where the harness attaches to the wing and motor. Nothing is more embarrassing than starting your launch running directly into the wind down the field with what looks like a box fan strapped onto your back, starting the climb, and discovering that the right carabiner has somehow, magically, of its own volition, with absolutely no fault of your own, opens up, slips off, and causes the pilot to land on his/her face first in the grass, with a gas-powered engine and propeller at full throttle pinning you to the ground wondering if you will be chopped into dog food and forgotten in a field somewhere. (This could get you into The Darwin Awards Hall of Fame with no arguments from anybody.) NOT launching DIRECTLY AND STRAIGHT INTO THE WIND can result in you going one direction while the wing goes off in another. This is great fun

for those who are on the sidelines taking video because most of them have done the very same thing at one time or another. It will probably end up in a video somewhere. Maybe even on TV. Certainly on the internet.

Check everything before you launch...twice...even thrice.

4. Again, be absolutely certain that you are facing STRAIGHT INTO THE WIND, and in FRONT of the engine. The engine is the big loud thing on your back with a spinning propeller on it. The engine should be about 25 feet in FRONT of the wing. On the ground, you should be about 6 to 12 inches in front of the engine.

(Check the harness and wind direction again.)

5. Once there is a bit of a headwind, there is a window of opportunity, and you start running... away from the engine...as if it is chasing you and you want to get away from it...but you cannot.

As the wing fills with air and climbs up and directly over you and your legs start burning a bit, it is time for the flying to begin. When the sensation of lift off is felt, it is indescribable.

It is something between abject terror and the utmost ecstasy that can be described in polite company. The world drops away and in a moment the pilot is flying three feet in the air. Then four hundred feet. And then a thousand feet above the ground! He or she will either circle the landing strip below or will begin heading off to another location somewhere...over there...first star to the left and on until morning.

While this is all happening, you will be yelling and screaming like a banshee. “WOO HOO!” and “YEAH BABY!”

Launching with a wheel launch vehicle is very similar to the foot launch, except that with the wheel launch, the pilot is sitting in a bucket seat and doesn't have to run down the field like a maniac. He is rolling on three wheels (tri) or four wheels (quad). Either vehicle might have one or two cup holders.

Whether foot launch or wheel launch, most participants will be equipped with a myriad of GoPro cameras (or similar) that have been installed on the frame or helmet or both.

The paramotor finally arrived! Unassembled.

The Man promptly set the assembly manual aside and began to start the process of building the paramotor.

The assembly of the paramotor was not particularly difficult. The Man learned that he could assemble most of the frame indoors, but not all of it. He had to take part of the frame apart before he could get the assembled frame out through the front door. With a small amount of grumbling, he got the frame whittled down in size enough to put it up on its side and get it out onto the front deck, where he then reassembled the frame and attached its pneumatic tire wheels.

Then came the hard part. Attaching the engine to the frame.

The Man soon figured out that it is difficult to lift a 42-pound, two-cycle engine built for flying, and hold it in place while inserting the mounting bolts through the engine mounting plates, and put on the nuts and bolts that would keep the mechanism together, by yourself, and all at the same time.

He learned that it can be done.

Eventually.

He FINALLY finished assembling the machine. There was only one more part to mount and it would be ready for flight. It was a grommet. He held the grommet in his hand and began to mount it. He discovered, after looking at the assembly guide again, that this particular part should have been mounted FIRST and not LAST. Looking further at the assembly manual, in the first paragraph were these words...“Do not assemble the frame indoors.” And...“Grommet must be attached before beginning assembly.” He learned that there really was a reason to look at and read assembly manuals before starting a process.

He used a word that he hadn't used in a very long time. Like, since he was a child. Once. It was the word that had a bad aftertaste.

He had to take virtually everything apart, add the grommet, and then...reassemble the whole machine.

“That's my life,” The Man thought...out loud.

The Man decided that he would go back over to the shed and gather up ALL of the instruction manuals he had ignored over the years and read them to find out how much he had missed in life by NOT reading them.

It was a lot.

The Man finally got the paramotor reassembled and checked over. He decided that it wouldn't hurt anything if he fired up the engine "just to see what it sounds like." He mounted the propeller, put two-cycle fuel (the cool people in the know call it "50 to 1") in the tank, and rolled it out to a safe place in the yard. He put the front of the chassis up against a tree (just to be safe).

He picked up the throttle cable and squeezed it. He yelled out, "CLEAR!" (You are supposed to do that to let everybody around you know that there will soon be a gas-powered, sharp, spinning thing in the area.) The Man pushed the starter switch for a second or two. The engine turned over, sputtered once, and then started! He goosed the throttle and the engine gave him the desired result...a propeller that was spinning faster, an engine that was making more noise, and leaves blowing across the yard behind him. He was ecstatic! It was running! He didn't goose

the engine too much more. The manual that he actually HAD read, said that the motor needed to be broken in for a bit before opening up the throttle all the way.

It would be two weeks before the local instructor could start classes with The Man. He couldn't wait!

After a couple of weeks of reading flight manuals, sitting in the paramotor and pretending to fly for a few minutes, and then shutting it all down again, it was time to start the lessons.

The Man bundled up all the pieces he was going to need for the first lesson. He had a checklist of the items he would need to put into the trailer.

Paramotor and wing.... Check, check

Fuel.... Check

Wind sock.... Check

Two-way radios.... Check, check (there were two of them)

Helmet.... Check

The Unexpected New Best Friend

Jacket.... Check (He heard that it gets cold at 1,000 feet)

Tie wraps/nylon cord.... Check, check

Camera(s).... Check.... Check.... Check (frame, frame, helmet)

Everything that could fall off or out of the paramotor tied down.... Check

Sandwiches and Diet Fanta.... Check and Check

When the Man started the lessons, he learned how to lay out the wing onto the ground and get it oriented into the wind. He learned how to “build a wall.” This entailed hanging on to the wing via the carabiners so as to “launch” the wing and look at it while it is hanging in the air on or just above the ground to see if all is well (no tangled or broken lines). He then needed to attach the wing to the paramotor using the carabiners. He also had to unhook the wing, roll it up, put it into the stuff sack, and put it away again. (He was used to this kind of thing after the first assembly of the paramotor frame in the house.)

After all that, it was time to “go cart” the machine. This part was a LOT of fun! After The Man unhooked the wing, he had to climb into the paramotor and belt himself into the bucket

seat. It was much like what a race car driver does when he climbs into his car before a race. He was then to call out “CLEAR” to warn those around him. He pushed the starter button and fired up the engine.

WOW! He was now free to hit the gas and drive all over the airfield. It was an amazing adventure to drive the paramotor around and around the yard.

But it wasn't actually flying. That day would soon come. Perhaps the next day.

After using about a half a tank of fuel “go carting” around the yard, it was time to give it all a rest. The Man put the paramotor back into the trailer, grabbed the stuff sack, and gathered up all the other materials. He went home. His heart was racing

The Man could hardly sleep that night, so he got out the flying manuals again and studied it some more for tomorrow's lessons and maybe even launch.

The next day, The Man met up with an instructor at the local private airstrip. In the paramotor world, one-on-one flight instruction is highly recommended for newbies. The Man had hired a private paramotor flight instructor who was highly thought of in the area. He would go through the official training with him. It was the smart thing to do.

The training included the setting up of the paramotor and doing the final check before launch. He had to check for any loose bolts, belts, fuel level, radios, and then build a wall.

He also learned about watching where you fly and making sure that there is nobody else in the area. (Or at least you need to know where everybody is in the air. An in-flight crash could prove to be extremely perilous.) Flying around with others in the air requires that the pilot always be aware of his surroundings!

The final step to learn prior to actual launching is called “kiting.” Like “kite” without the “e.” Kiting is kind of like practice launching. To kite the paramotor, one needs to do all the steps of the launch except the launch itself. That is, attach the wing and lay it out properly. Then check all the other connections, wind speed, and direction. The only difference between kiting and actual launching is the launching. You get in the seat, buckle up, and then call out “CLEAR!” Start up the engine, and throttle up until the wing comes up and inflates. At

that point, the wheels start rolling and the wing begins to climb. As long as you keep rolling, the wing will continue to climb until it is directly above you. At this point, you either hit the gas and pull gently back on the control line handles to launch and fly or hit the gas only and enjoy “flying” while you are still on the ground.

Kiting the paramotor is a very enjoyable activity, and doing it prepares you for the final step, the launch. Once one is competent with the kiting maneuver, it should be time to put on the big boy pants and launch. It is scarier than it looks at first. But when you finally decide to launch, it is only one more step to commit to and do it. Get up to speed on the ground and gently pull down on the control lines. THAT is when the blood starts pumping hard.

Next came the time to actually launch!

Every takeoff should be done at full power and straight into the wind. The tendency for the new pilot is to, when the wheels leave the ground, panic a bit, and reduce the power. (When the wheels leave the ground, the human body starts yelling at the brain to get back down on the ground where you belong! The brain must overpower the body’s will and keep on the gas.) Once

the new pilot reaches roughly 400 feet, the desire to jump out of the vehicle stops. When you figure out that the launch didn't kill you and you are still alive, you can relax a bit and start enjoying the ride.

The Man wasn't quite ready to leave the earth at first but launched anyway and climbed up to about 400 feet. He figured out that he was doing fairly well. The urge to vomit was gone and he decided that he would climb a bit higher. The instructor was on the ground and on the radio "directing traffic" for The Man and a few others who had launched before him.

He gave directions over the radio for The Man to climb up to 1,000 feet and fly out to the left and fly over and across the highway below. He then told The Man to turn left again. After several hundred yards, The Man was directed to turn left once more, which would bring him heading back to the launch area. As he was coming back to the landing area, the instructor told The Man to ease back on the throttle and let the aircraft start descending. The Man was having an absolute blast and asked if he could go around the field another time before landing. Permission was granted and so, he flew out again over the hangars, veered left again, and headed out to the highway. The sensation was not like any he'd experienced before. He felt a new connection to The Old Man. He felt like he understood him a little bit more.

It was time to swing back to reality and head back to the highway and then turn back toward the landing area. The Man let up on the throttle and started to descend. There was a small cornfield at the near end of where he wanted to land. He had to goose the throttle a time or two to keep above the cornfield. He came in about 20 feet above the ground, dropped a little farther, and flew over the instructor. He was almost to the ground when the instructor told him to pull down on the brake toggles. The brake toggles cause the wing to stall, lose speed, and come down.

With a small bump, The Man landed. Perfectly.

It was no less than a complete mindgasm. Tears started running down The Man's cheeks. He had flown. Actually flown. In the air. Into the sky! It was absolutely incredible.

The ride had something of a spiritual element to it. He suddenly felt that he understood why The Old Man flew. He had somehow joined with his dad.

The itch in his left arm actually stopped...for a while.

The Man gave the obligatory and enthusiastic "WOOHOO!" unhooked the safety harness, and climbed out of

the paramotor. He fell on his face, kissed the ground, and went over to the instructor and shook his hand.

The lifelong dream of flying had at last been fulfilled. It had taken some 50 years, but it was finally accomplished! Was there an element of danger? Of course. Was the risk worthwhile? Absolutely!

Over the following years, The Man would fly the paramotor over and over again in various locations. Each time he went up in the sky, he was reminded of the day that the flight bug bit him. It brought back memories of the county fair, getting pantsed by the wire fence, the skeevy guy, the flowers and vegetables, the rodeo, but most of all, The Old Man. The flight bug itch in his arm mostly went away, but he still notices it every once in a while.

He NEVER forgot...the gyrocopters.

Never.

33

GIVE ME SOME FOOD, BABY

The Man started. He had been on the edge of sleep for a few hours and it took a moment for him to come back to his senses. It was creepy. He felt like he was somehow being watched. He yawned and looked around. Jay-Rob was on The Man's chest...staring at him while rocking back and forth.

The Man could read Jay-Rob's body language. The language could be roughly interpreted as "GIVE ME SOME FOOD, BABY! NOW!"

By this time, The Man and Jay-Rob had spent several days together. Jay-Rob slept mostly indoors and with his little cage door closed. His cage was in the laundry room. The Man or Gretchen would open the cage door first thing in the morning, which would allow Jay-Rob to hop out and freely roam about in the house. While The Man made breakfast, Jay-Rob came out of his cage and marched into the kitchen to see what was happening. He seemed to be very hungry in the mornings. He would stand, legs slightly apart, and stare at the man with what looked to be a disgruntled expression on his face. He wanted food. And he wanted it NOW!

The Unexpected New Best Friend

RIGHT NOW!

34

THE WHISTLE TRICK

Each time Jay-Rob and The Man went out together, The Man would do his whistle trick with Jay-Rob. He would whistle before every worm was dispatched. He would whistle just prior to going on a walk and at other appropriate times. And it seemed to be working. Every time that he whistled his slide A E combination, Jay-Rob would respond with his grindy-sounding call.

One morning, after Jay-Rob went out on his own for a bit of a morning flight, The Man went out to find him. He whistled. Jay-Rob responded in kind but was nowhere to be seen. He whistled again. Jay-Rob whistled back. The Man still could not see him, but he was figuring out the general direction that the return whistle was coming from. He whistled one more time. Then he spotted the little bird sitting on the edge of the chimney about 50 feet away. Jay-Rob gave The Man a quick look and launched. Straight toward him. Straight toward The Man's nose. Fast. Faster and closer.

In a couple of seconds' flight time, Jay-Rob had come to within inches of The Man's face. The Man had decided that Jay-Rob was about ready to crash right into his left eye! MAYDAY! MAYDAY! BRACE FOR IMPACT! PREPARE FOR HULL BREACH AND RAPID DECOMPRESSION! He held his breath. Jay-Rob slammed on the air brakes with his wings, and while pulling up on the stick, he did a perfect two-point landing on The Man's shoulder with talons extended. Needle sharp. Thin t-shirt! "YEOUCH!" was blended with elated surprise.

Jay-Rob would now come when called!

It occurred to The Man that there was some sort of a magical connection between animals and people. He had always felt that connection with his German Shepherds. He had it with a cockatiel named Rocky (Rocky would "rock" back and forth when he hissed at you), and he remembered it with a bulgy-eyed black fish named Frank (after his father of the same name) in a fishbowl when he was four years old and still living on the Air Force base. It also happened a few years later with Peety Boy. Now it was happening with Jay-Rob. He couldn't help it. After saving the little bird's life, he was "linked" to Jay-Rob. That "link" had just shown itself when The Man whistled to Jay-Rob, and Jay-Rob called back and flew to The Man.

It was nature's magic in play and it brought to mind something that happened decades prior when The Little Man was five years old. Magic was in abundance that Christmas evening. Magic, being what it is, always feels the same no matter how old you are, and The Man recognized it immediately.

35

SEEING IS TRULY BELIEVING

On Christmas Eve of 1961, The Little Man had hopped into his footie pajamas. He was lying in bed wondering what surprises were waiting for him in the following morning's Christmas festivities. The Wow Mom came into his little bedroom along with The Sis and The Old Man. Cookies, milk, and half sandwiches had been put by the living room fireplace for Santa, and everything was ready.

There was a window in The Little Man's room that looked out into the backyard.

The Bro Man was probably out at a Christmas party somewhere with his friends.

As time went on and the chatting about tomorrow's events was drawing to a close, The Little Man started to doze off. Suddenly, there was a loud noise outside. A BANGING noise!

Right outside and upward on the roof! He sprang from his little bed to see what was the matter (thank you to Clement Clarke Moore). The Little Man looked out his window, but there was nothing out there except the black backyard.

The Sis, The Wow Mom, and The Old Man were looking at The Little Man and smiling. He knew in his heart that he was safe with The Old Man standing there. The Old Man, as always, had his Argus camera handy snapping flash pictures. The Little Man was beside himself and getting a little scared. The banging on the roof was very loud by now and it kind of sounded like a herd of goats were running around on the roof. Lots of goats or maybe even deer! Could they be REINDEER? There was even a muffled “HO! HO! HO!” floating down from the roof!

The only possible and logical answer to the glaringly obvious question was “YES! SANTA CLAUS WAS PAYING THEM A VISIT!!” He was right there on the roof with his reindeer and sleigh and presents and everything! They had landed on the roof and Santa was about to come down one of the two chimneys that were in that house! After a few moments, The Little Man thought that he could hear something going on in the other room...just a quiet rustling sound. Perhaps it was Missy, the dog, readjusting the couch pillows for more comfort. The three “adults” in the room stood still and motioned for The Little Man to be still and be quiet. (As everyone knows, Santa is

very shy and if disturbed or startled, he will jump right back up the chimney and leave. Without a trace or present left behind!)

After a few more moments, the ruckus from above started again! It was just as loud as the first one had been, and there was another muffled “HO! HO! HO!” that echoed back to the house, followed by a deep-voiced “Merry Christmas.”

The Little Man was STUNNED! And also very tired. He dropped off to sleep like a rock.

Not long after all the hubbub was over, The Bro Man came home from the party and stepped into the bedroom to say good night to The Little Man. Through bleary little eyes, The Little Man was still very excited and was telling The Bro Man about how SANTA CLAUS AND HIS REINDEER HAD COME! And how The Bro Man had missed it all.

It was not until The Little Man graduated from high school that he learned the truth about Santa Claus. That Santa did not live at the North Pole but rather lived in a little house in Pacoima, near Los Angeles. Some of his school classmates along

the way tried to tell The Little Man that it was probably his brother, who wasn't out at a party at all, but was in the backyard throwing black walnuts on the roof and yelling "HO! HO! HO!"

The Teen Man knew better than to believe THAT lame explanation.

36

GOING HUNTING WITH JAY-ROB

The Man and Jay-Rob had spent several days together in various parts of the yard. Jay-Rob always seemed to be ready for a stroll and a worm with The Man. Sometimes The Man would hold his new best friend in his hand and they would go down to the creek together. They would dig worms with either the shovel or the spade. (The shovel got a lot more work done but the spade seemed to be the more “artistically surgical” way to get to the worms.) Sure, he could have taken the easy way out and just walked over to the worm bucket and fed Jay-Rob from there. However, The Man rather enjoyed taking him down to the creek and digging there just as well. He would talk to Jay-Rob all the while. He would tell the little bird to watch for a worm and to be quick when grabbing it.

Sometimes Jay-Rob would look down into a hole that The Man was digging and spot a worm or bug in there. Taking no caution whatsoever, Jay-Rob would jump down into the hole, grab the worm, and eat it right on the spot. There were times they would be sitting on the ground together. The Man would sit cross-legged with Jay-Rob right next to him. Jay-Rob would

jump up onto The Man's bare leg and watch from his new soft perch. Oftentimes a mosquito would land on The Man. Jay-Rob would react instantly and peck the mosquito up as fast as lightning before The Man could swat the offending creature!

They were becoming very close friends.

37

JAY-ROB GETS LOST!

It was early Sunday morning on the 4th of July. Gretchen was up and getting ready to go to early church service. The Man was preparing to take her along with him. As per their custom, they would go to church and then go out for breakfast. However, on this particular day, they decided not to do the breakfast part. They agreed that they needed to head back home after the service and tend to Jay-Rob.

When they got home, The Man noticed that the kitchen door was open. He wasn't particularly concerned because they lived in a quiet neighborhood. It appeared that the day was going to be warm and very nice. Summer was in full swing.

Since Jay-Rob's cage door was usually open, Gretchen hadn't given much thought to the back door. The Man wanted to check in on him and make sure that he was all right. He went out onto the deck and looked around. He whistled his little

whistle sound and listened. There was no response. He whistled again. This time a bit louder. He did this several times but to no avail. He was beginning to get concerned and decided to check around the immediate neighborhood.

There was nobody home at the house next door to the right (the house where the bridge in *The Great Unknown* lives. The bridge was still scarred from getting pounded in the historic battle several years prior). By now he was on his way to a full-on panic. His concern-o-meter needle was climbing fast.

He walked across the street and looked around over there...to no avail. The Man's heart started racing in earnest as he began to imagine the worst.

The Man went to the house next door to the left where Doug lives. (This is the house where The Man commits "class 3 criminal trespass" on a regular basis.) The garage door there was open and Doug was busy working on something. He was involved in the repair of a device that The Man couldn't even BEGIN to identify. However, there seemed to be at least one spring, two gears, a very noisy motor, and some rubber tubing involved.

Doug seemed to be quite engrossed in the project and The Man didn't want to startle him. Scaring him in that way could very well have caused a heavy object to be hurled at high speed in The Man's direction. Followed by a severe beating. Doug was a big man. And quiet. The Man did not wish to mess with him too much.

The Man knocked loudly on the garage doorframe and called out to Doug. Doug shut down the noisy device and turned around to see who it was. He greeted The Man with a friendly smile and a greasy handshake. The Man explained to Doug that he was nursing a baby bird that he had adopted. He explained that the bird had fallen out of a tree in his backyard. He went on to tell Doug how he had fed the bird, taught it to fly, and all the other details that he could think of. Doug put his "Stop Talking" hand up in the air and said, "Are you talking about that little bird that has an attitude? Kind of rocks back and forth and dares you to come closer?"

"That's the one," The Man replied, with a big smile. They both laughed.

"He was here a few minutes ago."

The Man sighed and began a period of "Temporary Undoing of Major Stress" mode (TUMS). At least he was on the right track.

Jay-Rob was probably still in the area. The Man's heart began to slow down just a bit.

He wiped his hands on a dirty rag and started walking back to his own house. The Man noticed that there was something going on across from Doug's house at the entrance of the cul-de-sac. It appeared to be some sort of 4th of July party. There were several families and a number of elementary-age children. Most of the children were playing dodgeball or the simpler version called "Throw the Ball At The Kid Who Isn't Looking Game." In more sophisticated circles, it is also called "killer ball." (The Man looked more closely and noticed that several of the children and one adult had black eyes.)

The couple of children who were not trying to kill or maim each other were busy running past a bush while laughing. The Man's interest was piqued. After looking at the bush for a moment, his eye was drawn to something underneath.

It was Jay-Rob! Apparently, he had been visiting Doug and decided that there was more interesting action across the street!

The Man went from TUMS mode and immediately upshifted back into "Oh No, Not Now!" mode (ONNN). He ran across the street and put himself between Jay-Rob under the

bush and the potential grave (though likely unintentional) harm the presence of the little kiddos presented to him. He shooed the kids away from Jay-Rob and explained the situation surrounding the stranded little robin. They seemed to understand and as they started walking back to the picnic and games, a ball flew out of nowhere and smacked one of the two kids right in the face. As the little boy's feet momentarily flew out from under him, he started crying and all the other kids started laughing at the same time. (The little boy learned the wisdom of the phrase, "always keep your eye on the ball" that day.)

The Man went toward the bush and Jay-Rob and laid down on the ground so as to provide some protection from the kids. He reached out to the little guy and extended his right index finger toward him. The bird happily hopped onto The Man's finger, seeming to wonder why The Man was crying.

The Man cupped the wayward little bird to his chest, kissing his head over and over again. Jay-Rob chirped his grindy little song as The Man's vital signs slowly returned to normal.

As The Man walked back to his house, he noticed that Gretchen had the jar lid full of water and ready to go. She also had dug up several worms and had put them in a container.

Jay-Rob seemed to be very grateful for the worms and water. He fell asleep immediately after downing them.

38

IT'S BEEN A HARD TUESDAY NIGHT. WAS IN A CAR CRASH WITH MY DOG

One Tuesday evening, The Man was coming home from a wrestling referees training meeting. (All the referees were expected to attend these sessions every year no matter how long they had been officiating.) He took Lucas with him most everywhere he went, and this evening was no exception.

As usual, The Man was singing Weird Al songs with the radio and Lucas would howl the occasional note as if singing right along.

As normal, The Man was in the driver's seat of the car and Lucas was in the very back in the cargo area. They were at a very large intersection and waiting for a red light to turn green. The car was the first in a line of cars waiting for the light.

Out of nowhere, The Man heard what sounded like a bomb go off next to him on the right side. He also heard a very light and quick yelp from the cargo area. His head was slammed into the head restraint and he was bounced forward toward the steering wheel. At the same time that the “bomb” went off, the world turned opaque sandy brown. He hadn't been blinded necessarily, but it was as if a brown sheet had been pulled down over his eyes.

When his senses began to stabilize, he concluded that a bomb HAD gone off near his car. As his vision cleared, he realized that his car was rolling forward across the intersection. He couldn't tell how fast, but he instinctively knew that he had to get it stopped. When he stepped on the brake pedal, nothing happened. He mashed down on the pedal over and over to no avail. It appeared that the engine had stalled. His sight was improving and he found that the car was halfway across the six lane intersection and heading toward the other side.

And he couldn't get it stopped.

As the car approached the other side, The Man tried to steer it. The engine had apparently shut down and the power steering was not working. He frantically kept pumping the brakes but to no avail. He forced the steering wheel to the left and, as the car came parallel with the curbing, he worked the tires toward it and rubbed them into the curb. As the car came in contact with the curb, it ground to a stop probably 75 feet or so across the intersection.

After a few seconds and a “Thank you, Lord” from The Man, he forced the now stuck driver’s side door open.

At the same time, he called out to Lucas. And again. And again. There was no response. He went around to the back of the car. Not only was Lucas not there, but the entire back window was gone! Lucas was nowhere to be seen!

The Man began an emotional process that included a combination of fear and rage. “My CAR! MY DOG!!”

He looked around and eventually saw, nearly 100 feet away, a police car with lights flashing. The Man’s head was beginning to clear enough to determine that the explosion that he thought he had heard was really the sound of a car crash. (He would find out later that a woman, who apparently not was paying any attention whatsoever to her driving, at nearly 50 miles per hour, plowed into his car as well as a second small pickup truck, at the same time.)

The Man started trotting back up the slightly inclined intersection. He had gained enough of his senses back to figure out that, upon impact, Lucas must have been thrown out of the car, through the closed back glass window.

The Man was literally in shock from the wreck but was able to keep it together enough to look for Lucas. He looked in the windows of the closest cars.

A policeman walked up to The Man and asked him what he was doing there. The Man explained that he had been IN the accident and that his dog was somewhere in the mess. He also pointed to the red car way across the intersection almost 50 yards away and told the policeman that it was his. The policeman informed The Man that HE had been sitting in his patrol car at the intersection two cars behind the accident and had seen the whole thing. He had even seen Lucas fly out of the back window and bounce on the hood of the car ahead of him, roll off the hood and under the front of the next car. The Man immediately dropped to the ground and began scanning under the nearby cars, frantically trying to find his friend.

No luck.

About that time, The Man spotted Lucas (looking a bit stunned and frightened). He called out to him. Lucas immediately looked up. As his ears pinned themselves to his head, Lucas ran over to The Man. He immediately started whining and leaning on The Man's leg. The policeman looked at The Man, pointed at the dog, and then pointed back at The Man. The relieved man nodded.

Prior, when getting out of his totaled vehicle (a car that he REALLY liked), The Man was thinking about how good punching the driver square in the teeth would feel. As he approached the scene of the accident, it became clear that it

was a woman who had been driving the now totaled offending car. Not only had the woman ruined his car and her car, but it appeared that she had also nailed a third car, a small pickup that had been sitting at the light and minding its own business as well. The Man who had been sitting there singing with his dog and having a great time at one moment, was now in an automotive demolition derby trifection. Three cars...wiped out... at the same time. It was as if The Man had been existing in one peaceful reality in one second, then instantly transported into a completely different reality of mayhem.

It would have been improper for The Man to punch the lady. He punched her car instead which, of course, accomplished exactly nothing except for the emergency room people getting to x-ray one more thing.

The Man started crying. All the other stuff could wait. Lucas had to be cared for. He had to go to the all-night animal hospital emergency room. The Man had to go to a different kind of hospital. The Man began to panic. Who would care for Lucas? How would he get to his hospital? How would The Man get him back? Lucas couldn't go with him in the ambulance.

The nice policeman started to tell The Man how things would go down. The Man explained that he didn't have a

leash in his car, and the tow truck was already on the crash site anyway. The Man began to argue with the officer. Then he took a big breath, stopped arguing, and realized what was happening. The Man recognized the symptoms. He was going into shock. He apologized to the officer and explained that he was getting “shocky” and was unable to think clearly. The officer took a deep breath as well. It just so happened that the officer had a leash in his car that he would loan to The Man. He would take Lucas to the animal hospital and would pick up his leash there later on. He would even call ahead to the hospital and tell the vets there that he was on the way with a dog that had been involved in an accident and to be ready when he got there.

The Man climbed up into the ambulance. He looked across the way as the policeman took Lucas away. He was in an utterly recognizable situation...again. He could do nothing to care for his dog. It was the same feeling he had experienced many years prior when Gretchen was taken from him in the hospital, and he realized that he might never see her again. He was going through it...again.

Swell.

After The Man had climbed into the ambulance and laid down on the very comfortable flat, stiff, wooden backboard, the paramedic took his vital signs and asked him some questions. He poked and prodded The Man, took his temperature (orally,

thank God), and gave him a once-over. The Man's head was taped to the backboard, and padding was placed all around him. When the ambulance arrived at the hospital, he was removed from the ambulance and rolled into the x-ray room, where he was poked and prodded some more. The paramedics wanted their backboard back, so The Man was tipped to one side and then the other while they removed the board. The process reminded him of the "magic" trick where the magician yanks the tablecloth out from under the wine glasses without spilling a drop of the wine.

The x-rays came out fine, revealing no visible damage. There were a few cuts (which The Man hoped would leave some delicious "story scars"). The ER people suggested a tetanus shot just in case, and then sent him out to the waiting room to wait for...ummm...a ride.

Hmmmm...

His brain was starting to kick in a bit. As the fuzzy parts faded away, he realized that he didn't have a car. The woman had seen to that. Neither did he have his dog. Circumstances saw to that. But he DID have a cell phone. It was nearly midnight and

The Man had not lost his manners in the wreck. However, he had to get home AND pick up Lucas in the process. He looked at the cell phone. It was badly in need of a charge. It was down to about two bars. The charger was in the car. The car was totaled, thanks to the woman, and on the way to the storage yard via tow truck. The Man did the math.

The Man called the only person who he could call without pissing him off too awfully much.

Jim.

The only person left that he could think of was Jim. He hated to do it...but not THAT much. The Man caved in and called him. He explained the situation and Jim somehow convinced his son, Joe, to drive out to get him in the middle of the night. They agreed on a meeting place. The hospital seemed to be the logical place since he had been checked out of the hospital and he couldn't go anywhere anyway.

The Man was stuck.

Joe was well over an hour away and it took what seemed forever for him to get there. The Man's concern about Lucas

made the problem even worse. There was nothing that he could do but wait on one of those hard plastic emergency room chairs and watch reruns of *Alf*.

About an eternity later, Joe walked into the waiting area. The Man knew that this had been a MAJOR inconvenience for him. He lived about an hour and a half from where The Man was. He showed no irritation at all. He seemed to be happy to help.

The Man got into Joe's car and away they went to the animal hospital to get Lucas.

During all of the goings on in the emergency room where The Man was, the same thing was going on at the animal emergency clinic. The nice policeman who had taken Lucas with him had walked him into the clinic. Apparently, the person calling the accident in to the animal clinic had told the receptionist a bit of an exaggerated version of the story. The doctors had pieced together a picture that was very different than the reality. From the description given, the doctors were expecting a quivering piece of German Shepherd meat barely hanging on for dear life. The doctors were very pleased to receive a shaking German Shepherd, walking in under his own power, with a cut on his paw and another on his face. Lucas was lightly sedated and the doctors did x-rays and the normal poking and prodding that was required.

Several hours after Lucas was checked into the pet hospital, The Man walked into the reception area. He was greeted by some very happy veterinarians and one very happy dog. The instant that Lucas locked eyes with The Man, his ears went back and he jerked himself away from the doctors. Within a few seconds, the dog had leaped through the air and was in The Man's newly formed lap down on the floor. The doctors explained the minor injuries and what would be necessary to keep the wounds clean for a few days.

Joe smiled and the three of them got into the car and headed for home.

The phone went dead.

It was AMAZING that Lucas had survived the collision at all. The Man decided that he would no longer be called Lucas, but rather "Lucas, The Flying Wonder Dog." Lucas for short.

39

EPILOGUE

One day 16 years ago, June 12 to be exact (it was a Saturday late morning), “The Man” went outside to mow the lawn.

One day six weeks later, August 7 to be exact (it was a Saturday late morning), The Man went outside to take care of his unexpected new best friend. He had invested most of the previous six weeks into his friend, starting almost from the day he had hatched. The hatchling had been rescued by The Man and an adventure had begun.

The scraggly little nondescript nestling had grown up into a larger-than-normal, healthy, and astonishingly beautiful robin named Jay-Rob.

The Man called Gretchen to come outside with him to The Other Side and watch Jay-Rob do his latest trick. Jay-Rob had learned to play hide-and-seek with The Man and had

flown out to No Man's Land and "hid" in the apple tree while waiting for The Man to whistle three times. On the third whistle the smart little bird would fly high up into the sky to where The Man could barely see him. Jay-Rob would come zipping straight down like a WWII dive-bomber with his wings folded up. At the last instant, The Man would reach out and Jay-Rob would extend his wings and drop lightly right into The Man's welcoming hand.

It was a breathtaking stunt!

Jay-Rob was already on The Other Side and sitting on an outer branch of the apple tree waiting for them. Gretchen and The Man met him there (after digging a few more worms). The Man whistled to Jay-Rob, who promptly flew over to The Man's shoulder.

Jay-Rob seemed somehow "different" this morning. Gretchen handed a couple of worms to The Man.

The Man felt that he was seeing something odd going on but couldn't quite put his finger on what it was...

As the three new best friends walked over to No Man's Land, Gretchen cut over to the shed to see if Edgar was nearby. He was up in the tree staring at her. She had to wonder if food had suddenly become scarce, or if Edgar was just being nice. A bit unsure of which it was, she walked back over to The Man and Jay-Rob.

Jay-Rob started singing. Loudly and VERY excitedly! In spite of his large size and his undeniable beauty, his singing voice was still the scratchy, grindy sound that he had always made. He couldn't "sing" a note, but still, to The Man, it sounded like a rendition of the beautiful, harmonious "Helplessly Hoping" by Crosby, Stills, and Nash. However, it wasn't like the singing he had done in the previous weeks. It was a different kind of "grindy."

It was hard to describe, and The Man felt somewhat silly, but to him, it sounded almost poetic. Even romantic in a way.

Jay-Rob hopped from The Man's shoulder, down to his hand, and then over to the apple tree. And then, he flew back over to The Man and landed back on his shoulder. He had never done this before. Jay-Rob squawked a couple of times and then flew back to the apple tree. Gretchen had water in her jar lid and The Man had two worms at the ready. He held both worms

in his left hand. When Jay-Rob came back this time The Man's right hand was empty. Jay-Rob landed in The Man's empty hand. He hopped over to his left hand and grabbed one of the worms. Down it went. Grabbing the first worm was normal. What was unusual was the way he treated the other worm. Jay-Rob reached over to Gretchen's water-filled lid and took a sip. He then grabbed the other worm from The Man's hand in his beak and flew back over to the apple tree.

Something was going on. The Man felt it in the air.

Another robin, a female, flew into the apple tree and landed next to Jay-Rob. He immediately gave the other worm to her!

The two birds then flew back over to The Man. Jay-Rob landed on The Man's shoulder. The other robin landed on the ground next to Gretchen. It was like it had been choreographed! Jay-Rob flew off The Man's shoulder and straight up into the sky. As The Man, Gretchen, and the new robin watched, Jay-Rob began his dive. As he came closer and closer to the ground, The Man put out his hand. Jay-Rob opened his wings and dropped gently into it. He then hopped out of The Man's hand for the last time and landed on the ground next to "Robin."

Jay-Rob gave a scratchy little squawk.

And then...

Jay-Rob and “Robin” flew away...

Together.

As they left, Jay-Rob was singing “The Grindy Song” with Robin, his new mate. Jay-Rob singing his coarse version and Robin singing her beautiful rendition of the same song. It seemed that she didn’t care about the quality of his singing voice any more than The Man had.

About the same time that Jay-Rob and Robin flew away, The Man heard something he had never heard before. “Did you hear that?” he asked Gretchen.

“Hear what?”

“That noise.”

“No. I don’t hear anything,” she replied.

At the same time, there was a gentle puff of wind that came through the trees on The Other Side. It had a recognizable odor to it. It was a kind of musty dirt smell that wasn’t particularly offensive.

From behind him The Man could hear Lucas, who had been sleeping the entire time. Lucas had leaped to his feet and let out a single loud bark. He was looking around and sniffing the air with his hackles up. He scanned the yard a bit more, got an embarrassed look on his face, turned around in a clockwise circle a few times, and laid back down to finish his nap.

It seemed to The Man that what he had just witnessed was the collective sigh of relief from thousands and thousands of worms who once again felt safe underground nearby.

It was odd. Very odd indeed...even for The Other Side.

After Jay-Rob and Robin flew away, The Man's lip began to quiver a bit. He couldn't speak for a while.

Gretchen gave him several tissues.

He needed more than just several.

The Man never saw Jay-Rob again. On occasion, however, he thought that he heard a grindy kind of bird song when he was on The Other Side of the yard.

And, what about the worms The Man had ordered from Uncle Jim's Worm Farm? Well, The Man had completely forgotten about them. He had ordered them, and in all the hubbub didn't notice that they had never arrived. As it turned out, he was having so much fun digging worms with Jay-Rob on his own (not to mention that he was still working through the huge pile of food that he had purchased at the grocery store some weeks prior) that it didn't really matter anyway.

AND, it seemed that yet another “That’s my life” thingy had come into play.

When he thought about the situation a little more, it occurred to The Man that something else could have happened. It was a long shot. A very long shot.

The Man lived on 1313 Mockingbird Lane. Across the street, where the kids had been playing killer ball, was the house that was situated at the corner of a cul-de-sac. The street name and number of THAT house was 1313 Mockingbird CIRCLE.

With all the crazy things that were going on with The Man and Gretchen that summer, it turned out that through absolutely no fault of the good people at Uncle Jim’s Worm Farm, the 3,000 worms were delivered...to the address across the street.

To make matters worse, the family had gone on vacation and would not be back for several weeks.

By the time The Man had put all the pieces together, nearly a month had gone by. He walked over to the house across the street and started poking around. The stench was awful. It was hard to put into words. It was an odor that could cause every orifice in your body to simply clamp shut in self-defense. Once

you got past the gag reflex, the smells began to sort of separate into three major odors: “Large dog doo,” “rotten eggs,” and “bottom of a moist garbage can” (LDDREBM). If you took a small sniff, it seemed as if your eyes, nose, and throat would start to burn.

The smell was still lodged in his memory from a previous experience.

When The Man was “The Young Man,” he had gone on a mountain-climbing weekend with the Boy Scouts. The troop went to the Dardanelles Cone in California. It was a difficult climb, but fun. The only thing on that trip that would be considered “not to be repeated” was the outhouse in the campground at the base of the Cone.

The Young Man had called it “Satan’s Outhouse.”

It was awful. One could smell it even when sneaking up to it from upwind. Even if you held your breath, you could only stay in the outhouse until you ran out of air. If you lingered too long, the stench seemed to penetrate through your clothing and

into your lungs through your skin. In short, you could smell it even while holding your breath.

God help you if you had to take a breath in there. You would taste it for days!

They say (whoever “THEY” are) that smell is something that can trigger memories. The Man believed that wholeheartedly. And that outhouse is what the neighbor’s front porch smelled like. The box of worms was now woefully ruined. The worms were all dead and the immediate area smelled like Satan’s Outhouse.

For a moment, The Man was taken back to Dardanelles Cone.

The Man didn’t think that it would be nice to just leave the juicy mess sitting there on the neighbor’s porch, and so he gingerly picked up the moist, spongy box, held it at arm’s length, marched it over to his own garbage can, and dropped it in. It seemed to “PLUGH” a bit when it hit the bottom of the can.

The next day, the HOA folks came banging on The Man's door demanding to know what the smell was. The Man walked over to the garbage can with them in tow. He had them take a step forward towards the can. Without saying a word, he turned his head and popped the lid off the can with a kind of sweeping, lifting motion. The effect of the escaping gasses was immediate and wondrous. As the HOA folks ran away choking and gagging, in between breaths they were mumbling something about fines, penalties, and lawsuits.

As all this was happening, up the block nearby, several dogs began howling in pain. Two of the HOA people were reportedly taken to the hospital for oxygen therapy.

It would be almost a week before the garbage man would be around to take the mass to the dump.

The dump people refused the delivery.

To address the obvious question, Gretchen is fine now. She has a pacemaker and is living with her new husband near her

brother, Tobin. She teaches piano and flute, and she is still very much loved.

To this day, The Old Man steps into The Man's dreamscapes from time to time. He usually smiles, waves, and then leaves. The Man always wakes up feeling a bit confused by The Old Man's appearances.

And sad.

Just checking in on The Man, he decides.

Frequently.

"That's my life, and I do love its consistencies," The Man sighed.

By this time, you may be wondering if these stories are true or not. Allowing for a bit of poetic license at times, they are true.

My name is on the front of the book. I was there when all this happened. Gretchen (not her real name in order to protect

The Unexpected New Best Friend

her privacy) is my daughter, and Lucas, “The Flying Wonder Dog” was my dog at the time. (Lucas is another story for another time.) Yes, I dug up some 3,000 hapless but juicy worms for my unexpected new best friend, Jay-Rob. He came to my whistles, ate my strawberries, sat on my leg, picked off the mosquitoes, and flew away to start a new family of his own. Except for a few obvious embellishments, the stories are true.

Every now and then, I go out onto the porch. In the quiet evening air, I whistle my whistle...and wait...and in my head -----and in my heart-----, I listen.-----

Not necessarily The End.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Elizabeth Bailey. Back cover photography www.ebaileyportraits.com

Susan Brooks Wallcraft. “The Comma Destroyer”

John Kvakas. “Give me more description!”

Brian Strecker. “Actor, client, and friend. You were there from the beginning.”

Dave Halcomb. “Paramotor technical assistant and flying instructor.”

My friends Mark and Deb Robbins. “Thank you for your encouragement and suggestions throughout the process.”

Linda, my sister, who helped “IMMENSELY.”

Uncle Jim’s Farm for being great sports!

The nice lady at Old Hickory Sheds who helped me reconstruct The Shed.

The WONDERFUL people at Paper Raven Publishing. “You folks are GREAT!! ALL of you! Especially Morgan, who pointed me in the right direction in the first place.”

My beautiful wife, Karen. You keep me on task.

The Unexpected New Best Friend

To those who serve and HAVE served in our military, and especially to those of you in The Greatest Generation, THANK YOU WITH ALL MY HEART!!

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