

ALLEN AND SUE



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Authors.....	Page II
Introduction to Allen and Sue.....	Page III
It's Over.....	Page 1
Invitation.....	Page 13
Encounter.....	Page 38
Love / Community.....	Page 67
Life.....	Page 128

## About the Authors

Joan is a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She has raised six children, three of them adopted. With four children already in her family she continued her love of learning with an Associate Degree in Social Science, then a B.A. in Elementary Education, an M.S. in Conflict Management, and finally, (her husband hopes) an M.Div. from the University of Notre Dame.

During these years she welcomed two more children into her family, and after completing her M.Div. Degree she was given the position of Pastoral Director for first one, and then a second Catholic parish where there was no resident priest.

Joan is now a full time advocate for the full inclusion of women in ministry including the priestly ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church. In 2006, intentionally breaking Church law to change it, she was ordained a priest through the Roman Catholic Womenpriest initiative (RCWP), and in 2009 was elected and ordained bishop for the Great Waters Region of RCWP.

Joan remains committed to the Roman Catholic Church, and works continually to convince her Church to ordain women for the good of the Church and for the women who are called to priestly ministry.

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John is a native of Dayton, Ohio, with a B.S. in Civil Engineering from the University of Dayton. His engineering career took the family to numerous places as he worked on a multitude of projects. John loved the challenge of building things; especially things that had never been built before and sometimes in new and unusual places while helping Joan raise their family.

John is now retired and is a full time supporting partner in Joan's ministry. He shares her fire and enthusiasm for the inclusion of women at all levels of ministry and the professions. He is pleased that in his engineering field the participation of women has gone from essentially zero to approximately 30%.

After years of being "on call" John enjoys the freedom of not carrying a mobile phone or maintaining an e-mail address. He enjoys the company of his two Tomcats and writing as a creative outlet, including letters "to the editor" and to their children and grandchildren.

## Introduction to Allen and Sue

In 1958 we met and quickly made a commitment to keep faith with each other. Over the years we have been partners in marriage, careers and children. When the children were nearly gone we became partners in a Catholic ministry, first for the advancement of lay people, then more specifically for the advancement of women.

Our partnership continues here with a teamed excursion into creative writing. The story of Allen and Sue and friends is about ordinary people in sometimes too ordinary circumstances. These are the kind of people we know, and the kinds of lives we know they live. To quote the character, Pat, “This is the world we live in.”

All the characters are creations of our imaginations. If you find in this story someone who seems familiar, it is because they are ordinary people. It is your imagination that has rendered them even more familiar. Actually, we hope that happens.

This story is intentionally not, repeat not, a “published” document with “rights reserved.” This story is an extension of our Catholic ministry, and as the Gospel advises, we “take no money in our purse.” So we will take nothing for this creative journey. If you choose to copy the story, we ask that you always include this Introduction Page, and honor the missionary spirit of the authors.

Joan and John Houk

*I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.*

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49



*When they realize that nobody cares, that nobody will answer them, children no longer cry.... We cry out only when there is hope that someone may hear us.*

Jean Vanier

## ALLEN

It's over. I can just lie back on this bunk and enjoy the quiet. This is the first quiet since I got on the plane home a couple of days ago. Well, it's not really quiet. There is still some ringing in my ears that the medics say may never go away. Even with the background noise this should be a quiet place, but it isn't. It's the quiet that happens when something is about to happen. Everyone stops talking, the dog looks up, and you don't know why. Why am I still on alert? The door bangs and I jump. The clerk says the Captain wants to see you. I have been expecting this but I wasn't ready.

*I need to shower and shave.  
Ok, but make it quick.*

I have never seen this officer before. Squeaky clean, a desk jockey, no fat, hard muscles. Training company? Lesbian? Be nice to find out. Careful Allen, don't cause a problem for yourself on your last day in the Army.

*So Specialist, you want out.  
Yes Mam, four years is enough.*

It's her job to read the speech about benefits, bonus, promotion possibilities. State side assignments. She has to do this even though my CO already said it all, but I have paid my dues then she gets unfair.

*You know your country has a big investment in you. Demolition Specialists take time and money to train. Your country needs you.*

Yes, I liked the idea of learning to blow things up, but I didn't know it was going to be me that got blown up. That IED was wired like we had never seen before and the Lt was going to check it out and I wasn't standing far enough away.

*Captain, I want to go home.*

*Ok, Allen - you are close enough a being a civilian that I can call you Allen. Do you need anything? You know that you will be in the IRR for four years subject to call up?*

*Thanks, I know about my Reserve commitment so all I need are my papers and a bus ticket*

*Don't forget to cash out.*

*Not likely I'll forget that. Thanks again.*

Salute and leave. That was easier than I thought. Then she called after me.

*You may have some trouble working back into civilian life. There is the VA to help, and some Churches have programs.*

Damn, she has actually read my file. I need to get out of here.

*Thanks Captain. I'm on the next bus to Chicago. Oh, tell your clerk that he should be careful banging on doors - someone might shoot him by mistake.*

~~~

SUE

He may not have slept in his clothes but they had been worn more than once. His desk was a mess, McDonald's rappers in the trash, bottle of generic Tums economy size next to the cup full of Bics. So this is what divorce on the cheap looks like.

*You need to sign these papers and it's over. There is no contest, hardly anything to contest. You agree he gets the car and you get the TV and you split the debt.*

The debt. I am getting divorced, and we haven't even paid off our honeymoon credit card debt. This is crazy.

He noticed the marks on her arms. There could have been cause, but there was no need.

*Just sign here.*

How does one sign the final paper on your divorce? Your married name?

*What name do I use?*

Confused for a moment, then he says.

*Will you go back to using your maiden name?*

*Yes.*

*Then sign that way.*

She signs, Sue Connolly.

*Here are your copies, and good luck to you.*

She was now going to be Sue Connolly again, and her world was a mess, and her head full of fog. She did the only thing she knew how to do. She took out her phone and called her best friend Mildred.

*This is Mil.*

*Hi, do you have time for lunch?*

*Sue, you know I always have time. How did it go?*

*Can we talk at lunch? The hotel OK? They have a salad bar.*

*Sure, in about thirty minutes.*

Strange that I should think about watching my weight just after signing my divorce paper. I still look good in my little black dress, maybe a little tighter than it used to be – God, why am I thinking about salads and dresses?

There was no line so it was easy at the salad bar, and they were back at a corner table.

*You want some coffee ladies?*

*Yes, please. That would be nice.*

*What does your Mother think?*

*She is relieved and sad at the same time. She knows she was right about him, and it was a big worry, but she is still sad it didn't work. Now Dad is not saying anything. He could say a big loud, I told you so, but, thank God he hasn't done that and I don't think he will. Mom was right and wrong at the same time. She was right that my getting married to him was not a good idea, but wrong that it had to be a church wedding. Even though it was kept small it seemed so formal, so real, so final. It's hard to let go of those feelings.*

*What do you do now?*

*I don't know.*

~~~

ALLEN

You must think tragically if you want to avoid tragedy. That's how the Army taught me, and that is how I survived the last 11 months with only a concussion and blown eardrums. Don't sit in the front of the bus, bad place to be in a crash. Don't sit in the back, too far to get out if there is a fire. Don't sit next to the big guy with the hoody flipped up. OK, there is a uniform. I'll sit by the uniform.

*So, where're you going? Mind if I sit next to you?  
Sure, sit down. Going to Chicago like you I guess.*

People tell strangers personal things. Seems like a lot of travelers are on their way to something unpleasant. This guy's little brother just died. The funeral is tomorrow, and the Army gave him leave to go home. He couldn't stop talking.

*I got my 8 and I am going to go for 20. Then I'll go home, get a muni job on the water department or building inspection, and at 65 I'll have two pensions plus SS, move to Florida and have a second fridge just for beer.*

He gave me a lot more details, but that was the whole story.

*I don't know what I am going to do. I just wanted out.*

So it went all night. The sun is starting to come up. It's a long ride from Ft. Leonard Wood to the South Side. That is Cicero out the window. I'll be home in time for breakfast. Love the way Mom makes eggs. No SOS for me today. Give the taxi driver a nice tip. He looks like he could use it. I remember when I painted this porch floor grey. Don't just stand there – ring the bell.

*Allen! What a big surprise. Give me a hug!  
Mom. Why are you wearing your coat?*

*Long story, walk me to the corner. Drop your duffel inside. The key is under the mat so you can let yourself back in. There are corn flakes in the cupboard and bananas on the counter. Coffee may still be hot. Got to go.  
Ok, Mom, where are we going?*

*I am working at the school helping in the library and the office. Dad is getting about 20 hours and we needed to pay the bills and it gives us insurance. I'll tell you the whole story this evening.*

Then Mom got on the bus and left me standing on the corner. Wow what a change! I'll get some breakfast at McDonald's down the street. Big coffee and two sausage muffins sound about right. Find a place to sit with a wall at my back. Wonder who that guy is over there with his head down on his arms? He hasn't moved since I sat down. Dirty gym bag seen better days. I need to get back to the house take a nap then call Kim.

He's asleep. Who sleeps in McDonald's with an old dirty gym bag? There is a young kid behind the counter. They need to get better uniforms for their employees.

*See that guy asleep over there?*

*Yes, but that's not a guy.*

*OK, whatever. Here is a 20. When whoever it is wakes up give them breakfast and the change. You understand—and the change?*

*OK, OK, I got it.*

Think about the worst thing that can happen to you then see that it doesn't happen. Think tragically to avoid tragedy. That "whoever" person sleeping in McDonald's is like the worst thing that could happen to me. Can't let that happen. Got to go find the key and call Kim.

~~~

SUE

*Dorothy, come down here.*

*I've got my hands in the sink.*

*Shit Dorothy, wipe them off and come down here. You can see the quarterback's nose hairs! I can't wait until the Cubs play in the spring.*

Dorothy went to the basement not knowing what to expect. Dementia at 60? But Bill had hooked up Sue's 50 inch HD flat screen and was sitting about 3 feet in front of it. This was the Bears like he never imagined them, and they had zoomed in on the QB as he was trying to get up from a nasty sack.

Sue's Dad was worried about her. He had never known a divorced woman up close. The few he had known had seemed kind of dangerous. Best to smile and move on. Now there was one living in his house. Yes, it was his daughter. Yes, it was his Sue, but it was a new world for Bill and it would take some getting used to. He didn't like that SOB she had married, even so he knew if he had put up too much of a fuss it would have driven Sue away and not helped the situation. He really was sorry it didn't work. Sue, on the other hand, was not surprised that the TV was taking some of the edge off her moving back home; after all, she had known her father all her life.

*Dorothy, what did she do with the cat? I am kind of glad she didn't bring him here to scratch up my new recliner.*

*I don't know, Bill. You will have to ask her. Supper will be ready in about an hour. Don't ruin your eyes.*

The next day was Sunday and Sue came into the living room dressed for Church.

*Are you going to Church?*

*Yes, Dad. I thought it would do me some good.*

*It doesn't seem right, Sue. You can't go to communion. People will stare. I really don't think it is a good idea.  
You don't want to be with me in Church because I am divorced? If that's how you feel I wouldn't sit with you in a dark theater.*

About that time Sue's mother walked in. Dorothy hated conflict, and she never took sides, so she stood there hoping it would go away. Sue broke the silence.

*I'm not going to church.  
Maybe we can have some tea and talk about it this afternoon.*

This was Sue's mother's way. Let things die down then ease into the subject one-on-one.

*What did you do with the cat?*

This was Sue's Dad's way of dealing with stress. Change the subject.

*He went with Mil. They always got along well so Chewy is staying with her.*

When Dorothy and Bill left, Sue went downstairs and turned on the TV. Maybe she could catch Mass at the Cathedral, but after a few minutes into a generic and droning homily she turned it off. Watching Mass on TV was like going swimming in winter clothes.

"It's over," she remembered the lawyer saying those words. At the time she didn't realize how those words would sting in an empty house.

~~~

ALLEN

Allen and Kim, Allen and Kim. There had never been a formal announcement and there was no ring, yet everyone had said their names together for a long time. Allen was on his way over to her place. She had not answered his earlier call. His nap had turned into an afternoon sleep. He looked good and felt good considering his all night bus ride. Kim would make it worth the trip. Her wild hair and beautiful eyes were right there in his mind's eye. He knocked.

*How did you get here? I thought you were in Missouri.  
Well, here I am. You look great!  
This is not a good time, Allen.*

He had never heard those words from her before, never. "Not a good time?"

*Let me in. We have a lot of catching up to do!*

Then Allen heard another voice, a male voice.

*Who is that at the door, Kim?*

The fog cleared for Allen and he knew why Kim's Skype "stopped working" a couple of months ago. He knew she was right. This was not a good time. As he turned to walk away she said, *I'm sorry. It just happened.*

He began walking not paying any attention to where or how long he walked. It was getting dark and there was a neon Bud sign. Maybe that was what he needed right now. The place was a neighborhood bar. If a picture had been taken 30 years ago and held up tonight, you may not be able to tell the difference between the picture and what was in front of you except the one woman at the bar would look older. She looked like she needed a place to stay for the night, and that this was not unusual.

He asked for a shot and a beer, the workingman's lunch when you only had 20 minutes to get a buzz. Allen wanted his buzz now. He pulled his wad of folded bills out of his pocket and peeled off a bill then stuck the wad back in his pocket. He tilted the shot, and sipped the beer. At that moment he knew that something was not right and it wasn't his memory of Kim's wild hair.

He had turned his payout into cash before he got on the bus. He wanted the feel of it in his pocket. It was more cash than he had ever had before and right now he knew it was a problem, a big problem. He had seen the bartender's eyes widen, and he knew that at least the bartender had seen this wad of big bills. This meant trouble and he knew it.

*Where is the men's room?*  
*Down the hall on the right.*

Allen took another sip of his beer, left the change on the bar and moved off toward the men's room. At the end of the hall was an exit door and he took it. Turning right he moved quickly to the end of the building and stepped around the corner. No mental fog now. His senses were sharp. His muscles tight. He looked around for something, anything. He knew someone was going to try to take his stupid money.

There was a pile of trash with the end of a 2x4 sticking out. He eased it out, about 2 feet long, perfect. He pushed himself against the building and waited. No footsteps. They thought he was taking a long pee. Perfect. He hadn't spent all that time in the Army knowing that there were people looking for a chance to kill him for nothing.

Don't wait too long because they will figure it out and come looking for him. He sprinted down to the next corner and turned left, sprinted another block and turned right. No one in sight. The streetlights were coming on.

It was over. Kim was over. Get to his parents' house and give his Dad this cash, stupid cash. There would be beer in the fridge and a whole year of family news to catch up on. The piece of 2x4 was still dangling from his right hand. Maybe he would keep it. Stupid

cash, stupid Kim, stupid Allen. Does months spent knowing there are people trying to kill you sharpen your mind or fuck it up? Maybe both? Got to get some new clothes.

~~~

SUE

Sue had taken the week off. Her boss was an understanding guy, and he let her go even though things were busy. Now she didn't want to go back to work although she had run out of excuses. Papers had been signed, her stuff, not much but hers, had been moved to her parents' basement and her old bedroom. What was bothering her today on her way to work was some of the people she worked with. Mostly they were nice people and would welcome her back with no questions, but there were some who would want all the gory details. The good thing was that her desk would be piled high with work and gave her a dozen excuses why she didn't have time to talk.

*Hi Sue. Welcome back.* It was her office mate.

*Good to be back. Look at all this work!* – as she hung up her coat and prepared to spend the day hiding.

The morning went well until Sue happened to see glamor boy from sales drifting around the office edging in her direction making small talk with first this woman and then that one. Eventually he got to her desk and ignored her work stack. He was pleasant enough, too pleasant, and then he went on down the hall.

*What was that all about?* – Sue asked to whomever was near enough to hear.

*Sue Honey, you're fresh meat.* – someone yelled across the room.

Sue pushed back her chair and thought they may be right. This was way over the top. My Dad is afraid of me and my “scandalous” condition. Now Romeo from sales thinks he has just what I need.

*Tell the boss I am taking a long lunch to Australia.* – and she walked out.

I don't want anything to eat, Sue thought. What I need is some quiet, some real quiet. I need to think this through. I wonder if the door is open? It was and no one was inside. She walked up the center aisle and put a scarf over her head out of respect for her mother's training and sat down near the front of the church.

The only movement was a small flicker from the sanctuary candle. No sound could make its way through the heavy walls and Sue began to cry. No sound, only tears dripping onto the front of her blouse and into her lap. Someone peeked in from the sacristy door, but made the right choice that this was not the time to offer help.

Time passed and Sue went back to work with only some hardly noticeable tear stains, knowing she was in a new world with no idea how to navigate it. If anyone noticed the spots on her blouse they didn't say anything. But they may have remembered that they

didn't say anything when they saw the marks on her arms, and how she started to wear more makeup and long sleeves even in warm weather.

~~~

ALLEN

*What the hell is wrong with you Allen?  
That's a hell of a greeting Pop, after not seeing me for a year.*

*Well I hear you quit the Army. Good pay. Secure job. Good benefits. Then you walk in my house with a chunk of 2x4 like you are going to whack somebody.*

*Sorry about the 2x4 Pop. I'll put it on the porch. The Army is a long story but I'm home now.*

*That's another problem. You can camp out in the living room but there is no room for you here any more. Your Mother always wanted a room for sewing and crafts. When you left we thought you were not coming back so that's what she did, turned your room into something she always wanted.*

Allen's mother was listening from the kitchen and knew from the tone that things in the living room were not going well. This was time for food, which was always her way. When people are arguing, feed them.

*It got late Allen, so we ate. We thought you would probably eat at Kim's but there is some of your favorite cold chicken and potato salad. Come on to the kitchen and have something to eat.*

*Kim's over, Mom.*

*Jesus Christ Allen. You quit the Army, now you dump Kim, walk in here like you are going to whack somebody, waltz in here like this is still your house - Pop used plain language.*

*I want to give you this money Pop.*

He tried to hand Pop the big wad of cash that now felt like a fire in his pocket, but Pop pushed it away.

*Go have some supper and talk to your Mother. None of what you say makes any sense to me. I'm going to the basement and have a beer.*

Allen was more than angry at his Pop, and it seemed like the only thing that had made any sense in this whole miserable day was his mother's suggestion to have some cold chicken. As he sat down kitchen memories flooded in. It was like he was a child again.

Some of the best moments of his life were at this table with his mother. The feeling was so powerful that he could hardly get the words out.

*Thanks Mom. You have a job. Tell me what's been going on. You never did that before. The chicken is great.*

~~~

SUE

*I'm going to lunch.  
You going to Australia again today?  
No, I'm going to go sit in Church.  
Whatever you say, Sue.*

Sue knew that “Church” had the same sound as “Australia” to her office friends, but why not tell the truth, it’s easier to remember.

The door was open again today, but immediately Sue knew that something was not right or maybe just different. The lights were on, OK. As she was putting on her Virgin Mary blue headscarf she saw the coffin. It was center aisle up front. Then she noticed the two women sitting where she had sat yesterday. A priest in vestments appeared from the sacristy and the women stood up. Sue realized she was standing in the back with her mouth open with the priest looking her way. Leave, sit, stand, kneel, where – sit here now. It was a funeral Mass.

Sue sat until after the prayers and sprinkling and the two women were walking back down the aisle. She didn't know who they were, but she knew what they were. Nurses, or maybe nurses' aids. The scrubs sticking out from their bargain styled cloth coats, and their calmness told the story well enough. Sue followed them out and hurried back to work.

*Where is today's newspaper?  
Look in the lounge. I think I saw one in there.*

Her office mate was right. There was today's paper on the side table.

Sue opened to the obits. It didn't take long to find the one that said “funeral mass today at 12:00 noon” with the Church's name. There was a woman's name, age, and that she had been residing at a nursing home. No mention of relatives – none – zero – zip.

The picture was clear enough. Someone had died and two women who had taken care of her at the nursing home were the only people to pray for this women at her funeral

mass. OK, the priest and an altar server, but really only two people at this woman's funeral? Yet she had seen it herself and knew it was true.

Dickens story flashed through her mind. Was this her “Christmas future”? God, what a thought. She clipped the obituary notice and stuck it in her pocket not sure why she did it. It crossed her mind that maybe she should go to Australia.

~~~

## ALLEN

The house was empty when Allen woke up. He had tossed around some on the lumpy old couch, but he had slept on worse. He went into the kitchen and there was a note on the table “cornflakes in the closet and bananas on the table, Mom”. What’s with the cornflakes? I didn’t even like cornflakes when I was a kid. I’ll clean up and go to McDonald’s, but first I need to do something with this money.

Allen took a few bills from his wad of cash and put the rest in the fruit bowl on top of the fridge. Then he turned his mother’s note over and wrote, “There is some money in the fruit bowl. Hope it helps, maybe Pop doesn't need to know, Allen”.

The short walk made him feel like breakfast. He was looking forward to something hot and a big coffee. Same kid behind the counter and he ordered the same thing. The kid looked like he sort of knew Allen and wasn't surprised by the order. Allen took his order and sat down. That's when his world changed and everything became crystalline.

Over in the corner was a bag, an unaccompanied bag. Allen's training kicked in and overcame every other reality. He wasn't in a South Side McDonald's. He wasn't even state side – he was faced with an unaccompanied bag. Everything became very sharp edged, everything, sounds, lights, table and the bag. Immediately he had to act.

How big was it? Big enough blow up this whole building and everyone in it. Was it on a timer? A cell phone – was someone watching? A pressure switch? If I yell “BOMB” the kid will freeze not run. Only one thing left to do, I have to get it out of here. If it has pressure switch it may blow when I pick it up but got to get it out now. Where to put it? In the steel dumpster? Where to go? Hit the ditch at the edge of the parking lot. As Allen pulled his feet under him and leaned forward the door to the restroom opened, and someone walked out and sat down by the bag. The person then got up and walked over to Allen.

*Man, you look like shit.*

Allen was trying to get his breathing under control but it wouldn't slow down.

*Are you the guy who bought my breakfast? The kid said you looked like a Marine, but right now you look pretty bad.*

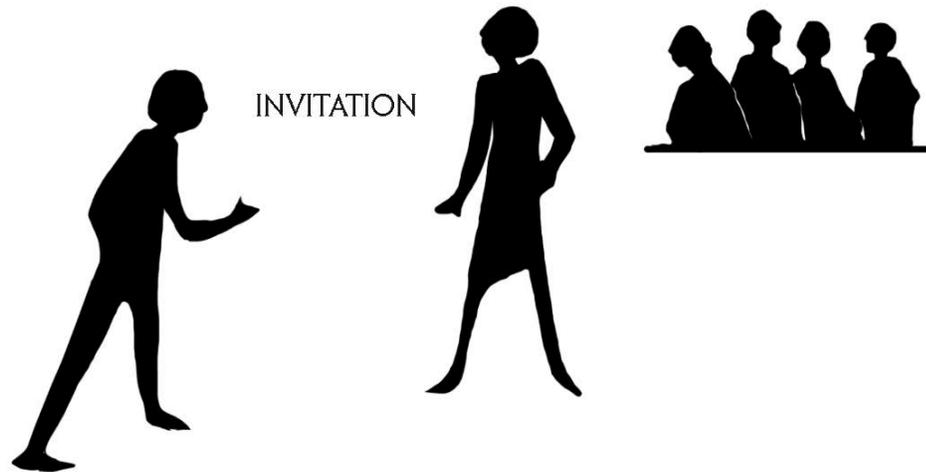
That thought brought Allen part way back. No way was he going to be mistaken for no jarhead Marine.

*You the person with the gym bag? What do you carry in that bag? And I'm Army.*

*Socks, shorts, T-shirt, shoes. I like to shoot baskets at the Y. That's kind of a strange question, but thanks for the breakfast. There is a group of us that meet here for breakfast on Sundays. Why don't you join us and I'll buy you breakfast. About 10 o'clock.*

*So that was you sleeping at the table yesterday?  
Not really sleeping. I work nights and sometimes it just knocks me out. I enjoyed the breakfast. Name's Pat. What's yours?  
Name's Allen. I'll think about Sunday. Thanks for the invitation.*

Allen looked at the old dirty gym bag and now he remembered it from yesterday. He now knew Pat's name but he wasn't sure what Pat was. Which restroom did he/she come out of? Maybe this wasn't the group he wanted to have breakfast with, and I'm not Army any more. God! What would have happened if I had grabbed that bag and run out the door and jumped into the ditch. They would have called the little guys in the white coats. Got to get a grip. It's over.



*There is no saint without a past, no sinner without a future.*

St. Augustine of Hippo

## SUE

The last few days had been better for Sue. Even the weekend at her parents' house had been quiet. She used her mother's avoidance technique to get past Sunday morning by finding something important to do in another part of the house. She had even shown her mother the obit she had cut from the paper and had a talk about people being lonely. She was surprised that her mother didn't question why she had been in Church in the first place. All in all, things had quieted down nicely for Sue.

Back at work on Monday it was lunchtime, and when Sue went to get her coat there were no questions about where she was "having lunch". Her feet seemed to take her back into the empty Church, and today it was truly empty. She took out the obit and said a short prayer for the deceased Linda. That was her name. She hadn't prayed for the dead in a long time, maybe since 3<sup>rd</sup> grade Catholic school. That was her last year there. They had moved, and from then on she was in public schools. When she had talked with her mother about her funeral experience, it came back that funeral prayers included praying for Linda so why not now.

Sitting in the stillness of the Church quieted her mind, and she remembered quiet things. Then she saw the priest come out into the Church, stop half way across and bow then

hurry on. She wondered what kind of shoes he wore because he made no sound on the marble floor. Then he was going back the other way and he stopped.

*Hello, I am Father Mike. I have seen you in Church a few times. I enjoy seeing people in the midday quiet. Sometimes I sit here and enjoy it myself.*

*I work near here and this is my lunchtime.*

*We have daily mass. You may want to come if you work near by. Pick up a bulletin from the table in the back. It will have the mass times.*

*It's better that I come to sit in the quiet.*

*Are you Catholic?*

Perhaps it is his job to ask questions, Sue thought, but I came in here for the quiet. I'll just answer him and maybe he will go on about his padding back and forth.

*My parents are Catholic and I had my First Communion but I am not going to Church.*

*Why is that?*

Is there no end to this man's questions? If I don't answer he will get the message.

Father Mike had been around a long time and he knew he had pushed a little too far too fast, but it was part of his work to sometimes ask questions. So he paused. The pause was what Sue needed to get over feeling like she was being grilled.

*There is really no reason for me to go to mass because I am not allowed to go to communion.*

*Is there a story behind that? Listening to stories is what I do best.*

Pushy, pushy questions. Sue answered with more than a little edge in her voice.

*There is no story. I'm divorced.*

There she said it. It was the first time she had said the words.

*How did you come to believe that you could not come to communion?*

*My Dad said so.*

*Have you committed any mortal sin?*

This was too much. Sue stood up and picked up her purse, but before she could get out of the pew Father Mike said, *Your Dad is wrong about this. We are wise to listen to our fathers, but there is no rule that a divorced person cannot go to communion.*

*Are you sure about this?*

*Yes, it's my job to know these things. There may be other reasons not to go to communion but being divorced is not one of them. However, I encourage you to tell me your story. It would be one way for you to have a clear conscience. If that doesn't sound like something you would like to do, we have a divorce support group that meets Thursday evenings. Sharing stories is what they do. That's in the bulletin also. It was nice meeting you, and I hope you continue to enjoy the quiet. Would you tell me your name?*

*Sue.*

*Sue, that is a beautiful headscarf. We don't see many of those these days.*

Father Mike moved silently back to wherever he had come from. Sue stood for a minute in her pew wondering if she should pick up a copy of the Church bulletin. That was really not why she had come here. Too much, too fast, and how does he move about without making any noise?

~~~

ALLEN

As Allen was unloading his duffel bag he began to smell something good. There was something familiar about it, but he was the only one in the house. His nose took him to the kitchen, and to a slow cooker on the counter. He lifted the lid and found it was his mother's famous pot roast with onions, carrots and potatoes. What was the special occasion? Whatever, it was going to be good. Then he heard the front door open.

*Hey, Allen you here?*

*Yeah Pop. In the kitchen.*

*Smells like pot roast.*

*It is. What's the occasion?*

*I suspect it's you, Allen. Seems like one good thing about your coming home is that I get to eat better. I was expecting maybe tuna salad. While I've got you by yourself, I wasn't in the best mood when you showed up at the door.*

*I noticed Pop.*

*It's been tough here, financially I mean. I thought why would you quit a good paying job with health insurance? Didn't make any sense. Also, Kim's cousin told me today that breaking up was Kim's idea. So maybe I should have listened some instead of spouting off. But what the hell were you doing carrying a club? This is not the best neighborhood, but people don't go around with clubs.*

*Pop I thought I was going to be mugged.  
Was someone following you?  
No, but.  
But what?*

*I don't know Pop. I seem to spook easy. I was carrying a lot of money. Don't look at me like that - I am not going to do that again.*

Pop took a deep breath. This was new talk. Allen never spooked before. He's always been steady even when he himself got flushed out.

*What do you mean you spook easy? That has never been your way. It was me that blew up at you when you came in carrying a club.*

*Don't talk like that Pop.  
Like what?*

*It was my job to blow things up and nearly got blown up myself a couple of times. Don't talk about blowing up.*

*Jesus Christ Allen, open your fist and sit down. You never said anything about getting blown up.*

*I lost my hearing for a while and it still is not right. I had a concussion from being slammed against the front of the Humvee and I saw the Lt. die and I don't want to talk about it.*

Pop was always full of fire, but he knew when to change the subject.

*OK, OK, let's change the subject. Where you going to live?  
I don't have a place and I don't have a job. Job first I think.*

*Well, you can't keep sleeping on the couch. Clutters up the living room. What if we fix up the third floor. It's a mess and you would have to stoop around but we could fix it up.*

*I remember it was full of junk.*

*Don't say junk to your mother. We can stuff her antiques in a corner, get a bed, a chair, maybe a piece of carpet from St. Vinnie's. You will need a chest for your clothes.*

*There's another problem Pop. I don't have hardly any civilian clothes.*

*Vinnie's has clothes too. Let's go upstairs and have a look.*

~~~

SUE

You can feel lonely in a crowd it read. Sue was looking at pamphlet titled, "Grief". Behind the table with a small pile of Sunday bulletins was a pamphlet rack. As she glanced over the titles she saw one that read "Divorce". When it comes to divorce I am the expert she thought, but there beside it was the one she picked up. She put it with the copy of the bulletin and carried them back to the office and had opened "Grief". Was she grieving? Was she lonely? How do you know what you are experiencing if you had never felt this way before? She stuck both things in her desk drawer and began checking the codes on doctor bills. If she were grieving she would have to grieve later – the insurance company was not paying her to grieve.

At home in the evening she realized that, invitation or not, she didn't want to tell anyone her story. Especially some priest who had never been married and divorced. That goes for the whole celibate Church she thought. What do they know? As far as sitting in a circle with strangers, why would I ever want to do that? Blab my story to strangers, no way. I don't like my story. The plot sounds like a headstrong kid not listening to anyone else with a bad outcome.

A small truth? It was still small, very small, yet perhaps the key to the way she was feeling. What label she put on it no longer seemed important. All on her own, doing her own thing, had not had a good outcome. Still the question remained, what was she feeling?

People can be lonely in a crowd didn't seem to fit. The only time she had felt near to what, normal? was when she was totally alone in total quiet. Sitting in the quiet had helped, and she resolved to do more of that when she had the chance.

*You seem quiet this evening.* It was her always-worried mother.

*I didn't mean to worry you Mom, but there is nothing I want to talk about. I like the quiet. I am glad Dad put the big TV downstairs.*

*Your father will get used to having a nice TV but there is no getting him away from it now. Having it in the basement does make the rest of the house quieter. I like this better than the way it was with the old TV always on in the living room.*

Sue agreed with her mother and went back into her thoughts. People can be lonely anyplace. Priests can move about without making a sound. What do priests do at night? Drink beer and watch TV? No one to argue with. Now that sounds lonely. Wonder what kind of reaction I would get if I asked Father Mike what loneliness felt like? God only knows how he might interpret that! But he may know and I would like to find out.

~~~

ALLEN

*Pop this truck smells like wet dog. What does he use it for?*

*Maybe he does use it for his dogs. I know his wife won't ride in it. Tom says it made him the most popular man on the block because everyone wants to borrow his pickup. He doesn't seem to mind lending it, but he likes people to put some gas in it.*

Allen and Pop are on their way to get some furniture for Allen's attic bedroom. It was a loud smelly truck, but that kind of added to the experience. Neither of them had ever shopped for bedroom furniture before. It didn't seem manly, but the old truck sort of made up for that.

They were able to find a bed and a chair that looked like it was well used which meant it was probably comfortable. A little table and lamp rounded out the furniture, but there was nothing to put clothes in that would fit in the small space. Allen found a complete set of sheets. They had little pink flowers. Pop didn't say anything and started looking at clothes. He spotted a Cubs jacket. What a find!

*Look at this Allen. I bet the person who donated this jacket would like to have it back. Try it on.*

The jacket fit. They found a couple pairs of jeans and some shirts. They were pleased with themselves and headed for the checkout.

Who was this woman with the wild hair like Kim reaching for their money? She was the most interesting thing Allen had seen in this store full of things "lightly used". She had either spent big money on the latest hairstyle or had not looked in the mirror this morning. He couldn't tell. She gave him a clerk's smile and he knew that he had to think of a reason to come back. Shoes! Yes, I will need some shoes he thought.

Back at the house things had gone well.

*We forgot to see if they had a rug.*

Allen brightened at the thought. There was another reason to go back. Then they were called to dinner.

When dinner was finished there was nothing left of the pot roast except a couple of potatoes. This pot roast was famous for a good reason. Allen picked up a towel and started to dry dishes. His Mom didn't say anything but he could tell she was pleased. The men in her family didn't help in the kitchen and that included Pop. It was going to be nice having Allen around.

It was time to call it a day, and it had been a good day, but Allen was not ready for bed. He went to the porch and stood listening. Then he went around the side of the house then to the back. Again he stood and listened. Only when he was satisfied that all was quiet and secure, that there was no one anywhere in front or back or either side could he come back in and go to bed.

Pop noticed that Allen had gone out, thinking probably that he wanted some fresh air. He saw an intensity in Allen's face that didn't fit "fresh air" but he let it go. He wanted to ask Allen what he was up to, but it had been a good day and he wanted to leave it that way.

~~~

SUE

There was a piece of copy paper taped to the door with black marker writing. It read "Divorce Support Group downstairs. Use stairway to the right." Sue had stayed late at work and it was now about 6:45. Looking at the note on the door she thought, well I have come this far I may as well go downstairs to see what this is like.

In the Church basement she smelled coffee. There by the coffee were some mini muffins and a tray of chocolate chip cookies with M&Ms but no one in sight. There was coffee and cookies but no people? Sue hadn't had anything to eat so she took two cookies and Styrofoam cup of coffee and sat down at a round table. A strange little man came out of what must be the kitchen looking like he may have come straight from Sherwood Forest.

*Hi, I'm Brother Nick. I see you found the coffee and cookies.  
Is this the divorce support group?*

There she said that word again. That seemed like progress to Sue. In fact it made her want to go out on the street and yell, "I'M DIVORCED!" Yes, this was progress, and she hadn't had anything to drink except coffee.

*You are in the right place. People will straggle in. There has been 8 or 10 of us lately, most come right from work.*

*I work near here, which is why I thought this may be a good time for me. I saw the notice in the bulletin.*

*Are you a member of the parish? I don't think we have met.  
No.*

About that time a couple of people came in the hall and attracted Brother Nick's attention saving Sue from an explanation she didn't want to give. A few more people came in with some "Hi, how you doing?" a handshake and a couple of hugs.

*Get your coffee. It's 5 after and we need to get started. Go around the table to introduce yourself to our new person.*

There were 8 people around the table and Sue knew she would never remember their names, but it was a nice gesture. There was one man, and the rest were women plus Brother Nick. They would all want to know all about her but that was not going to happen.

*My name is Sue Connolly and I work at the insurance company down the street. I saw the notice in the bulletin and it seemed like this time would work for me if I stayed late and came right over.*

That was her line and she was not prepared to say any more. No, she absolutely wasn't going to say any more about herself.

*Dear, Greta calls everyone Dear that simply won't do. We need to hear your whole story. How long were you married? What was your husband like? Did he cheat on you? We need the whole story, dear.*

*No we don't. It was, whatever his name is, across the table. Greta is being way too pushy Sue. It's Sue isn't it? Anyway, you tell us what you want us to know whenever you want to tell it.*

If Greta's looks could kill, Jerry – that was his name, would be dead. Sue did not like being the center of their power struggle. She had been pushed and shoved until she was black and blue. She did not intend to tell her story now, like pushy Greta wants, or ever like Mr. Nice Guy thinks.

*I am not going to spill out my story to you or anyone else. I came here because I don't know if I am lonely, guilty, angry or grieving. Watching and listening to you people fuming at each other is not going help me figure that out - and she stood up to leave.*

Brother Nick began clapping, a slow rhythmic clapping. One at a time the others joined in until even the combatants were clapping. In her 22 years no one had ever clapped for Sue before, for any reason. She sat back down speechless.

~~~

ALLEN

Being acutely aware of your surroundings is an evolutionary survival art, which is encouraged by military training. If survival is your focus it works well, but if you are on your way to breakfast it is not helpful. As Allen walked into the McDonald's parking lot

Sunday morning he noticed an old faded Lincoln with a torn vinyl top. A gray Prius, are all Priuses gray he wondered? He saw the dumpster was full; they must pick up Sunday nights. A freshly washed Bemer slowly came around the building and did not stop at the window. There was a man standing at the *Exit Only* sign. The Bemer slowed further and the driver's window came down. Something was passed between the driver and the man and the car moved off. Allen couldn't see what was passed but he knew it wasn't cigarettes. This is the world we live in he thought, and went inside.

The gym bag wasn't there, but the kid at the counter was the same.

*How about a Big Breakfast with Hot Cakes and a large coffee?  
That sounds good. What's your name? Mine's Allen.  
Name's Jimmy. He paid for it. I'll bring it to you.*

Allen saw a raised hand. It was the person, Pat, who had invited him. Jimmy the counter kid had said, "he". He was sitting at a 6-place booth with 4 other people and he was motioning for Allen to sit down. Their breakfasts were partly eaten so the table was a jumble of paper and plastic containers.

Pat asked the people to introduce themselves. Allen's eyes were keen but his hearing was poor. He wouldn't remember the names anyway. Why do they always do that impossible introduction routine? He shook everyone's hand and sat down on the end of the bench.

Pat had on the same gray hoody that Allen remembered – the Prius? Next to Pat was a man – he was sure – in a worn out Carhart. He had the meaty hands of a laborer – the Lincoln? Then there was a younger person on the end of the other bench with his feet sticking out. Clean boots with loose laces, soft hands? On Allen's side in the corner was a guy in a black vest with patches all over it like he was a boy scout collecting merit patches, only one said Rt. 66 and another Black Hills. The vest was like the back of an RV on a cross county trip. Finally, the person next to Allen had a recent hair cut, clean cardigan and a firm hand shake. Ivy league? Any one of these people would not have attracted any of Allen's sharp attention but together they did not fit. Allen felt like he had gone down the rabbit hole.

Jimmy brought Allen's Big Breakfast and he had to say thanks to Pat, and made the decision that he had to at least eat his free breakfast before excusing himself. Sitting there eating and not saying a word was not working. There was only one question on his mind and he had to ask it.

*What brings you guys together?  
Friar Tuck.*

It was Pat who answered. He, yes he, seemed to be the ringleader. His answer did not improve Allen's comfort level. He put down his fork and looked Pat right in the eyes.

*His real name is Brother Nick but we like to call him Friar Tuck because, well, he just looks like one. Brother Nick runs the support groups at the parish.*

*So that's how you people met each other?*

*Not exactly. In the spring Tuck, I mean Nick, got the idea that we should have a big picnic in the city park. You know, lots of food, games, and so on and he would invite all his groups to come. It was great fun and that's how we met. When the picnic was breaking up I said (Allen was no longer surprised that it was Pat's idea) let's meet for breakfast, and here we are months later still having breakfast together.*

Addressing all of them Allen asked, *You mean each of you belongs to a support group?*

Pat answers first. *Yep, Trans. Carhart says, AA. Clean boots, NA. Travel man, PTSD. Ivy league, Divorce.*

*What the hell do you talk about? I'm Army, discharged last week, and looking for work.*

Pat again. *Sports of course. Cubs, Bears, Bulls, Hawks, Socks. We tried going to a sports bar but that's not good for some of us. So here we are eating breakfast and wondering if the Bears can find a quarter back.*

Allen wasn't completely ready to drop his guard, but in a strange way the group made sense.

*Why did you think I might fit in?*

*You're a nice guy, bought a stranger breakfast, and then next day you were coming out of your skin. I thought you were going to jump up and run out the door. That's us, nice people with something inside we need to deal with.*

Breakfast was eventually over. They solved every team's problem except the Bears QB. Allen followed Pat outside.

*Who was the guy I saw in the blue Bemer?*  
*I have only one answer for that. Not my problem. See you next week?*

~~~

SUE

Sue stayed until the divorce support group had broken up at exactly 8:00. There were

stories of not enough money, problems with child care and school behavior. Sue didn't have these problems and had determined that this group of people was not for her. Even though they had allowed her to just listen. Brother Nick touched her arm as she was leaving.

*I hope you will come back.*

*These are not my problems. I have a job, a place to stay, no children, no harassment from my ex. These are not my problems.*

*I could see that, but please come back at least one more time and tell them what you have just told me. It would be a favor to them and to me if you would come at least one more time.*

So Sue promised she would come back. The group had tried to be nice to her after the initial pushy demand to hear her story in all its gory details.

As the week passed Sue stayed away from the Church. She didn't want to sit and cry and she didn't want to be confused by a priest's ideas about her going to communion. Nothing got better and nothing got worse. On Thursday she kept her promise and went back to the divorce group.

As she was sipping her coffee and eating a cookie it occurred to her how what seemed like a small thoughtfulness of coffee and cookies had connected her with Brother Nick. It's possible, she thought, that these treats were not accidental. That Brother Nick knew something about people and food, and then more people came in and went directly to the cookies. When she saw the smiles and hugs her thoughts were confirmed. There was a kind of magnetism in that side table that pulled people together. No one pushed for her story, but she felt she had to say something as the end of the hour approached.

*I have a job so money isn't a problem. I have no children so child care and school behavior isn't a problem for me either. But if I sit quietly I begin to cry. It happens in a quiet Church, in my room at home, once even on the bus going to work. She paused, then, I don't think telling you my story will help me.*

Time was up and no one pushed Sue for more. Once again Brother Nick touched her arm.

*Thank you for coming back. It was important to the group. They would have felt really bad if they thought they had driven you away. Now I agree with you that this is not the group for you. There is no need for you to come back.*

Sue felt an unexpected deflation. In spite of her resistance she had developed a small comfort level with these people. Maybe it was the coffee and cookie, or Brother Nick's soft touch on her arm, or the little round of applause, or the groups quick willingness to let her sit and listen without making any demands. An hour ago she didn't want to be here, and now there was a small sadness that she would not be coming back. Too many disappointments, too many, and she began to cry.

*I have an idea. Something I would like you to consider, but we would need to talk about it in more detail. I have an office in the rectory. Could you find time to come and talk with me about my idea?*

Sue surprised herself and said, *Yes.*

~~~

ALLEN

*And they provide the uniforms.*

It was clean boots who Allen now knew was Larry.

It was Sunday morning at McDonald's and Allen had a slow week looking for some kind of work. He kept thinking of the ABC's of job hunting. A for available, B for better and C for careers. He knew that a C job wasn't going to fall into his lap, but he had some ideas. He had stopped at the fire station and talked to the guys. They were encouraging, but getting on with the fire dept. could take a long time. Time was what Allen didn't have. Now he was at breakfast with the Friar Tucks, and Larry was telling him about what could be an A job.

*The company provides guards and watchmen for all kinds of places. You need to pass a drug test and a criminal background check. Get a physical and go to some classes. They pay for the physical and your time in class. And they need people. Like I said, they provide the uniforms. I'm a mall cop.*

*Do they carry weapons?*

*Some do, and the company gives some weapons training, but most don't. I don't.*

Larry gave Allen a scrap of paper with a phone number on it. Allen thanked him and stuck the paper in his shirt pocket. Allen wasn't worried about the background check or the drug test. He was clean. He was strong and healthy, but he wondered if his hearing could be a problem. He would call the number Monday. This could be what he needed.

One by one they said their good-byes until it was only Allen and Pat at the table.

*Would you like some more coffee?* Allen was suggesting he would like to stay and talk.

*OK. Jimmy can you bring us two fresh coffees?*

*Last week you said "Trans". This is a new idea to me. No one at the table blinked so it wasn't a new idea to them.*

*I'm FTM.*

*The first time I saw you I couldn't tell what you are and FTM doesn't help.*

*Female to male. Right now I am on testosterone. Maybe surgery later.*

*You talk about this as if it was an everyday thing. There was some talk in the Army but I never knew anyone FTM or another way.*

*I do talk about it with my friends, but I still haven't got up the courage to talk about it with my family.*

*It was nice of Larry to remember that I was looking for work.*

Allen had maxed out on too much information.

*Yes, Larry is a nice guy. So are the others. I was glad you came back. FTMs like hanging out with the guys.*

Allen was still not ready to go there.

*I saw that blue Bemer again today, but it was a different person at the exit only sign. They moved on as soon as the Bemer pulled out.*

*You have it figured out. The BMW guy is a dealer.*

*They do this in plain sight? In the middle of the morning? Not in some dark ally?*

*Yep, that's the world we live in.*

~~~

SUE

The fish were beautiful. They were the most colorful fish Sue had ever seen. She found herself watching their graceful movements. Near the fish tank was a framed certificate, Psychology – Marquette. There were two comfortable chairs and soft light. The fluorescent tubes in the ceiling were turned off. She worked under their glare all day and hated them. The parish secretary, Megan, had shown her into Brother Nick's "office" which didn't look anything like an office, but he wasn't there. So she sat down and waited. Several minutes passed.

*I must have been early, but the secretary showed me in.*

*No you were not early. I like to let people become comfortable with the space before we talk. I was impressed with you at the divorce group meetings, but I agreed with you that that was not the best place for you.*

*I see your certificate. I didn't know you were a psychologist.*

*I wanted to help people, but I didn't want to cause any harm so I went to school. I am an extrovert. Talking is my natural way. I can talk all day. What Marquette taught me was to shut up and listen.*

*I am not going to sit in this nice place and tell you my story.*

*Yes, I understand. That, and being on the edge of tears suggested to me that you may have post-traumatic stress disorder. Let me explain.*

*I don't know what kind of disorder you are talking about. I go to work, do my job, live my life. How is that a disorder?*

*You are correct in everything you said. What I mean is that a really bad, traumatic event can have lasting negative effects. Your marriage may have been such an event in your life.*

*Sue felt herself relaxing a little, but just a little. Are you talking about people who have flashbacks and stuff like that? I don't have flashbacks or nightmares. I have never been in a war zone or anything like that.*

*I am really glad to hear that you don't experience those things. Not everyone who has PTSD has those symptoms. Sometimes they refuse to reconnect. They won't think about it or talk about it, including seeking help because it brings back bad memories. Some people become hyper vigilant, but I don't see that in you. I have seen you cry. Can we start there?*

*Everyone cries.*

*You are right again. We may even agree that if more people cried more often the world would be a better place.*

*My crying hasn't caused anyone else a problem.*

*This is all good news. Let's just leave it there for now. Here is my idea. You seem to function well in daily activities. However, I recommend that you see your personal care physician and follow whatever advice they give you as part of a package to give you confidence that you are in good health. Then what I would like you to do is to sit in on my PTSD group and listen, just listen.*

*Do you really think this is necessary?*

*I don't like "necessary". Let's say I think it may be helpful. Many people get through life like you are now, maybe stuffing things down. People stuff down while grieving a loss all the time.*

*Do you think I am grieving?*

*Yes, and angry. Listening may help. It's what I do.*

*Will you be there?*

*Yes, I am always there all the time.*

*OK, I will come and listen if you will be there.*

*Good. We meet on Tuesdays at 7:00, same place, maybe donuts instead of cookies.*

*Sue felt a laugh. It was almost there. Could I come sit here sometimes? By myself I mean?*

*Sure, get Megan's phone number. She knows everything that goes on around here. She can tell you when my office is empty, and you can come and watch the fish. I do.*

*Thanks. I will do that. See you Tuesday.*

*Don't forget to see your PCP, and one more thing. The group is all men.*

~~~

ALLEN

These shoes are killing my feet. Now I know why the last owner gave them to St. Vinnies. I will get some better shoes with my first paycheck. That wild hair clerk hadn't been there when I went back to get the shoes. I'll think of another reason to go back.

This was Allen's first day as mall cop. Things had gone well, he thought, except for the tight shoes. He had told them his pant size but they were tight around the waist. Too many Big Breakfasts he thought. He should start running like he did in the Army or stop eating like he did. Running didn't appeal to him right at this moment, maybe it was the tight shoes. This job got boring quickly, but he had put his name in at the fire station. There was a chance he could get in the next group of trainees. Then he saw a bunch of teenagers.

Too many in one place he thought. Too much shoving and pushing. Was there a bulge under that big one's sweatshirt? He's packing! Allen grabbed a fist full of shirt right under the kids chin and lifted him up. The others started yelling and pushed in around Allen. He backhanded the nearest one who went down like a sack of potatoes. He kneed another one and the rest scattered. He pushed the button on his mike.

*Need help here. Shoe store first level.*

At first there was no response, then a woman's voice came back. *Stay right there I'll key the police.*

It wasn't a whole minute before the mall manager got there. What she saw did not please her. Two kids on the floor, one doubled over and the other with a bloody nose, and Allen holding a third by the shirtfront.

*Put the kid down now.* She was a big women use to being in charge and Allen knew an order when he heard it. He dropped the kid.

*Whose cell phone is that?* Allen looked down and realized that the bulge had been a big cell phone.

*It belongs to this kid.  
Give it back to him now.*

Two cops came trotting up. They didn't look happy. It had been a quiet evening in the patrol car. They were unlucky enough to be close to the mall. Another car was on the way.

*What happened here?  
First call the EMTs. These kids need to be checked out now.* Was she ex Marine? Could be.

*Who's the rent-a-cop?  
He's new, name's Allen.*

*Allen, what's going on here?*

*I thought this kid was packing heat and I took it away from him - only it was his big cell phone. The other two pushed in and I, well you can see.*

The other kids were yelling. *We didn't do anything. This guy went berserk on us!*

*Allen, go to the office and write down what happened. I'll take care of this.*

On Sunday morning Allen walked into McDonald's. Jimmy brightened up. He liked Allen.

*Give me one sausage biscuit, no make it two, and a big coffee,* and Allen went to sit

with Pat and her, I mean his, friends.

*How'd it go?* They all wanted to know.

*I got fired. First day.* Then he told them a short version of the story.

*He could have had a gun.* Larry was trying to be helpful.

*I guess he could have, but I lost it. It was like I back on deployment.*

*Have you had this happen before?* It was travel vest man who Allen now knew was Dave.

Allen slumped down, and for the first time he felt that these people were really his friends, and he told them about the gym bag.

*Maybe you need some help with this.* It was Pat showing a soft side.

Then it was Dave again, the PTSD man with all the travel patches.

*You should go talk with Brother Nick. This won't go away by itself. I know.*

I have friends, Allen thought. Strange friends, but they really want to help. If one of those kid's parents press charges I could be in court over this. This could mess up my chances with the fire dept. But right now that all seemed less important than breakfast on Sunday morning with friends.

*Anyone want some more coffee?*

~~~

SUE

Sue really was early this time. There was Brother Nick fussing around the coffee table. He had a comfortable presence. Especially today for Sue. He had promised to be there, and she relaxed a little knowing he kept his promises.

*Hi Sue. Get some coffee. We will be sitting on the couches over in the far corner.*

Sue started for the couches and then hesitated. She was dressed office appropriate. Medium heels, straight skirt about an inch above the knees. But she knew that when she sat down on one of those soft couches there would be a lot of leg showing. She had always thought that her legs were one of her best features, maybe her best, but not tonight. The very last thing she wanted this evening was to attract attention. Brother

Nick noticed her pause.

*I should have worn slacks.*

Always flexible, Brother Nick responded. Let's use the big round table then, and we will give it a different look, a little more like home. Give me a hand. There is a tablecloth in that closet. I will bring out some real mugs and put away the Styrofoam. Oh, and a couple of trays. We will take the donuts out of their boxes and put them on the table. Without understanding why all the fuss Sue went to work.

They were about finished giving the table its new homey look when Roger walked in.

*What's this I see? Brother Nick has a new helper? Tablecloth, mugs, what's next, soft music? Nice knees.*

*Sue, this is Roger. He does a good imitation of a poorly trained adolescent. Roger, this is Sue. She will be joining us tonight.*

Roger didn't seem to mind the dig. It looked to Sue that they had been down this road before.

*Hi Sue. You doing a story for the paper? No pictures, only first names.*

Why not play along? *OK, no pictures and only first names.* Brother Nick's eyes widened just a little as he thought, Ok, be flexible. See where this goes.

Other people streamed in right at 7:00 – good churchgoers, never early but never late. There were a few comments about the change in venue but no complaints. Some introductions but no pointed questions directed at Sue.

*Let's do a check in for Sue.*

They were all vets. They told Sue where they had been, some small details like branch of service but nothing about traumatic experiences. Then the talk went social, banal social, weather, a car problem, good donuts tonight. It could have been dinnertime at a friend's house.

Brother Nick had expected some changes in group dynamics. This always happened when someone new joins a group. No one wants to expose any vulnerabilities to a stranger. Add the fact that this new person was a nice looking younger woman and the men, Roger excluded, dove for emotional cover. The men sat a little straighter and cleaned up their language. Brother Nick was liking this; in fact he liked it a lot.

*I have never been to a war zone, but Brother Nick thought my coming here tonight would help me.*

The whole table went quiet. So Sue was one of them, not a writer from the paper. Curiosity was suppressed, but compassion flourished. They hadn't spent weeks with

Brother Nick for nothing.

*It's close enough to 8:00; we will call it a night.*

*Do you ride the bus?* It was Roger.

*Yes.*

*I'll walk you to the bus stop. It's dark this time of day.*

Dave, the little guy with the strange vest spoke up. *I'll go with you too.*

Then they all agreed. Sue needed company to the bus stop and they would wait with her until the bus came. It was like the queen and her personal guard leaving the basement of the Church. Their protective instincts had taken over, except maybe Roger's. Sue was going to be one of them and nothing bad was going to happen to her. When he was sure no one was looking Brother Nick did a little dance. He had taken some risks in bringing Sue into this group and now he couldn't be more pleased with the outcome, except someone would have to do the dishes. Megan would not be pleased if he left the dirty dishes for her.

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ALLEN

Pop got home from work even earlier than usual. His paycheck would be even lighter this week. Allen was sitting in the living room.

*You going to the mall today?*

*No Pop. They aren't going to call me anymore.*

*Is that a nice way of saying you were fired?*

*Yes, I guess. I messed up and they let me go.*

*Fired, I'll be damned. Come on downstairs and we'll have a beer.*

It was only 2:00 in the afternoon, and Pop rarely had a beer until after dinner. In a nicer house the "downstairs" would be called a man cave, but Pop's downstairs wouldn't fit most people's image of man cave. There were a couple of old lounge chairs – he could probably have found better at St. Vinnies. There was an old console TV, which he couldn't get rid of if he wanted to. Who would want it? The TV was seldom on except for football season or when Pop wanted background noise. His one prize was the old refrigerator by the washing machine, which he kept well stocked. He didn't know anyone else with two refrigerators, and it kept his beer at a perfect temperature. Pop's downstairs was where he met with his counselor, Tom. There were places in the house where Tom was not allowed, but here the old yellow cat was at home.

*So what happened? Didn't seem like you even had time to get into any trouble.*

*I lost it and banged some heads. They were just noisy kids and I lost it.*

*Jesus Christ Allen. What are you going to do about this? If you can't hold down a job how are you going to live?*

*I know Pop. I have thought about going to the VA but the word is that it takes a long time to get in. The guys at McDonald's think that I should talk to a Brother Nick.*

*So now you go to McDonald's to get advice on how to deal with problems? Don't you know how bad that sounds? Makes more sense to go around carrying a club than to go to McDonald's for advice. Have another beer. I can't make sense of any of this, and who is this Brother Nick?*

*If you knew the people I have breakfast with on Sunday mornings you would be even more confused. There is nothing wrong with you Pop, but these people seem to understand the strange things I do better than anyone else I have talked to. They are really trying to be helpful.*

*Ok, so you met some nice people. I get that part.*

*Yep, they are nice people, and I will go and talk to this Brother Nick. They call him Friar Tuck.*

*Friar Tuck? This is too much for one day Allen. Let's see what's on TV.*

Pop knew that daytime TV was for idiots or people confined to a hospital bed, but he needed something to take his mind off of his son's strangeness. He got a fresh beer, and Tom jumped up on his lap. Life is good he thought. Life is good, but sometimes you needed to shut the door on it. Pop had found a way that worked for him.

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SUE

The nurse had taken Sue into the examination room. Take off everything from the waist down and cover yourself with this drape. The doctor will be in to see you in a few minutes. Sue began remembering her Jewish friend, and the old Jewish men's prayer she had talked about which went "Thank you God that I was not born a woman". Sue was going to be examined by a gynecologist. What an embarrassing position to be in, she thought. Her mother's PCP had said she looked healthy, but recommended she see this doctor as an additional check. Then it was over.

*Take my hand and we will get you up. You have some vaginal tears but nothing*

*to be concerned about. We will do testing for STIs and include HIV.*

This alarmed Sue. *Wouldn't I know if I had some disease?*

*Some STIs can be asymptomatic and can cause serious problems much later, including infertility. I wish more women in your situation would get an exam and testing. You say someone advised you to see me?*

*Well he suggested I see my family doctor and she referred me to you. He didn't want me to have any health worries, and I didn't think I was even worried.*

*It was good advice not only for you, but for him.*

Sue thought, for him? This was the second time Brother Nick had almost made her laugh, but he would never know. The doctor noticed Sue's little snork but decided not to ask.

*How long before I know the test results?*

*You shouldn't sit around worried. It will only take a few days. I will give you a call. I recommend annual check ups, especially for sexually active women.*

Not likely I will be sexually active anytime soon, thought Sue.

*Can you send me a reminder card or something?*

*Yes, we do that. I will be in touch when the tests come back. Please stop at the checkout desk, and have a nice day.*

The ancient Jewish men had good reasons to be thankful they were not born a woman, Sue thought as she walked out. They didn't have to go through this. She wondered if they still prayed that way.

When Sue left the medical building the sun was out. She loved the sun, especially on cool days like today. Should she stop at the Church for a quiet visit she wondered? No, better get back to work. It's over.

~~~

ALLEN

Allen had come up to the Church door. The little paper sign read "PTSD Group Downstairs" looked like it might have been out in the rain at some point, but it confirmed that he was in the right place. The woman at the crosswalk caught his eye. Designer jeans, blue headscarf, walked with a purpose. This was the kind of sight that lifted a

man's spirits even on a damp chilly day like today. Then this bright spot on a gloomy day turned toward him. Don't stare, be cool, and she stopped. Maybe she needed directions, no help there; Allen hardly knew where he was. Allen's brain had stopped working. Then with a small smile she walked past him into the Church. Allen followed her like a dog on a leash.

*Hi Allen. I see you found your way here. It was strange vest Dave. Come on with me. I'll introduce you to Brother Nick.* Allen still looked like he was being led.

*Dave, I see you have brought a friend. I'm Brother Nick.*

*Name's Allen. Dave invited me to come see what the group was like. Thinks I might fit in.*

Then Sue came out of the kitchen and Brother Nick said something that could have been welcoming while Allen looked for something to do or say, anything that would make him look less like a deer in headlights. Ah, he spotted the side table. A cup in his hand, that would help. And a donut, maybe two, on a little plate. Allen moved toward the saving cup and plate.

*I encourage people to bring their friends. Have you and Dave been friends for a long time?*

*No, we met at McDonald's.*

*I heard about the Sunday breakfast club. Good idea. Are you a vet?*

*Yes, I guess that is why I am here. The guys thought I should meet you.*

*Then you are more than a visiting friend tonight. Well, welcome again. We will need some one-on-one time. Schedule that with me before you leave tonight.*

*OK. I have time. I am not working right now so whenever you want to see me is OK.*

Brother Nick made a mental note – not working.

*My name is Sue; you weren't here last week.*

*Name's Allen. No. Dave brought me. Wanted me to meet Brother Nick. The guys at McDonald's call him Friar Tuck.*

That got a smile. Allen reentered the world with new confidence; what a difference a smile can make. Brother Nick called the circle together and Dave introduced Allen. Life was good.

Brother Nick noticed some little changes; some would call them improvements. As a group, they looked cleaner, neater even. A shirttail tucked in, shoes no flip-flops. Was that a new haircut? This was all good. People who begin to take better care of how they look are headed in the right direction. Brother Nick knew it was partly, perhaps mainly, due to Sue's presence, but that made it even better. Life was good.

The talk was a little more than social, but not much. Some small successes were shared. Roger had called his brother who he hadn't talked to in years. Dave had signed up for an art class; something he had always wanted to do. No one questioned Sue, or even Allen, then it was 8:00.

Allen began to help clean up. It was automatic. His mother would be pleased. Sue put on her blue scarf and her bus escorts assembled at the bottom of the stairs. As they started up the steps Brother Nick asked, *Would tomorrow at 10:00 work for you, Allen?*

*Yes, that's fine.*

*Good, see you then. My office is in the rectory next to the Church.*

Allen would be there early. There was no telling who else might show up. Life was good.

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SUE

Sue's mobile phone was ringing. Where did she put it? In her purse. She fumbled it out and answered.

*This is Sue.*

*Sue, this is Dr. Woods. Your tests have come back, and you have one positive test for Chlamydia. I will prescribe an antibiotic, and I want to see you again in 3 months. Did you leave a pharmacy name at the desk?*

*Yes. What did you say I have?*

*It is a very contagious sexually transmitted disease. If we treat it now there will be no lasting effects, but no sex of any kind until you have taken all of the antibiotic.*

*You mean I will be OK after I take the antibiotic?*

*Yes, but I want to see you in 3 months to be sure there is no new infection, and no sex; you are contagious even though you have no symptoms. All the other tests were negative.*

*Dr. Woods, there will be no new infection, and no sex.*

*Good, but I want you back in 3 months, that's very important. I will transfer you to the appointment clerk. This antibiotic works well. You will be fine. See*

*you in 3 months.*

Sue sat upright in her office chair. Her office mate saw her sit up and saw the tension in Sue's face.

*I need to go out.*

*Is there anything I can do?*

*Answer my desk phone for me. I won't be long.*

*Are you sure you are OK?*

*Actually, really OK. Be back soon.*

Sue went straight to the Church rectory.

*Megan, is Brother Nick in?*

*Let me look. Yes, he says to come on in.*

Sue went straight in, and as Brother Nick stood up she gave him a big long, full body, hug. It wasn't often that Brother Nick got that kind of hug so he was in no hurry to be released.

*Brother Nick, you saved me from a terrible disease!*

*Really? I didn't know I could do that.*

*You sent me for a medical check up and they found out that I had this disease, and it can be cured and I will be OK, thank you, thank you.*

*I was hoping it wasn't a miracle cure. That is not a reputation I pray for.*

*I need to get back to work, but I just had to say thank you.*

*While you are here, how do you feel about the PTSD group?*

*I haven't really said anything yet, but the group seems to like my being there. It's fun that they think that I need an escort to the bus stop.*

*You will tell them what you want to tell them when you want to. I think it is good for you that you are coming, and yes, they do like your being with them. It is good for them too, if you haven't noticed.*

*What good does it do if I never tell my story? Isn't that the idea? Isn't that what groups like this do?*

*Our first job is community building. Trust and a sense of community, that is what a group like this has to offer.*

*I should be getting back, but do you have time for a quick question?*

*Yes.*

*Can I go to communion?*

*If you mean because you are divorced, the answer is yes you can go to communion. However, I recommend a talk with Father Mike. There may be things in the way of a completely clear conscience that you may not even be aware of.*

*You gave me good advice once, so I will think about it. See you on Tuesday.*

Sue saw Allen sitting by Megan's desk. What was he doing here? To see Brother Nick of course. He stood up as soon as she came into the room. Good manners. Must say at least some little thing to him.

*Hello Allen.*

*Hi Sue. I eat breakfast with some friends on Sunday mornings. I think you would like them. I guess I am asking you to have breakfast with me and my friends.*

There was not a good connection between Allen's brain and his mouth. The words seemed to come out all by themselves. He was as surprised to hear what he said as Sue was.

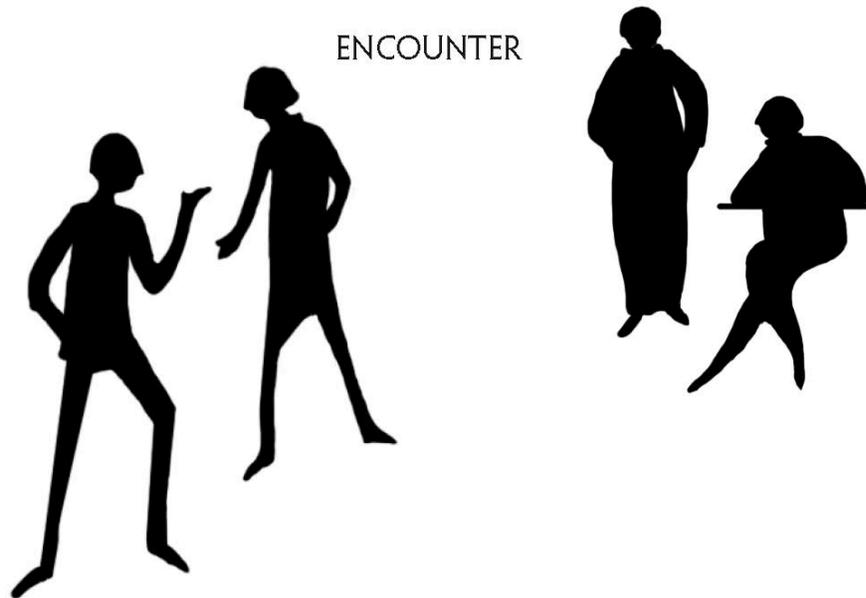
Sue was not pleased. Newly divorced, with a venereal disease, no desire for intimacy of any kind even a new friend. This was not what Sue wanted. So she said, *where do you and your friends meet?*

*At McDonald's on Wilson, about 10 for breakfast?*

Megan couldn't help overhearing and tried to hold in her laugh, but she wasn't completely successful. She had heard and seen just about everything you can imagine, and maybe some you can't, from her privileged place. She knew what she was seeing.

*I will try to come. Have to get back to work.*

Allen could see Brother Nick standing in the doorway to his office. How could someone choose celibacy with women like Sue in the world? Brother Nick was thinking the same thing.



*The biggest human temptation is to settle for too little.*

Thomas Merton

## ALLEN

Brother Nick had asked Allen to come to his office. Sue's brief visit had not been part of his plan, but he was pleased that it happened. He was now sure that Sue would continue to be good for the PTSD group and that included Allen. Now he wanted to know more about Allen.

*Thank you for coming. Sue had stopped in for a quick visit. There was no time conflict.  
Take a seat.*

*I asked Sue to have breakfast with me on Sunday. I thought she was going to say "no," but she said "yes". Actually she said she would try. That was good enough for me.*

*We could talk about Sue, but I want to hear about you. You told me that Dave brought you. He must have had a reason.*

*The whole Friar Tuck group thought it was a good idea. Oh sorry, Brother Nick, but that's what they call themselves.*

*Interesting. I didn't know that. Don't feel bad that you let it slip; I like it. I will use it myself. How did you meet this Friar Tuck bunch, and why do you think they suggested you come to the PTSD group?*

Something in Allen told him this was a beginning. He had been saying to himself "It's over," "It's over," but it wasn't. This was a beginning. He couldn't have explained how or why, but he knew. So he told Brother Nick his whole story. He told him about his team clearing IEDs and seeing people get blown up. He told him about the mugger who maybe wasn't really there. He told him about the gym bag he thought was going to blow up McDonald's, but was only socks and shoes. And he told him how he lost his job as mall cop. He even told him how he couldn't go to sleep at night without checking all around the outside of the house. He told him everything he could think of.

*That's quite a story. Now we know why your Friar Tuck friends suggested that you come to see me. We can't make this all go away with the wave of a hand, but you have taken a big step in the right direction. We both need to lean back and take some slow breaths.*

Allen wanted to cry, but how could a grown man cry in front of another man, even one in a brown robe. It wasn't done. Not in his experience it wasn't. So he looked at the ceiling then he noticed the fish. They were beautiful. He latched onto the fish tank.

*Those are the most colorful fish I have ever seen.*

*It's a saltwater tank. Saltwater fish are beautiful aren't they?*

Brother Nick let Allen watch the fish for several minutes before he said anything.

*Do you have a place to stay?*

*My Dad and I fixed up the attic.*

*This is in your parents' house?*

*Yes, it's temporary until I get work and a place of my own.*

*Your experience at the Mall stands out in your story because keeping a job is an important step for you.*

*Maybe it was the wrong kind of job.*

*That's possible. But working seems to be your most immediate goal, and I agree with that priority. We may want to think about some medical intervention - short term at least.*

*You're talking about pills?*

*Yes.*

*I don't want pills.*

*OK. We will keep that on the back burner for now. When was the last time you had a physical?*

*When I rotated back a few weeks ago.*

*Good. Here is what I would like you to do. Come and see me once a week so we can both keep up with how things are going. Be sure to stay connected with friends and family. It would also be good if you would come to the PTSD group and listen. Are we agreed?*

*Will Sue be there?*

Brother Nick wasn't sure how to be helpful and confidential at the same time.

*Sue is part of the PTSD group for a reason. It is important for her and the group that you give her time and space. Are we agreed?*

Allen needed to digest what “time and space” may mean. Like it or not Sue had a place near the center of his new way of thinking. It's a beginning.

*OK, I'll try. See you Tuesday.*

~~~

SUE

Sue's “I'll try” response to Allen's invitation to breakfast turned into a “yes” when she got up on Sunday morning. As she was leaving the house all dressed up her Dad asked,

*Where are you going all dressed up?  
I'm going to McDonald's, Dad.*

It was fun to tell the truth and be mysterious at the same time, and avoid another confrontation with her father about Church. The Uber driver was nice. Sue would give her a good tip. As they pulled into the parking lot Sue wondered how they managed to make these places all look the same. Why she accepted this invitation to breakfast from someone she hardly knew was her own mystery, and fast food, Sue would much prefer some cereal and fruit for breakfast. And who were these “friends” she and Allen were going to eat with? Jimmy the counter kid saw this well dressed women come in. He seldom saw anyone like this even on Sunday morning.

*We have a special this morning and all coffee is a dollar.* Jimmy was being his very best self.

*A coffee with cream, please. Do you know a man named Allen and his friends?*

Lucky Allen he thought. *Yes, they are right around the corner in the big booth. Here is your coffee.*

Clean boots Larry was the first to spot Sue. This had to be Allen's friend that they expected. Larry was always on the end of the bench. In fact almost off of the end because of all the space construction coat John took up. Larry rushed to get a chair to put at the end of the table. Good manners Allen stood up.

*Hi Sue. These are my friends. That's Larry, John and Pat, and over here, this is Dave, you know Dave, and Jerry, Jerry always wears a tie even to McDonald's.*

Sue shook hands. She noticed that her hand completely disappeared when she took John's hand, but there was a gentleness about his handshake that she liked.

*Hi Dave. I didn't know you would be here. And Jerry, it's good to see you.*

This confused Allen. He knew Sue would recognize strange vest Dave from the PTSD group, but how did she know shirt and tie Jerry? Jerry spoke up.

*We were all sorry when you didn't come back to the divorce group. We thought we had run you off, but Brother Nick said there was a better fit for you in the Tuesday group. Nice to see you too.*

This was more than Jerry usually said on three Sundays. It was ringleader Pat who figured it out.

*You were in the divorce group, and now in the PTSD group with Allen and Dave? I'm in the Trans group. John is AA and Larry is NA. We call ourselves Friar Tuck's Sunday breakfast club.*

It took a few moments for Sue to digest all this. They were certainly not the friends she had been expecting. She wasn't sure whom she was expecting, but for sure it was not these people. Allen remembered his first experience and guessed Sue's confusion.

*They met at an all group picnic. It was Brother Nick's idea to get everyone together. They liked each other and started having breakfast on Sunday and they invited me to join them.*

Sue's confusion only grew as she tried to place herself with this "club". Why was she, Sue Connolly, with these very different people? She tried to stuff down the why me, why am I here, but it came back strong. She wanted to leave, go sit with the fish, be anyplace but here. The silence grew thick so it was always observant Pat who spoke up.

*We love to talk sports. We don't talk about why we are in Brother Nick's groups. Not on Sunday mornings.*

This was not going well for Allen either. Too much information. Sue had been in the divorce group and Brother Nick put her in PTSD?

Sue had to say something or start crying. *Do you mean it was Brother Nick's idea that you meet at McDonald's on Sunday morning instead of going to Church?*

*Brother Nick never preaches Church. We don't go to Church, do we?* It was Pat again.

The *no's* got mumbled around the booth except for John who said, *I sort of go to Church.*

Pat was not going to let "sort of" stand by itself so he/she asked, *How can you sort of go to church?*

*Sometimes I go to early Mass and stand in the back.* John didn't like talking about this and it showed.

*Sorry John. It just popped out.* Pat had broken the "sports only" rule, but John's protective bubble was gone.

*My marriage failed because I was an alcoholic. I met Fran at AA and we started living together. That was 20 or 21 years ago. So I sometimes just go and stand in the back.*

Sue was still confused, but the "why" of this group began to make sense to her when Pat continued.

*You stand all by yourself?*

*Yes, that's what I do.*

*We can't have that, John. Next Sunday I will go to Church with you and we will stand together.*

Then Larry piped up. *Me too.* Then Dave and Jerry. *Us too.* Pushy Pat, *What about you Allen?*

*I have never been to Church.*

*There is a first time for everything Allen. Come with us.*

It was agreed. They would go to early Mass with John and then come to McDonald's. No one pushed Sue to go with them, but she knew she would. Allen and Sue were full of questions about each other, but they would "tell what they wanted to tell when they wanted to tell it".

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## ALLEN AND SUE

They met at McDonald's for the short ride together to the Church. John had offered to drive. Early Mass was not well attended on any Sunday. There were a few people scattered about the Church, hardly more than one person in any one pew except for two or three older couples who were sitting together. Father Mike had given up inviting everyone to "come up front with me". A few did, but it didn't last more than a week or two and then people scattered about the Church again. So when Father Mike walked out of the sacristy he saw exactly what he expected, except, there was a row of seven people standing against the back wall. What's that all about he wondered?

Father Mike resisted his inclination to invite them strongly to come up to the front pew, which, as usual, was empty. There was something familiar about the young woman with the blue headscarf, but he didn't make any connection. The Gospel for this Sunday was Mt. 18:15-20 and that is what he was going to preach on. So when he read from Matthew he hit verse 20 a little harder,

*For when two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them."*

Father Mike had thought about saying something like, "I always liked this reading because I knew that at least Jesus would show up for Mass." He had decided against it however. He didn't want the reputation of being a snarky priest, and if he made it sound like a joke some people wouldn't get it and there would be phone calls of complaint. So he chose a different message.

*Jesus is there with us even if we don't know it, and maybe even if we want him there or not.*

He went on to say how *We don't need to literally call on Jesus by name, although that is always a good idea. What really counts is having the good intentions of Jesus. Is this group of two or three, or more, a caring group? Do you really care for one another? If you do then Jesus is there with you. Even when you are being unkind to one another Jesus is there urging you to be your better self. But Jesus is especially there with you when you are in trouble to encourage and support you.*

Father Mike's message didn't get applause, that's not the way of this particular congregation, but he saw some smiles and a few nods. That was usually encouragement enough for him.

He processed to the back of the Church at the end of Mass hoping to catch the standing seven to find out who they were, but they had slipped out. Without saying anything to each other the seven friends each thought that what Father Mike said may come up again at breakfast.

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## ALLEN AND SUE

John had quit smoking, but car interiors never forget. His old Lincoln was big, but seven made it a squeeze. So it was another smelly, stuffy ride back to McDonald's. Allen and Sue were thinking about last Tuesday's PTSD group meeting. They had not been ready to talk openly, but Dave did. It seemed very important to Dave that he wasn't feeling the constant urge to get in his van and go, just go, someplace, anyplace, to get away. That feeling had dominated his life and now it was receding, not gone, but not always there either. The group was happy for Dave, and he even made a show of taking off his travel patch vest. He even said he might put it in a frame and keep it trophy-like. This morning he was quiet in John's car and so was everyone else.

Breakfast started off much like other Sundays except that today, again, Sue was at the end of the booth sitting on a chair. Everyone knew that their experience with John in Church had to come up, but no one wanted to start it and break the sports only rule. Finally John said.

*It was special that you were with me in Church this morning. I really want to thank you.*

*Isn't that what friends are for?* It was Pat.

*I wonder why Brother Nick never talks to us about Church?* It was Larry.

Allen spoke up surprising himself. *I never went to Church before, but isn't Church about bringing people together? Why build a building that holds a bunch of people if it isn't to bring people together?*

They picked up on the theme and passed it around. Why have a booth that seats six people if you are only going to sit by yourself? Why have a Lincoln if no one ever rides in the back? Why have a school bus for one kid? And they started to laugh. It was a healing sound. Then Allen had a sobering thought. If you have never been to Church then what looks common to the regulars looks strange to you.

*Did you notice that everyone was spaced out? Almost no one was sitting within reach of anyone else. It was almost like they were contagious or like a squad on patrol so that one grenade doesn't kill them all.* That got another laugh.

*You are right, Allen. We were the only ones who sat, I mean stood together. I wonder what the priest thought when he saw us standing in a row against the back wall?* It was Larry.

Quiet Jerry joined in. *There was only one of us that looks like they might be going to Church and that was Sue. We all look kind of rough; I even forgot my tie. We could have been protesters ready to make a fuss and hold up our signs, "Down with the Pope".*

Jimmy came around the corner to see what all the laughing was about. If there was a good joke he wanted to be in on it. They told him “You had to be there”. So he went back to the counter disappointed.

Why build a Church so everyone can sit by themselves? Allen was going to see Brother Nick later in the week and he would ask. The breakfast club didn't connect directly with the idea that it can take new eyes to see how things really are, but they had come close. As far as being friends to and for one another, their Church experience had brought them closer together, and their laughter had sealed the deal.

*How do you get here?* Sue wanted to talk to Allen, and this seemed like a safe topic.

*I walk. I live with my parents and their home is not far from here. What about you? I didn't see a car.* Allen sees everything.

*I use Uber. It's easy. And I'm also living at my parents' house. Would you like some more coffee?*

Allen and Sue stayed for a while after the club broke up and went their separate ways. Allen remembered Brother Nick telling him “She needs time and space”. He was trying, but not doing a very good job of it.

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## BROTHER NICK

Brother Nick enjoyed his quiet moments too. He intentionally did not over schedule his day. It was his little push back against what he thought was the world's obsession with busyness. Allen had visited him this morning as scheduled, and Brother Nick would go to the homeless shelter for lunch in a few minutes, but for the moment it was he and his fish.

Lunch at the shelter was one of the best parts of his day. He would help serve, then sit with clients and eat what they ate. The staff had given him a small room where people could talk to him one-on-one. Being present to people was why he was there, but he did whatever needed to be done, washing dishes, wiping down tables. He wasn't chaplain, although some people may have called him that; he was a brother with a small “b”.

The short ride to the shelter was its own ministry. People were attracted to his brown robe – he always wore a robe, cincher, sandals and a wooden Tau cross on a leather thong around his neck. In the beginning he had thought of himself as Nick the Franciscan Brother, but as time went on he became Brother Nick. Being Brother was no longer what he did – it was who he was, and the brown robe said who he was to all the

bus riders. People would ask him for prayers for themselves or for someone they knew needed them. He always carried a supply of miniature Taus in his pocket that he gave away freely.

He felt good about this week's talk with Allen. There had been no big events to report, but Allen did give him a clue that may be very helpful. Allen was very aware of his surroundings. He noticed things that others may not see. Brother Nick thought this might be a useful entrance into a discussion of hyper vigilance with Allen.

Allen had told him the story of how he was with John from AA standing in the back of Church at early Mass, and how he had noticed what they had called the "contagious" people in Church. I must tell Father Mike this story, he thought. But Allen's observation was critical to Brother Nick's work. He didn't preach Church; he preached community, and he preached it the Franciscan way, by doing it. The short answer to Allen had been some Catholic history of people being "me and Jesus" at Mass so that is what they did. But Allen did not need a history lesson so he told Allen straight out that he, Brother Nick, thought that people should not be contagious in Church, and that it was his ministry to try to do something about it by bringing people together.

Allen had also wanted to talk about Sue. Who wouldn't? But Brother Nick steered him gently away from talking about Sue. Then Megan knocked disturbing his thoughtful quiet.

*Brother Nick, do you have a minute?  
Sure Megan, come on in.*

Brother Nick saw his connection with Megan the parish secretary as essential, although he always kept it light hearted. Megan taught him things he would never have know otherwise, like how do millennials think, especially how young women millennials think. The daily parish "news" was secondary. Brother Nick was all ears.

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MEGAN

Megan was born for the job of parish secretary. She was not an "administrative assistant" to anyone. She was queen of her domain and everyone loved her. If you needed anything she knew where to find it. If you wanted information she knew how to get it and she knew everything that went on in the parish. Best of all she had a confessional sense of confidentiality. Gossip never started and always ended at her desk. But what she had to tell Brother Nick was not gossip. It was the result of sophisticated intelligence gathering.

*The Cardinal wants his Auxiliary Bishops to become more involved in the parishes.*

*Knowing our Archbishop, "involved" may not be the best word.  
I know, but snooping sounds mean.*

*Does your mole think we are in for another round of closings and consolidations?  
We came out of the last round still standing.*

*It's possible. There is going to be some kind of announcement, probably in the  
spring.*

*That's a lot of possible and probable. Have you talked to Father Mike about this,  
and how do we look on paper?*

*I will talk to Father Mike when he comes in. We will turn in our annual report  
in October.*

*How is Mass attendance?*

*Down a little.*

*Are baptisms keeping up with funerals?*

*No, but we are paying our bills.*

*Think about how we can polish our image. OK, enough of that for now, how are  
you doing?*

*Good, but I may not have the wow power I used to have. That good-looking  
Allen that visits you never looks my way, but when your friend Sue is in the  
room he never takes his eyes off of her. I turn 30 next month. That's when  
everything begins to shift and sag.*

Brother Nick's suspicions about Allen and Sue were being confirmed.

*Too much information, Megan. I thought 30 was the new 20.*

*No one told my body, but you asked.*

Megan couldn't leave the conversation on a down note.

*On the plus side we have a good sign up for RCIA classes. We should have a full  
house for the Easter Vigil in April.*

*Be sure to tell Father Mike. That's the kind of thing an "involved" person may  
be interested in. Check my schedule for me. What's on for this afternoon? I may  
want to stay at the shelter a little longer today if there is no conflict.*

Calling from her desk, *Nothing scheduled until 3. Enjoy your friends.*

Brother Nick made sure his bus pass was in his robe pocket although most of the time  
the bus driver didn't ask, and he was out the door with a wave. Megan's phone rang.

*Parish office, this is Megan.*

*Hi, this is Sue Connolly. Brother Nick said it was OK for me to spend time in his office if he wasn't going to be using it. Is it free this lunchtime?*

*Yes, the room is free. Will you be coming soon—I need to step out for a few minutes?*

*If I am there at 12:30 would that be OK?*

*Yes, see you then.*

When Sue put her sweater on and got up to leave, her office mate asked where she was going. Sue answered,

*To watch the fish.*

Sue loved to tell the truth when she knew it would sound unbelievable.

~~~

FR. MIKE

Father Mike had been dead center in his seminary class, and that is pretty much where he remained, just a competent priest. If you asked any member of his parish about the staff, they would have said they loved Megan, Brother Nick was a saint, and they liked Father Mike.

His office was arranged for visitors with his desk against an outside wall so that there was nothing between himself and whoever had come to see him. In addition to his office chair there were two comfortable chairs; he often saw couples. His one concession to his own needs was the window. The window was as wide as his desk, which was against the same wall and centered on the window. There Father Mike could look out at the world, but it was much more important to him that the world looked in.

The wall, the desk and the window faced south. That allowed the Chicago winter sun to warm his old bones, his spirit and even his imagination. One can imagine quite a lot sitting in the warm sun on a cold day. That is where his spirit was, imagining a peaceful world, when he heard a tap at his door. His response was the same as it would have been if it were the cleaning lady, the rumored Auxiliary, or in this case, someone he was not sure he knew. *Please come in. How can I help you?*

Sue came into Father Mike's office and took the chair he was pointing to, and he came and sat next to her. It was then that he noticed the light blue scarf, this time around her neck, and his memory of her in the silent Church clicked in.

*It's nice to see you again. I remember our brief conversation in the Church. Are*

*you the Sue that Brother Nick told me had joined one of his groups? He gives me an occasional update and mentions new people.*

*Yes, my name is Sue Connolly, and Brother Nick has been very helpful to me. I even told him that he had saved my life, but that is not why I am here.*

Father Mike waited. She would tell him what she wanted to tell him when she wanted to tell it. He would ask Brother Nick later how he had managed to save someone's life.

*I want a new beginning. I don't know how to begin again and I am afraid it may be impossible for me. When I got a divorce it was a huge relief and I was able to say "It's over", and it was, but now I know that will never be good enough. I want a new beginning and I am afraid I will never have it.*

*I can tell you have thought about this a lot.*

No questions this time. Father Mike was a good priest.

*For days, no weeks, and the last hour sitting in Brother Nick's office by myself.*

*Ah, his beautiful fish. Some say that sitting in Brother Nick's office is better than sitting in Church.*

*I didn't listen to my parents or my friends and I married a man who used me as his punching bag.*

It was time for a relevant question.

*How old were you when you married this person?  
I was 19.*

Father Mike waited. Young people make mistakes.

Sue closed her eyes. She couldn't look at anyone, not now.

*I had an abortion. I hated the way he treated me. I didn't want his child. Now I am divorced, lonely, angry, and last week I found out I had a venereal disease and I am afraid. I am afraid I can never begin again.*

Sue opened her eyes and looked at Father Mike not knowing what to expect. He had taken a little stole out of his pocket and put it on.

*Are you going to ask me to go to confession?*

Sue's Catholic grade school training told her the stole meant, "whatever I hear will never be repeated."

*It would seem that you just did. I am confident that you are sorry for what you have told me, and that you are resolved that this will not happen again, and you are asking for God's forgiveness. Am I correct about this?*

Yes, now Sue was looking straight at Father Mike.

*Then in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit I absolve you of these sins and any other sins you may not have been able to recall.*

And he blessed her.

*Do you believe that God has forgiven me?*

*Oh yes. As sure as the sun is shining in that window God has forgiven you. Now you must forgive yourself.*

Father Mike was a good priest.

~~~

JOHN

*Did you go to Church this morning John? Pat wanted to know.*

They had all gotten to McDonald's in the rain.

*No. I asked Fran if she would like to go but she doesn't like Church. She goes to AA with me and she loves Brother Nick, but she doesn't understand why I go to Church and stand in the back by myself. After last week when we all went together I wondered myself why I do it.*

Allen looked soggy and wet after his walk in the rain.

*You are not the only person who comes to Church all by yourself. I asked Brother Nick about it and he didn't really tell me why people are like that, but he said his work is to bring people together. Look at us; we know that what he does works for us.*

*The Steelers are playing the Bears this afternoon. Does anyone have a big screen TV? Larry was trying to bring the talk back to sports.*

John spoke up. *I will be watching it and I have a 50-inch TV. Would you like to come over and watch it with me? Would anyone else like to come over? It will be coffee only.*

Pat said *yes* and Larry confirmed that he would like to come. It seemed everyone else had already made plans. Sue looked at Allen and he realized that they may have plans too.

*I'll call Fran and make sure she doesn't mind my inviting two extra for the game.*

Fran stays close to home. She loves 1000 piece puzzles and cookbooks. There is a table dedicated to puzzles, and one wall of the kitchen is nothing but shelves of cookbooks. No, she doesn't mind if John invites a couple of friends. She will prepare some special snacks. John put the phone back in his pocket.

*Fran says she would enjoy some company.* John knew that wasn't exactly what Fran had said but he was hopeful that it was the truth.

*Why do you like to watch the Steelers Larry?*

*My whole family lives in Pittsburgh. That's where I grew up. We are all Steeler fans. There were times when it seemed that they were all we had to be proud of. I have my own Terrible Towel.*

Everyone wanted to hear about Larry's Terrible Towel.

*I'll bring it next week. You may like the story behind it. Anyone like to make a small bet on the game?*

*I don't think we should start betting.* It was Ivy League Jerry. *Gambling was the big reason I am divorced.*

*Sorry Jerry. I didn't mean gambling.*

*I know, but for me that was how it started and I don't want to go there.*

It was agreed. No betting on games. John gave Pat and Larry his address and reminded them that it was coffee only. Pat would bring some nuts. That would be OK, but Fran would probably have something she made for them. It's what she likes to do. As everyone was leaving Allen asked Sue if she would like some more coffee. It had become their excuse for lingering after the rest had gone on their way.

*I really like these people Allen. What do you know about John? It was nice of him to invite us all over on short notice.*

*Not much. He works as a construction laborer when the weather is good. He drives that big old car. I remember when he told us that his marriage didn't last because of his drinking, and that he and Fran are both AA and they have been together a long time. That's all I know.*

*Do you like to watch the Bears play?*

*I like sports on TV but I don't like watching all by myself.*

*I have a big screen TV. Sue had given it to her father but that seemed like an unimportant detail.*

~~~

ALLEN

*Mom, Dad this is my friend Allen. We are going to watch football.*

*You don't watch football Sue. Allen what do you do?*

*I was in the Army. Right now I am loading trucks at the Terminal, but I have my name in at the fire department.*

*Where were you stationed? I was at Bragg.*

*Ft. Leonard Wood.*

*What did you do? That's the engineer school isn't it.*

*Dad.*

*Well you bring someone home to meet your family and you don't want me to ask questions? So you want to watch football. Come on downstairs with me Allen, we'll have a beer and watch football. Wait until you see this TV. Sue got it as part of her divorce settlement.*

*Dad!*

*And that's what it was like meeting Sue's family Brother Nick. Now she has asked me to go to Church with her on Sunday. She doesn't seem to want the time and space you think she needs.*

*So you liked her family?*

*Her Dad's a hoot and her Mom is a sweet person. What's not to like?*

*And you are going to go to Church with her on Sunday?*

*That's all new to me, but I said yes.*

*Why is it that when you come in for our weekly talk we end up talking about Sue, and now Sue's family?*

*Brother Nick it's because Sue is on my mind. She is always on my mind. How do you like the PTSD group?*

*They are OK. You know I don't say much. Maybe it's because Sue is part of the group. There are things I am not ready to say in front of her.*

*Maybe, but what about the other guys?  
Brother Nick, I think they are all afraid of something.*

*I think you are right Allen. Big grown men can be afraid. I think you know yourself what PTSD is like. When you feel safe you will tell them what you think is important to help them feel safe.*

*You want me to help them to feel safe?*

*Yes, and I would like you to help me with a different group of people. I eat lunch at the homeless shelter every day. Is there a day you could join me there?*

*I don't get called to the Terminal every day, but I never know until the last minute so I can't tell you what day. Why do you want me to go to a shelter? Do you think that's where I am headed?*

*No, no Allen. I don't think you are headed for a homeless shelter, but many homeless people are vets like yourself. They are having a hard time finding a safe place in their own dangerous world. Come a little early, any day you are free. The staff always needs help.*

*I am having a hard enough time helping myself, and you want me to help other people. That doesn't make much sense to me.*

*Trust me on this Allen, and the food is good. Come hungry.*

~~~

#### ALLEN AND SUE

*Should we sit or stand?* Allen was asking Sue as they entered Church. They were going to early Mass so that they could have breakfast with their friends.

*I think we should sit.* There was a scattering of people already in Church. Sue didn't want to seem pushy and cause someone to move over when there were empty pews, but she didn't want them to be all by themselves either. So she chose a pew directly behind another couple. They would be with other people, but not seeming to crowd anyone.

Allen tried to remember when they were here with the others, but he discovered that when in a pew people didn't just sit. He wanted to be respectful and also not look so different, so when people stood he stood and when they sat he sat. The kneeling was an

entirely new experience, but he managed to put the kneeler down without a bang.

Things were going along OK. Following along actually kind of felt good. A little like how marching in step built *esprit de corps*. He heard the priest say something about a sign of peace and he remembered shaking hands with John and the guys. So he turned to Sue and she gave him a kiss. A first kiss. A long kiss. This Church experience was far better than he had expected.

The couple in front of them turned toward Sue and Allen extending their hands prepared to say "Peace be with you" but instead they saw a young couple exchanging a lingering kiss. Of peace? Of love? Of passion? No need to put a name on it, they remembered. As they slowly withdrew their hands, there would be no handshake; they found themselves facing each other and she reached up and gave her husband a kiss.

They had been married a long time. He knew all of his wife's kisses, and he recognized this kiss. It was not only a kiss of peace, it was a kiss of invitation. His whole day took on new surprising possibilities. He would take her to her favorite restaurant for her favorite breakfast, crepes and fresh strawberries. There was no one at home except the cat. The kids were grown and gone, and he took his wife's hand as he heard the priest invite people to communion, *Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.*

Allen and Sue stayed in their pew and waited for the closing hymn. Father Mike got to the back door ahead of them.

*Good morning Sue.*

*Father Mike this is my friend Allen.*

*Nice to meet you Allen, and he took Allen's hand. God bless you both and have a nice day.*

Allen was impressed. Sue even knew the priest. Somehow that made him feel more connected. And the kiss. Brother Nick may not be pleased, but Sue had kissed him. In front of everyone. In Church. He was not yet prepared to say that Church was an invitation and an encounter, but it was as clear as day to Allen that life was good; no, Life was great!

~~~

## ALLEN AND SUE

Allen and Sue were a little late getting to McDonald's, and before they arrived they had been the topic of conversation. When they came in together and told everyone they

had been to Church, it confirmed the group's opinion that Allen and Sue were two names that would often be said together. This made them all feel good that they were right about what they were witnessing.

*We don't need a Terrible Towel. We already have a terrible quarter back.*  
Larry was showing off his Steeler "towel" and Dave was complaining.  
*All the profits go to charity,* Larry added.

*It's a nice idea. Who did you say thought it up.* Pat wanted to know.

*A man named Myron Cope. He was a sports broadcaster for the Steelers. The Towel has become a great tradition in Pittsburgh. The original is even in the Pro Football hall of Fame.*

*You missed out on some good food. Fran is really nice.* Pat was addressing the four who didn't go to John's house to watch the game.

John added, *you can all come to watch a game sometime. I wasn't sure how Fran would like a bunch of new people in the house, but she really liked the company.*

They all thought it was a good idea, but they needed to plan a week or two ahead. Next it was the Cubs. Everyone likes to talk about winners, young love or baseball are both good. When they had enough good sports vibes they drifted out and headed home except Allen and Sue. Jimmy the counter kid knew that this meant fresh coffee time and brought it to them. It was like the whole world was now saying Allen and Sue in the same sentence.

*Brother Nick asked me to come to the homeless shelter at lunchtime. That's different. What do you think that's all about?*

*Something about a lot of people who use the shelter are vets like me. Are you going to go?*

*I trust Brothr Nick so I will go, but I am not looking forward to it. I didn't know you knew the priest.*

*I met Fr. Mike one day when I was just sitting in Church, and he came and introduced himself. It was Father Mike that told me that the parish had a support group for divorced people and that is how I met Brother Nick. There is a lot you don't know about me Allen.*

*I know everything I need to know. I only thought it was nice that you knew the priest. Father Mike is it?*

*I went to the divorce group for a while, but Brother Nick thought the PTSD group would be better for me. He was right. That's how I met you.*

*Will you keep going to PTSD? So she goes to Church by herself.*

*I think so. They are my friends now and there are things I would like to tell them.*

*I am in the PTSD group because I am always expecting something bad to happen even though I am not in a dangerous place any more. Allen was showing some of himself.*

*I have a strange mix of feelings. Sometimes I feel lonely. Sometimes angry. I mean so lonely and angry I just sit and cry.*

*I would never hurt you. Is that what she does by herself in Church, sit and cry?*

*Our coffee has gotten cold, Allen.*

Allen was confused. Sue had given him a bold, passionate kiss, in Church no less. Now she had turned shy and didn't want to talk about herself or "them" either. He knew he had to stop talking, but he couldn't let things stand as they were and talk about cold coffee. It had been Sue's idea that he would come to her house to "watch a game on TV". That worked once for her, maybe it would work again, but he didn't want to hide his invitation to meet his family behind TV sports. Allen was confused. Sue was being both bold and shy. Allen was a long way from understanding Sue. His confusion would become a mystery of invitation and encounter, but today it was only confusion, but he couldn't leave it there.

*I would like you to meet my Mom and Pop. It is only a short walk from here and you can call Uber from there whenever you want to.*

*I'll walk with you to your house. The weather is nice. Tell Jimmy he has to get rid of the cold coffee.*

~~~

ALLEN

Allen had taken a Sunday afternoon nap. He woke up to good smells coming from the kitchen, and he came down from his attic room to find Pop in the living room with the newspaper. It looked like Pop was looking at the classified section. Allen stiffened wondering if he was going to get another job lecture. He tried to head it off.

*What did you think of Sue?*

*She's a pretty thing, kind of shy, didn't say much. It would have been nice if she had stayed for lunch but she seemed in a hurry. Where did you meet her?*

Pop placed importance on where you met someone. If Allen had picked this woman up at a bar that would put a different spin on his opinion of her.

*I met her at Church, well the Church basement.  
You don't go to Church.*

*Remember I told you I was going to a PTSD support group. That's where I met Sue, but we did go to Mass together. She is Catholic, and I have met her family. Nice people.*

*Isn't this happening kind of fast? What was she doing at a PTSD group? Pop doesn't miss much.*

*Sue is divorced. She must have had a tough time of it. Her marriage didn't last long and she doesn't like to talk about it.*

*Christ Allen. Can't you do better than that? A divorced Catholic?  
Who do you think I should date, a virgin atheist?  
Calm down Allen. You really like this Sue?  
Yes, I really do Pop.  
Bring her back when she has time to stay a while.  
I will. You will like her too when you get to know her better.*

*You going to work tomorrow? Allen knew this was coming.*

*The Terminal didn't call me so I am going to the homeless shelter.*

*Sit down Allen. We fixed a nice place for you until you could get on your feet. I know you had a bad time of it in the Army and I am pleased that you are trying to get passed some bad memories, but going to the homeless shelter is crazy.  
Pop said this in the most calming voice he could manage.*

*I am not going to live there. I am only going for lunch.  
Pop was relieved, but only a little.  
There is always stuff in the fridge. You can make your own lunch right here.*

*Brother Nick, who runs the PTSD group asked me to come to the shelter at lunchtime. He goes there every day. I am not sure why he wants me to come there but it has something to do with some of the people there being vets like me.*

*Come to dinner!*

The call to dinner was a relief for Pop. This was not the Allen he remembered. Bring home a divorced Catholic? Go to lunch at the homeless shelter? Going around the neighborhood with a club? Having a poor excuse for a job? He refused to think any more about it. Pop didn't like to be stretched, and Allen was pulling hard at places

where Pop had never been before. He would have some dinner and would not think about women, shelters, clubs or jobs. *What's for dinner? It smells great!*

~~~

ALLEN

Allen walked into the homeless shelter at about 11:30. It was already crowded for lunch. How to tell the staff from the clients? It was warm but almost everyone had their coats on, some with two or three layers. There was someone with only a tee shirt on, maybe that is a staff person.

*I am looking for the person in charge.*

*That's me. Name's Jack. What's yours?*

*Allen. Brother Nick asked me to come have lunch with him. He said I could help out if you needed help.*

*The kitchen is in good shape. We could use some help on the serving line a little later. Go have seat and visit. I'll call you.*

Where to sit? Everyone seemed to have a cup or something in front of them. Can't sit down with empty hands. There he spotted people making peanut butter and jelly bread at the end of the room, and there was a coffee urn and cups. Allen got some peanut butter bread and coffee and felt like he fit in at least a little. He couldn't hide that he had on clean clothes and had shaved. There was an empty chair and Allen took it. The man next to him introduced himself.

*Hi, I'm William, not Bill, William. What's your name?*

*Allen.*

*What do you do Allen?*

*I was in the Army.*

*I worked construction. See those beams up there on the ceiling. I did that work. Built my own house too. Then I invited some friends to stay with me and they burnt it down.*

The guy next to William was smiling and gave a little nod. He had heard this story before and was pleased to confirm it.

*I was Union. Were you Union?*

*No, I was Army.*

Brother Nick came in the door. There were some waves and someone called out, *Hi, Brother Nick.*

Allen served the green beans, one scoop. Then he helped clean up. Everyone had a story they wanted to tell him. Allen tried to be a good listener. After everything had been washed up and put away Brother Nick called Allen into his little room.

*What do you think Allen? How do you like my shelter family?*

*I was surprised how friendly people were. Everyone had a story they wanted to tell me, but some of their stories didn't seem real. It was like the few I talked to didn't know the difference between what was real and what wasn't.*

Brother Nick leaned back in his chair and said nothing. He couldn't have scripted a better experience for Allen, and he said a little prayer of thanksgiving for blessings received. Allen would figure out that not being able to tell the real from the not real was why many were here at the shelter. Would Allen see part of himself here? Brother Nick was counting on his silence to send that message.

~~~

ALLEN

*Would you like to go to lunch with me again sometime?*

Allen was having his weekly meeting with Brother Nick.

*Do you always go to the shelter for lunch?*

*Almost always. The people at the shelter are my shelter family and they are my daily reality check.*

*I understand how they might be like a family. They know you and like you. I noticed all the waves and hellos when you came in. But the stories they told me were kind of crazy.*

*I have many families Allen. The shelter folks are one of them. My Brothers at the Friary are one, the parish here is another, each support group is a family to me. I have no wife or children but I do have families. What was your Army unit like for you?*

*We were close. We watched each other's back, had some good times, but I don't think we ever used the word "family" to talk about ourselves. We were squad and platoon.*

*You are living with your parents now is that right? How is that working out?*

*Mom is great, but Pop and I don't see things the same, especially when it comes to Sue.*

*Let's not talk about Sue today, but you say you and your Pop don't see things the same way. When we disagree with someone we often use the phrase "don't see things the same way". That is why the shelter folks are my daily reality check.*

*But if their stories are not real stories how does that help you?*

*Look around this room. It is warm and dry. Freshly painted. Comfortable chairs. Beautiful fish. I come to the parish every morning and this is what I find. On weekends I live with my Brothers in a wonderful old house with a lawn and big trees, a room for prayer, a little fountain in the back. All this is very real to me, but it is not my only reality.*

*Don't you want a nice place to work and a nice place to live? I still don't understand what you are telling me about a reality check at the shelter.*

*My shelter family doesn't have this nice place to work or my nice place to live, but their lives are as real to them as mine are to me.*

*I can see that, but I still don't understand why you like to have lunch at the shelter. Why aren't you happy with what you have?*

*I am happy with what I have, very happy. But that's not all there is. Have you've seen a gated community?*

*No, but I have heard the name. It means you can't get in unless you live there. Right?*

*Correct. It is a physical example of what I am trying to tell you. People can put up fences, even walls, put guards at their gates to protect their wonderful place to live. We can also do that mentally. We can put up walls around our lives, our ideas, our reality.*

*Why is that not a good thing? In the Army we always had a defensive perimeter to keep out the bad guys. Living in a gated community may help people sleep better at night. They would feel safe.*

*Allen, I think you've got it.*

*I do?*

*People build real physical walls and mental walls to feel safe.*

*OK, I understand that, but still?*

*Allen, when we build outside and inside walls to feel safe, we shut out the rest of the world, but our life is not all there is. When we let other people's lives in, our lives grow bigger. I want my life, my reality, to be as big as possible.*

*I can see that when I think of Sue, but not the people at the shelter. Brother Nick, Sue is bold in public and shy when it is just the two of us talking. Why would she be that way?*

*We were not going to talk about Sue, but she may be a good example of what I am trying to say. Perhaps she feels safe when there are other people around. What do you think?*

*That's possible. You may be right. I want her in my life, but I don't want to scare her.*

*Telling our story is an invitation to the other person. If they tell you their story, both of your lives become bigger. I think that is where you should start with Sue. Tell your story.*

*Telling my story could take hours.*

*Allen, it could take a lifetime. Start small. With other people present. Don't rush things with Sue.*

*Thanks, Brother Nick. Wish me luck. I'll think about lunch at the shelter and listening to other people's stories.*

*I'll do better than wish you luck, I'll pray for you.*

That was another new idea for Allen. He didn't think anyone had ever prayed for him before.

~~~

ALLEN

The tablecloth, napkins and real cups had become a new tradition with the PTSD support group. They had gathered around the upscale table for their hour of being "family" for each other and for Brother Nick. Sue and Allen were sitting next to each other. It was not like they were together, but there was no one in between them. Allen began to speak not being sure where to start and even more unsure of when to stop. So he just began.

*I was part of an IED team. When there was going to be a troop movement the route needed to be checked and made safe. We knew our job, but the people who set the IEDs were always trying new booby traps. One morning we saw what looked like a new way to trick us. The Lt. wanted to check it out first and when he got close it went off. He was killed. I got a concussion and busted eardrums.*

Allen had to pause here to collect himself. Sue reached over and put her hand on top of his. Was she telling him that that was enough for now? But he had so much more to tell. So he said.

*We did this day after day for months.* Then he accepted her touch as “enough” and stopped.

No one said anything. They were all thinking about their own stories, their real traumatic stories that wouldn't go away. They had told each other little pieces of their stories and, like Allen, they often didn't know where to start, and they never knew when to stop. After listening to Allen they may not have thought about feeling “safe” so that they could tell more of their stories, but they felt a new connection to Allen. Surprising herself and everyone else Sue spoke up.

*I lived in a world where I was beaten every day, for no reason, no reason. I never knew when it would happen. Everyday it would happen. I never knew why or when, but I knew it would happen. I used makeup and long sleeves to hide the bruises.*

Sue stopped. That was all she was going to say. Maybe all she was ever going to say, and she took her hand away from Allen's.

Each person in the circle felt, really felt, that Sue was talking directly to them. Angry chemicals flooded their brains. This should never have happened filled their thoughts. We will not let it happen ever again. It was Allen who spoke the words everyone else was thinking.

*You are safe here. This will never happen to you again.*

Sue heard what Allen said and believed that he meant it, but she was not sure she would ever feel safe alone with a man.

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#### ALLEN'S STORY

Allen had been thinking about Sunday morning ever sense Sue had put her hand on his and talked about her violent marriage. The PTSD group had been around the table, but it

seemed like she was speaking only to him, and now it was 8 o'clock Sunday morning. Last night he had asked Pop if he could borrow Pop's old Chevy in the morning. Pop had said, *Sure, where're you going?* When Allen told him, *To Church*, Pop rolled his eyes and walked away. Allen didn't say he was going to Church because he thought Sue might be there, but Pop was no dummy.

Allen waited inside the Church door until Mass started. No Sue. John wasn't there either. It was the first time Allen had ever been to Church by himself. To sit or stand in the back? He would sit. It was announced that today was the 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time. Why was this time ordinary he wondered? The last reading ended with "The first shall be last and the last shall be first", and that was what Father Mike talked about. Allen remained fuzzy about why the workers who spent all day in the sun didn't get paid more, "God's ways are not our ways" didn't help much. But Allen liked Father Mike's message that you didn't need to be fancy or rich to please God. Did God even like the people at the shelter? Allen liked that thought.

Father Mike shook Allen's hand at the door. *Good morning, Allen.* Allen was impressed. He knows me. *I expected to see you with Sue. I hope she is OK.*

Allen decided he needed to be truthful with a priest so he confessed, *I came to Church hoping that Sue would be here, but she wasn't.*

*My door is always open. Stop and see me sometime. Maybe Sue is not feeling well this morning. I will say a little prayer for her. Hope to see you again, Allen.*

Father Mike was always inviting. Now someone was praying for Sue. Allen liked that even better.

Allen drove over to McDonald's with only one thought in mind, "Was Sue OK?" Her revelation to the PTSD group hung in the air around him like a cloud. As he pulled into the parking lot he could see the same blue Bemer parked in the back with little puffs from the exhaust and a man sitting behind the wheel. Allen parked and walked over. The man hit the window button.

*Every time I see you here I am going to call the cops.*

*You want trouble? I will find where you live. I have connections and your license plate number.* And then the man closed his window and drove away.

Allen turned toward the door wondering why he had done that. He didn't like drug dealers, but it wasn't his job to do something about it, or was it?

*Hi, guys. Sorry I'm a little late.*

*We thought you and Sue went to breakfast someplace else when we didn't see you both.* It was Pat, always Pat.

Allen didn't want to tell them he had gone to Church looking for Sue so he managed to say in a way that made it sound of no particular interest, *Oh, Sue's not here? What are you having for breakfast?*

Pat wasn't fooled. *We missed you both. Guess whom we were talking about when you walked in?*

Allen gave up. *I don't know why she isn't here. I had hoped she would be.* And he got his Big Breakfast. Life always looked better on a full stomach.

When the McDonald's club broke up Allen wasn't sure what to do. As he was driving past the always open Super Market he remembered that they had a cooler with flowers. If Sue wasn't well he would take her some flowers to cheer her up. Flowers or not, he now realized that the lost puppy feeling that had followed him from Church would not go away until he saw her.

With flowers in his hand Allen knocked on the door of Sue's parents house. He remembered her parents were nice people so he wasn't concerned that he would be treated like a stranger. It was Sue that opened the door.

*Flowers! How nice. I'll get a vase.* And she was gone. A minute or two later she came back.

*Don't stand on the porch like a lost puppy, come on in.  
I was worried when you didn't show up at Church or at McDonald's.  
You went to Church by yourself?  
I was thinking you would be there.*

She gave him a light kiss. *Sit down. Would you like something to drink?*

*No I had a good breakfast. Well, a cup of coffee would be nice.*

He knew he would not ask any more questions today or perhaps ever. Life was good again.

*I would like you to come to dinner at my parents' house. My mother makes really good pot roast.*

*Of course. Just tell me when.*

The flowers had been a good idea. He would remember that.

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## ALLEN AND SUE

Allen picked up Sue about 6. This was not an Uber date. When they got to Allen's parents' house Pop met them at the door.

*Allen said I should behave myself and watch my language. I guess that means he likes you. Come on in.*

It was cool enough to wear a coat, but Sue only had on a little sweater with long sleeves. When Pop offered to take it and hang it up Sue said she would keep it, thanks. Everything seemed awkward. Pop was keeping his promise by saying nothing and Allen hadn't thought this meeting through and couldn't come up with something to say. Sue rescued them both. She remembered the Cubs jacket.

*I really like Allen's Cubs jacket. What a wonderful surprise they have been. Do you think they can repeat?*

*Do you like baseball?* That a young woman would like baseball was another new idea for Pop. After years of "same old" his life was now full of surprises.

*I played on the girls' softball team in high school, and I do like to watch a good game.* Allen sensed his world was going to be full of surprises too.

Allen's Mom came in from the kitchen. Their house had no parlor. The whole idea of a formal room for guests didn't fit in their world. Their big eat-in kitchen was a good substitute. While dinner was being prepared it was women in the kitchen and men in the "front room". Allen's Mom clearly enjoyed her own cooking, and there she was at her kitchen door wanting to give Sue a hug but held back for now.

*Did these two men just leave you standing there? Come on in the kitchen.* Sue's parents may have been a little more formal, but not much, so this invitation to the kitchen made Sue feel very much at home.

Allen's mother was clearly delighted to have another young women in her kitchen. Her own daughters had grown and moved away. She didn't welcome Sue into her kitchen; she adopted her on the spot. Allen and Pop stayed away until they were called to the table. Allen and Pop were not aware yet that Sue was no longer a guest, but family. Allen's mother took charge. She knew Sue was a Catholic and that Catholics prayed before meals.

*Sue would you pray for us before we eat?*

Sue crossed herself and began, *Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts...*

Pop had never had his pot roast blessed before. He wasn't sure he liked it, but he wasn't sure he didn't like it either. What's next he thought? but he had to say, *What are we waiting for, let's eat.*

The pot roast was as good as advertised. The only use for a knife was to butter the rolls. Pop wanted to know what position Sue played? *Third base*. And what was her batting average? *.325*. Not bad for a girl Pop thought, but he didn't say it. It was warm in the kitchen and they all felt it both outside and inside.

After dessert of home made chocolate cake Sue wanted to help clean up, but no, the leftovers will go in the fridge and everything else will go in the new dishwasher. The dishwasher was a brand new addition. When Allen's mother started working she started asking for a dishwasher, and Pop had finally agreed when he was reminded that he had friend who was a plumber who would install it for free.

She had said, *if I am going to work, I need a dishwasher*, and Pop finally agreed.

The hour after dinner slipped by in the after glow of a good meal shared by people who like each other. Then it was time for Allen to take Sue home. This time Sue didn't escape a big hug from "Mom" and Pop was pleased with how well he had kept his promise to behave and watch his language.

As Allen and Sue walked to Pop's Chevy Allen took her hand and they both knew that they would "leave their parents and cling to each other and the two would become one flesh".



*Patience takes root when I recognize that other people also have a right to live in this world, just as they are.*

Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 92

## ALLEN AND SUE

Pop's old Chevy had bench seats and Sue moved to the center and leaned against Allen as he drove. They were on their way to Sue's house after a dinner of pot roast prepared by Allen's mother. There was no space between them for conversation so they rode along in silence.

Sue's house was quiet, but she knew her mother left notes. Dorothy had a mobile phone, but she never considered not leaving a note on the kitchen table. It read, "Dad and I are going out to the Millers. We will probably be late. There are leftovers in the fridge." Sue took Allen's hand and led him up the stairs.

*Are you sure about this?*

*Yes, are you?*

*Oh yes.*

They sat down on the edge of the bed and sue said, *there is something I need to tell you. I had a very contagious venereal disease, but I have finished my antibiotic and should be OK now.*

*You didn't need to tell me that.  
Yes I did, and there are a lot more things I need to tell you.*

Allen searched for something to say. *OK then. I am not a virgin, and I have a capped tooth and I don't hear well.*

*You are making fun of me aren't you?  
Yes I am.*

*Well, I am glad you are not a virgin. I don't want someone fumbling around. So you don't hear well, well try this,* and she leaned over and whispered in his ear. *I love you,* then asked, *what did I say?*

*You said make love to me.  
I did not!*

*That's what it sounded like to me,* and they started to laugh.

They fell back on the bed and laughed about today, they laughed about the whole week, and about every day since they had met and they didn't hear the front door open.

Bill and Dorothy were tired and had said good night to the Millers early. When they stepped into the house they heard crazy laughter from upstairs. Bill opened his mouth like he was going to call up the steps, and Dorothy put her finger to his lips, took him by the sleeve and led to the basement closing the door quietly behind them.

In the basement Dorothy sat Bill down, got him a beer from his downstairs fridge and turned on the TV. The Hawks were playing Boston. She muted the TV and sat down beside him and he switched his beer to the other hand and put his arm around her shoulders. After 30 years they knew each other's minds, and Dorothy said, *We use to be silly like that. What happened?*

*I don't know, but I think Allen and Sue will be good for us,* and she leaned back hoping that he was right.

Allen was matching Sue's breathing. It was like she was breathing for both of them. Her breathing quickened and then collapsed in a little cry. He followed moments later with a moan from his soul. He slowly let himself down on her and their bodies were warm as soft wax smoothing out life's hills and valleys. A few minutes went by and she gently pushed him to her side and asked, *Where did you learn to make love like that?*

*My mother taught me.  
No she didn't!*

*You are right, she never talked to me about sex, but she always taught me "ladies first".*

*I love your mother.*

*So do I, and he reached over and cupped her breast with his hand. She gently lifted his hand away.*

*So you can be a tease.*

*There is a lot you don't know about me.*

*I can't hear what you said.*

*Too bad. We need to get dressed before my parents get home.*

*Will you marry me?*

*I think I already did.*

*It was the pot roast wasn't it?*

*I will learn how your mother cooks it.*

*I hope you will fix it often.*

*You can count on it.*

~~~

#### POP AND RUTH

Pop was sitting at their breakfast table enjoying his favorite eggs over well and links, with toast and coffee thinking that only Ruth knew how to make his eggs right. A hot breakfast had become rare, a thing of the past, like a lot of other things, especially since Ruth had started work. At least they had Sunday breakfast together most weeks.

*Thanks for the breakfast. Like old times.*

Then Pop asked the question that had been on both of their minds.

*What do you think of Sue?*

Ruth sat down at the table with her own plate, eggs just right for dipping toast.

*She helps in the kitchen like one of our own. She has manners, and keeps herself looking nice. I think she will be good for Allen. I like her.*

*But she is divorced and a Catholic.*

*You need to get over those things Pop. Did you see the way they looked at each other? They are way more than friends. It reminds me of us 32 years ago.*

*Jesus Ruth, you would have them married before we even get to know her.*

*I like her. Allen loves her. What more do we need to know?*

Pop went quiet. Too many new ideas at once. Ruth wanted him to remember what it was like for them. Those days of hot nights and hot breakfasts are gone he was thinking, but here he was with his favorite hot breakfast. What's next he wondered? Ruth had the answer.

*Some of the people at school talk a lot about the "Y", and they seem to really enjoy it. They told me that family membership doesn't cost a lot and there are all kinds of things we could do.*

*What do you mean "we"? You are not going to get me into any Zumba class.*

*It's more than dance and exercise classes, although we could both use a little more exercise. There is a basketball court, a walking or running track and a pool. You once told me that some day you would like to learn how to swim. They even have water exercise classes.*

*You have been thinking about this haven't you?*

*All day yesterday we were talking about it at the school. Belonging to the "Y" would lighten us up, give us fun things to do.*

*I don't know Ruth. What's wrong with things the way they are?*

*Wouldn't you like to lose some weight? Feel better, look better?*

*What's wrong with the way I look? and I feel fine.*

*You said you wanted to learn how to swim, and I would like to put some spice back into our life. We are not old yet unless we want to be.*

*I will not be in a class of little kids learning how to swim.*

*And I don't want you to spend the rest of your life in front of the TV with a bottle of beer.*

*You don't need to raise your voice. I can hear just fine.*

*Bud, I look at Sue and Allen and I don't want us to get old before we have to.*

Ruth hadn't called him Bud in a long time.

*OK, OK, let's go look at the "y", but I am not making any promises, and I will not put on a leotard and do dance classes.*

Ruth was remembering why she had married Bud all those years ago.

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BILL AND DORTHY

*Bill, turn off that TV. I want to talk to you.*

*Dot, the game is almost over. They may go to empty net!*

*Come up when the game is over then.* Dorothy would be patient but only until the game was over.

*We lost. What did you want to talk about?*

*What do you think of Allen?*

*He's a big strong looking kid, but we really don't know him.*

*I like him. He makes Sue laugh. Can't you tell how different she has been after all the silent treatment and staying in her room?*

*I'll admit that the divorce was hard on her, and that she seems to perk up with Allen, but isn't this happening kind of fast?*

*You don't remember what it was like for us?*

*That was different.*

*Why was it different?*

*We were in love. That's how it was different.*

*And you think they aren't? Don't you see how they are? You can't put a piece of paper between them.*

*Did you see that piece of junk he was driving? It should have antique plates. He doesn't have a real job, lives with his parents. How can he support a family?*

*First, he is no kid, Bill. He did a tour in the Army, which gives him VA. You remember when you got out and we used VA to buy this house?*

*Dot, you don't marry someone because they are a Vet.*

*OK, but I like him. Sue likes him, he makes her laugh, and I like having them both around. They liven things up.*

*Not to change the subject but pushy Margaret at the Church asked me again to help with the October Fest. She never gives up. What a pushy woman.*

*It could be fun, Bill. We could do it together. Remember how we always would go to the Festival and have a great time? We haven't done that in years. It would get you away from that TV.*

*What's wrong with me enjoying a little TV?*

*Don't get huffy. I just meant I think it would be fun to help at the Church Festival. We could see all of our friends, watch the kids on the rides; remember they even have a beer tent.*

*You really want to do this don't you?*

*Yes, I want us to do it together.*

*Maybe they need someone to tend bar at the beer tent. I could do that.*

*Bill, there isn't a lot of togetherness with you serving beer to old men.*

*So it's togetherness you want.*

*Fun together like old times.*

Bill saw a lightness in Dot's spirit that hadn't been there for some time and he liked it. They would help at the Festival. No point in getting old before they had to.

*OK, I'll call that pushy Margaret back and tell her we will help. God only knows what she will ask us to do.*

God only knows!

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THE BREAKFAST CLUB

It was Pat's idea to invite Brother Nick. Pat had suggested it last week. *Wouldn't it be fun to invite Brother Nick?* And everyone thought it was a great idea. Brother Nick had agreed and they were all gathered in their favorite big booth waiting when Brother Nick came in the door. Jimmy the counter kid had never seen a Franciscan in a brown robe.

*What would you like? We have a Big Breakfast that is popular, and coffee is a dollar. Are you going to a party?* Pat heard Jimmy's question and called out.

*Is that you Brother Nick? We are right over here!*

*Pat, is this your brother?*

*No Jimmy this is Brother Nick, a Franciscan. He is our good friend. Give him whatever he wants. I'll pay.* Brother Nick cut through the strangeness and stuck out his hand.

*Hi, I'm Brother Nick, what's your name?*

*Jimmy. Are you a real Franciscan like in the movies?*

*I guess so. I'll have the Big Breakfast and a big coffee. Nice to know you, Jimmy.*

*Here, have a seat Brother Nick. Jimmy will bring your food.*

*Table service. How nice. So you have breakfast together every Sunday morning?* and he shook hands all around. These were five people he knew well and having breakfast with them was something he knew he would enjoy.

*When did this all start?* He asked.

*Right after the all group picnic so we have been having breakfast all summer.*

*You had said on the phone that Allen and Sue were part of your club. Do they still come? They are not here.*

*They still come but usually a little late. They tell us they go to Church first, but we aren't sure that is always the truth. It's fun to watch them. If they sit any closer they would be in each other's lap.* Everyone laughed and agreed with Pat.

Brother Nick filed that information then asked the obvious. *What do you talk about?*

For once Dave spoke up. *We like to talk about sports. Every week there is something going on, but lately we talk about Allen and Sue before they get here. Like Pat said it's fun to watch them fall in love right in front of us. What do you think of the Cubs chances to repeat, got any heavenly inside information?*

*The Cubs are great for sure. Champs after a century near the bottom. A great story. Do you do anything together?*

Jimmy brought his breakfast. John joined the conversation.

*Once some of us came to my house to watch the Bears, and we have talked about doing that again, but the idea of actually doing something together, we haven't talked about that.*

*Good coffee, maybe better than mine.*

*We never want to complain about your free coffee but it is not very good.*

That was a big step for shy Larry and everybody knew it.

*I'll buy some better coffee and clean the pot, and you let me know if there is some improvement.* Brother Nick wanted to be sure Larry knew he had been heard.

*So you never talked about doing something together?*

*We never talked about anything but sports, until now it's Allen and Sue and you. Pat liked the rhyme and it got a laugh. Is there something you would like for us to do? This is a new idea for us.*

*There are a lot of things that need to be done, but how about having breakfast with me at the homeless shelter?* This shocked Jerry out of his silence.

*Do you really live at the homeless shelter?*

*No Jerry, but I usually have lunch there during the week and sometimes breakfast on Sundays. They are sort of my Sunday breakfast club, and there are always things that the staff needs help with.*

*You mean like washing dishes?* Pat wasn't sure he liked the direction of this conversation.

*Sometimes yes, but the most important thing that you could do is to talk sports with the people there. I know they would really enjoy that, and you could help serve, clean up or whatever needs to be done. You invited me to breakfast and now I am inviting you.*

*Where are we going?* It was Allen and Sue who just walked in.

*Hi, guys. Brother Nick wants us to eat breakfast with him at the homeless shelter.*

*They serve good food. You would like it, Allen added. Brother Nick is always stretching people. I say let's do it. I had lunch with him there and liked it.*

Sue chimed in, *is this an all male shelter?*

*It's mostly men, but there are women who eat there. You might be surprised by the men's good manners. There is no problem for a woman like you, Sue, having breakfast with them. But maybe you and Allen would want to split up and sit at different tables.* That got the laugh Brother Nick thought it would.

Then it was agreed. Next Sunday breakfast at the shelter.

John had to ask a question.

*I thought maybe you would want us to go to Church with you instead of coming here like we do each Sunday.*

*We will feed the hungry next Sunday. Jesus will be pleased.* Brother Nick was pleased and he thought everyone else was too.

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#### BROTHER NICK

Brother Nick was worried. This was unusual because he had “seen a thing or two” as they say, and he was not easily disturbed. He was yet unaware that the circle-of-life that Allen and Sue were creating had drawn in both sets of parents. The two groups that he could observe (PT and Divorce) were doing well and surely benefiting from Allen and Sue's “circle”. That didn't mean that Allen and Sue were not two speeding trains heading toward each other on the same track. He had a powerful tool—community—and he would use it to put Allen and Sue into a safer and wider world. He also had to see them both separately. He had taken the first, wider community, step with the breakfast club. They would grow community at the shelter next Sunday. This evening he had the PT group with their real cups with improved coffee around the tablecloth-covered table, and there were today's donuts, not the day-old one's he had been saving money on.

*Can we have a little check-in? How was your week? Let's start with Sue.*

Sue hated to go first. Was Brother Nick testing her? Could be, she thought.

*I am getting along well with my parents, but beginning to think of finding a place of my own. It may be my imagination, but my Mom and Dad even seem to enjoy having me around, which is new. And I bought a new pair of shoes, which always makes me feel good. Actually having said about Mom and Dad and shoes, it really does sound pretty good. Thanks for pushing me to talk first.*

Thinking to herself, but if he wanted me to talk about Allen and me, I am not going to do it. Not in front of this bunch.

So it went around the table and back to Allen who was sitting next to Sue – to no one's surprise.

*I got some hours at the Terminal and got a call that the City is going to start interviews for the next firefighter class. I told them to sign me up for an interview. They are sending me papers to fill out. I am getting along well with my parents. Now that I think about it, and heard what Sue said, things with my parents have gotten better, but I didn't buy any new shoes. Allen had a sense of humor, who knew?*

Brother Nick really liked what he was hearing. The train crash possibility was still there in his mind, but the trains had slowed down some. Perhaps the crash would turn into a kiss. He would do what he could to help that to happen.

*I think this group is ready to take the next step. What would you like to do together?*

Dave had been part of the “what should we do together” conversation on Sunday, and he was suspicious of a second dishwashing adventure so he spoke up.

*The weather is great this time of year. Not too hot and not too cold. We could go to a Bear's game together.*

There were a few “great idea, Dave's”, but also some grumbles like “do you know what tickets cost?” Brother Nick let the conversation go for a little while. They may come up with a good idea themselves, which would be better than what he had in mind, but it wasn't happening so he said.

*The friary where I live has nice grounds, but it could use some TLC. Some leaf clean up and raking and sweeping, a little bush trimming. If you come to help me clean up our little place I will set up the grill and we will do hot dogs and burgers.*

Some thought, but didn't say, that Brother Nick may just be looking for some free labor, but the weather was perfect for being outside. The food sounded good, and they wanted to see Brother Nick in an apron. Dave saw an escape from washing dishes at the shelter and asked, *Can we bring family or maybe a friend?*

*Why that's a good idea Dave.* Brother Nick was mentally calculating the number of burgers and hot dogs. *What if you all bring the chips and drinks – no alcohol – and I'll do the grill and have dessert?*

*I have never seen a friary. Could you show us around?* It was Allen.

Turned out none of them had ever seen a friary, and Brother Nick promised a tour. After

Sue checked the weather forecast on her phone, it looked good, the event was planned for Saturday. Brother Nick was greatly pleased with himself and the community that was growing before his eyes to include “doing things together” and now with family and friends thrown in. He still needed to see Allen and Sue one-on-one. Next week would be soon enough. Life was good.

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## BROTHER NICK

Brother Nick was not happy with himself. Earlier in the week he had felt worried, and now today he felt busy. He liked his days and weeks, even seasons to flow. He liked to feel connected, never rushed. But he had done it to himself by overloading this weekend. It was for a good cause, Allen and Sue and the rest, but he didn't like feeling busy. It was Saturday morning and the PTSD clean-up crew was to begin work at 10. He had to get supplies for the grilled lunch, find the tools, bags, gloves, make a mental list of tasks, check around inside to be sure it didn't look cluttered for the tour. Then the Friar Tuck breakfast club was coming to the shelter tomorrow and he need to let the shelter know, and he felt busy and rushed.

He had worked with enough PTDSs to know that it can keep coming back if it is stuffed down. Allen and Sue were candidates for future problems, and he really liked them. Sue in particular, was a concern, which raised its own questions in his mind. He would do what he could to place them in a wide supporting community because he was sure they would need it. Got to get ready for the crew, he was thinking, just when an old Chevy pulled up in the driveway with four people in it. Allen and Sue were in the front with an empty space on the passenger side and two older men in the back that Brother Nick didn't know.

*Brother Nick, this is my father Bud, but everyone calls him Pop, and this is Sue's dad, Bill. We are ready to help; what would you like us to do?*

Brother Nick didn't like “busy” but he was mentally quick and flexible. Part of his building community project was happening before his eyes and he liked it. He would put them to work even though they were an hour early.

*Allen, there is a shed out back. Go and round up some rakes, brooms, clippers and bags. Bud, would you please clean up the back deck and check the grill, and Bill will you go to the store with me to pick out our lunch. Sue, come with me. I am sure the common area could use some straightening up. Pick up the magazines, empty the trash cans for me, please. If anyone says anything tell them I want the place looking nice for company and not to make a mess.*

And off he went with Bill to the store. Brother Nick didn't like busy, but he could do busy when he had to.

Bill had been a Catholic all his life, but he had never gone to the Super Market with a Brother in a brown robe. He was impressed with all the “Hi, Nick’s” and the way Brother Nick would stop and give someone his complete attention even though he knew they were rushing to get back. Bill was impressed, and today he liked being Catholic, which wasn't always the case. On the ride to the friary he had talked to Allen's father Bud about the crazy things you could see on the new wide screen TVs. It was going to be a good day. He was glad Sue had pushed him to come. When they got back there would be more new people to meet.

The whole crew began teaming up, mostly two by two. Sue partnered with Dave's girl friend, Alice, and they began dead heading the last of the marigolds and pulling leaves out of flower beds. Bud and Bill trimmed bushes back from the outside walls and Allen raked with a man from the PTSD group that he liked. They were all making good progress on the friary yard and on becoming friends. Brother Nick even grabbed one of the other Brothers and they set up tables on the deck for lunch. The four other Brothers had been invited to have lunch with the clean up crew and they seldom missed a good meal. Brother Nick liked the way things were going, and he called the crew together for lunch.

*Who would like to say the blessing before we eat?* No one spoke up; Brother Nick waited, but only a short minute. *Sue, would you please bless us and the food?*

For a few seconds Sue did not like Brother Nick, but she recovered nicely. “*Bless us, O Lord*” she began, and her new flower garden friend, Alice, chimed in along with a few others. Later Sue thought, what a great way to find the Catholics in a crowd.

The yard looked good, but Allen had a question. *The yard looks good, but there is a part of the yard that is all grown up and wild looking. Would you like us to come back sometime and clean that up?*

*No Allen, we leave that part of the yard “wild” as you called it, on purpose. St. Francis asked his Brothers to leave part of their garden wild so that's what we continue to do. We call it God's garden.*

The crew and the Brothers were all well fed, and Brother Nick announced he would take those interested on a tour inside. They all wanted to see inside, including Allen and his Pop, who were clearly curious about what Franciscan secrets they may see. A few days ago they didn't even know there was such a place. From the outside they could see a nice old house with a small bronze house number at the end of the driveway with “Friary” in even smaller letters.

*There are five of us who live here. We all do separate work during the day, but we try to pray together in the morning and eat together in the evening. We each have our own room and these are the common areas.*

It all looked like a big family house to Allen and Pop. A little nicer and neater than most, Sue had seen to that part, but a home much like any large family with middle class resources might live in.

*This is our Chapel. This is my favorite place.*

They could all see why this was Brother Nick's favorite place. It was beautiful. The far window looked out on a big fir tree with a simple platform bird feeder between the window and the tree. The room was paneled in a honey colored wood and the two rows of pews were of the same color. There were no decorations except for a cross on one wall and a statue of Mary with a blue cape to the right front. Allen had seen that color before.

*I invite you to take a seat, and place yourselves in the quiet for a few minutes. Come on out whenever you like. I will be right outside.*

Brother Nick was prepared for the question because he loved his spaces. He loved his office with its fish tank and he loved his Chapel. It did not surprise him that others liked them too. So the question was expected.

*Can I, we, come back again and spend time in your Chapel? It was Sue's new Catholic garden friend, Alice.*

*We don't have public prayer here, but there is no reason we couldn't set aside a time for people to use the Chapel for private prayer. I'll put a tablet out and anyone who wants to be on a list to know what times are available can sign up.*

There were a few small cleanups to finish, tools to be put away, and bags of leaves to be hauled back to the compost pile. Finally some sharing of e-mail addresses and phone numbers completed the day. Brother Nick was pleased again. Life was good.

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#### SUNDAY BREAKFAST AT THE SHELTER

Brother Nick had called the staff at the homeless shelter to tell them that he would be bringing a group of seven people for Sunday breakfast. The cook decided that this was a chance to make Sunday breakfast special. He would not use the serving line but instead Brother Nick's bunch would serve a sit down breakfast. It was almost time to begin serving and everyone was there except Sue and Dave, but as the visitor-servers were lining up to begin serving Sue came in the door. It was like someone had hit the "pause" button.

When Sue got out of bed and looked out her window she could see the weather had changed from Saturday's sunny warm to cloudy rainy, almost cold. However, she was still in her Saturday sunny mood, and she dressed for her mood not the weather. She had a bright yellow jacket and she put that on as she was going out the door along with her blue headscarf to keep the weather out of her hair.

So, When Sue walked into the shelter she was like a yellow canary among a room full of brown sparrows. A few thought she may be a mental lapse, an apparition, perhaps mystical or caused by something they should not have put into their body. But everybody, clients and visitors alike, thought, "I hope she sits at my table". Allen almost dropped his two plates full of someone else's breakfast. Brother Nick knew, maybe for the first time, that he needed to be honest with himself about women.

The cook hit the "play" button and serving began, "back to front" the servers were told.

When it was time for the visitor-servers to eat there were no two chairs together so Allen and Sue had to sit at separate tables. When Sue sat down with her plate of scrambled eggs and fried potatoes the others at the table knew she was real enough and began to tell her their stories. Sue soon realized that, real or not real, their stories were as important to them as hers was to her. She would take this, new to her, idea to the PTSD group on Thursday.

Dave was having a rough morning. He didn't want to go to the shelter. He didn't want to be asked to wash dishes. What he wanted to do was to get in his van and head down the road to someplace, anyplace, just not here. But breakfast with his friends drew him like a magnet so he put on his travel patch vest that had been in the back of the closet. It was sort of his security blanky, and he went to the shelter. Serving was about over. The cook spotted him. There was no place to hide.

*Brother Nick is this one of yours?*

*Yes, this is Dave. Hi, Dave, glad you made it.*

*I need someone to slop dishes. Will you do that Dave?*

Dave's worst fears had become realized. "Slop the dishes" sounded like a job made up for the worst of the worst, and he was caught. Maybe this job was something you would threaten someone with to get them to change their lives and fly right. But Dave was in the open, no place to hide, so he said, *Yes*.

*This is the dirty dish station. They will bring their dishes here, you scrape them in the trash can, rinse them in this tub of soapy water and place them in this empty tub. When the tub gets full bring it into the kitchen and someone will put them into the dishwasher.*

Dave took his instructions as if he were being told how to walk to the gallows, and he took his place at the dirty dish station. His first customer asked him a question.

*I see your travel patches. Have you really been to the Black Hills?*

*I have, and to Mt. Rushmore too.*

*I love the sky out there. You can't see the sky in Chicago.*

About then someone else came up, heard the conversation, and added, *I go to Ft. Myers in the winter. Chicago is too cold. Good place Ft. Myers. Good people there to help you out. Ever been to Ft. Myers?*

Soon there was a small knot of people wanting to know all the places Dave had been and hands were reaching out to scrape plates and rinse them. Dave found himself in a community of travelers at the dirty dish station. He would remember his little spontaneous community, as he told his story of sloping dishes to the PTSD group. Brother Nick, always looking for the teachable moment, would add, *Sometimes our worst fears can hide a blessing.*

~~~

ALLEN

*I think this is the last time we need to meet like this, Brother Nick. I don't think I have PTSD any more.*

*Tell me what's going on. I hope you are right, but it is very unusual for PTSD to go away all of a sudden.*

*I feel good. I no longer think that someone is following me. I don't patrol the perimeter of the house before I go to bed. I put my 2x4 club in the trash. I am getting along with the guys at the Terminal. It's gone Brother Nick.*

*Why do you think this has happened?  
It's Sue. I think about her all the time; we are going to get married.  
And what does she have to say about all this?*

*I know you told me to give her time and space, but she doesn't want it. She wants me. I think she needs me, and I want to be there for her.*

*Those are some keen observations, Allen. I think you really care for her, but there was a reason I asked you to give her plenty of time, and not to push.*

*I know she had a rough first marriage. A really rough first marriage. She keeps wanting to tell me stuff and I keep hushing her up. I tell her I don't need to know any more about her or her past. I love her the way she is.*

*I agree with you, Allen. You don't need to know the details of her past, but there may be things she needs to tell you. It can be a great weight lifted to talk about what has happened to us. This is why support groups work so well. We become friends by sharing our stories. So I understand that you don't need Sue to tell you about herself, but she may need to tell you.*

*Brother Nick, I never thought of that. I will try to be a good listener.*

*And you must be prepared to hear some unpleasant things. Your reaction will be critical to your future together. Listen to me carefully, Allen. If you pull away from her for even a second when she tries to tell you about herself, you could cause lasting damage to her and to your relationship. Are you listening Allen?*

*I don't want anything bad to happen to Sue.*

*Then you must let her tell you whatever she wants to tell you whenever she wants to, and you must never give her any reason, even the smallest reason, to doubt that you will always be there for her. Can you do that?*

Brother Nick had a good feeling that Allen was working through his bad memories, but he knew they could come back at difficult times even in Allen's old age. But today he felt that Allen meant what he said, that he was truly feeling better, and making progress. He did not have that same feeling about Sue. Sue had bounced and needed long term support. He would do what he could.

*You talk about getting married. What steps have you taken in that direction?*

*I don't understand steps. We walk into the Justice of the Peace, or whoever, and say the right words and we are married. I would do it tomorrow.*

*Have you thought that this may not be what Sue wants? What she wants may take some time and there could be steps that may not be easy for either of you. This is one place where you must give her the time we have talked about.*

*I agree. I will not push, but if she wants to get married right away I will not say no.*

*I really like your honesty. Sue may suggest you both go to see Father Mike. It would be the Catholic way to begin. This may be the first test of how much you love her. And I would like you to keep coming to the support group. We can suspend our one-on-one time for now at least.*

*Again I agree. You have given me good advice all along. I'll see you Thursday.*

~~~

BROTHER NICK

Being honest with oneself is the real test of an honest person, and Brother Nick was an honest person. Sue had been to his office earlier in the day and explained that she didn't need any more consultation about her PTSD. Brother Nick remained legitimately

concerned, he was sure, about her progress, and told her so, but there was a sadness he felt about her no longer coming to see him that didn't quite fit his usual professional thought process. Then Sue asked him innocently, almost off handily, why he liked to ask her to go first and even to say the blessing at meals. With a wave of his hand he responded, "*Because you are a Catholic*", but her question triggered a fresh look at his honesty with himself.

He liked Sue. In fact he now suspected he liked her to the point that he needed to question his professional judgment about her PTSD. This was real, and new, self-honest territory and he needed to talk to someone about it today, and Father Mike was only a few steps away.

*Do you have some time to talk?  
Sure what's up?*

*I have a client with PTSD and I am not sure I am doing the right things. Actually, it is more than that. She is a beautiful young woman, and if I no longer meet with her I will miss her. This is new for me to feel this way about a woman. It feels unnatural for me and makes me question my judgment about her progress.*

*Give me a little background. That may help us both to think about this.*

*She came to the divorce group and I didn't think she fit there. I was impressed with her interaction with the group and thought she would be strong enough to work with the PTSD group and directed her there. That has been working well, I thought, and she has come in for a few one-on-ones, which also went well. Now she has told me she thinks she is OK, and I feel an uncomfortable sadness that I may not be seeing her again.*

*We are talking about Sue Connolly, aren't we?*

*Yes, she is recently divorced, difficult marriage, and strongly connected with a young man named Allen who has hyper vigilance PTSD. Their relationship has grown very strong, very fast even though I advised them, especially Allen, to slow down.*

*If they didn't have trauma in their background what would you think?  
I would be applauding new love, to myself of course.*

*What indicators do you have that that this relationship may not work? Father Mike did not like asking questions, but he could get to the point quickly if he needed to and he thought he did.*

*Only their backgrounds. I have been trying to build supporting communities for them, without being too obvious about it, and I have been very pleased with everyone's response. That is everyone's response except mine.*

*Has there been anything from her that you thought that she would encourage an unprofessional relationship?*

*Once she gave me a big hug, a really big hug, and told me I had saved her life. What I had actually done was to give her standard advice to have a health check. Now that I think about it that was a powerful experience for me. I don't get full body hugs from beautiful women. Now I don't trust my judgment.*

*I understand that, but I don't share your discomfort with things as they are as you have described to me. What I hear is that a beautiful woman likes you. That's a blessing. That you respond by enjoying her company is natural, not unnatural as you suggested.*

*You wouldn't think so at my age, but being attracted to a woman, there I said it, is new to me.*

*When you and I agreed to a celibate life we didn't have our natural feelings removed by some mystical process.*

*Have you ever been attracted to a woman?*

*Oh yes, several times.*

*And how did you manage?*

*Manage may not be a good word, but I did learn to enjoy those times, and here is the key, Brother Nick, I learned to enjoy them in the context of the rest of my life.*

*Father Mike, all I have ever done is avoid women.*

*As you are discovering, that this is not always possible, and I am suggesting to you that learning to enjoy the company of women can add a healthy reality to our celibate lives. Being attracted to a woman doesn't include jumping into bed with them. That's not who we are. It doesn't fit in the context of our lives.*

*I preach, by doing, expanding one's life by sharing our stories and listening to other people's stories. Making our lives bigger and more real, I call it. Sexual feelings, there I said it, I thought were dangerous, and you are suggesting they can actually make our lives bigger and more real.*

*That is exactly what I am suggesting to you. Your concern about making correct professional judgments is well founded. I believe you will successfully work that out. I don't think you need to avoid Sue Connolly, if fact, I think she has already "made your life bigger" as you like to say.*

*To make professional judgments for both Allen and Sue I think I need to see them together, not one-on-one, and to drop my cautionary language about the speed of their relationship.*

*I like that approach.*

*Oh, I expect you will be seeing one or both sometime soon, Father Mike. There is talk of marriage.*

*Wow, that is fast. Then it will be my turn to slow things down to fit our, sometimes unnecessary, rules.*

*That's your department. You have been a good listener. I will want to talk more about making our lives bigger.*

*Any time.*

~~~

#### ALLEN AND SUE

*I was talking to Dave's girl friend, Alice, and she told me about an apartment in her building that is available. I can afford the rent. If I get it will you move in with me?*

*Allen would really like that, however, he hesitated answering. Then he said, yes, I would move in with you, and I want us to get married as soon as we can. How do we do that?*

*Mom encouraged me to have a Church wedding three years ago and nothing would change her mind. I was a headstrong child and she wanted me to "do it right", as she said, but it didn't work. Now I don't know what to do except I want to be with you.*

*Would you want to have our wedding in Church?*

*That's what I am uncertain about. It's like I don't want to repeat the same mistakes, and getting married in Church was part of that whole mistake.*

*I don't know anything about Church or no Church wedding. My parents were not married in Church and they have been married for more than 30 years.*

*I like your parents, especially your mother. She treats me like I was her daughter. What would she say if we moved in together?*

*She would probably say, "When are you going to get married and what's the hurry?"*

*Sue thought that was probably exactly what her mother would say also. She knew her parents liked Allen; that was different than the first time, when she knew they didn't like who she was marrying. So she said, *the mistake I made the first time was not getting to know his parents and not listening to mine. If I had done those things I wouldn't have gotten married.**

*And then you wouldn't have been in Brother Nick's PTSD group and I wouldn't have fallen in love with you.*

*You are trying to make me feel better about my mistakes aren't you?*

*I am only telling it like it happened.*

*Thanks, that helps, another reason I feel so sure about us. Let's go talk to Brother Nick. It was his idea to put us into the same group.*

*Give Megan a call to set a time and I will go with you.*

~~~

#### ALLEN AND SUE

*When Megan told me you two had asked to come see me I said, "God is great!" like Megan's friends would say, because I had just decided to call you both and ask you to come see me. So come in. Allen, get another chair please. You called me so you start.*

*We have questions about getting married.*

*That's really Father Mike's world, he and the team he has doing marriage prep classes. But I will try to be helpful. What I wanted to talk to you about was that I agree with both of you that there is no need for you to keep coming to see me personally about PTSD, unless of course you want to, or something new comes up.*

Allen and Sue looked at each other and didn't know which one needed to respond first; finally, Sue spoke up.

*I really do feel so much better. I think you helped me a lot and I am so glad you agree that I can put PTSD behind me.*

*Sue, trauma does not just go away, it never does, and it can cause big problems down the road. Both of you, what you experienced is part of your life. What I am trying to say is that I think you two, with a supporting community of family and friends, can live good lives not dominated by your past experiences.*

*It was Allen's turn to say thanks. I understand, I think, that I will always remember, but it won't ruin my life.*

*You want to be a firefighter you told me.*

*That's right, and I may be in the next class.*

*Some day your training and experiences may help you to see something really bad about to happen and that will save your life and maybe other peoples' lives. You will learn to tell that this is a real problem about to happen and to act quickly.*

*I hope you are right.*

*I don't know everything a firefighter has to do but I can imagine that being able to quickly see a situation and act could be life saving. Even in everyday life being able to take quick action can be a real asset. You may misjudge a situation from time to time but I think you are going to be OK.*

*Sue, you must be aware of the problems it could cause you if you bring too much of the past into the present. Let now be now, and today be today. Don't let past mistakes spoil a new day.*

*Repeating mistakes is why we wanted to talk to you about our getting married. I went through marriage prep classes, had a Church wedding and a big reception and it was all a big mistake. It's like repeating all that will be like repeating a big mistake.*

*Sue, one of the things that make you who you are is that you can be spontaneous, even a little impetuous. (Allen looked at the ceiling) Know that about yourself. Focus on what is going right for you and Allen, and I think you will be OK.*

*Allen was beginning to see that Brother Nick was not going to tell them what to do or not to do, and he liked that, but Sue wanted some answers so she said, what if we don't have a big wedding and just moved in together. Would that be so bad?*

*What would your parents think?*

*Brother Nick we are not children any more. Sue was getting defensive.*

*No Sue, you are not children, and your parents should not make your decisions, but you need them in your life and they need you.*

*I never thought about my parents needing me.*

*You will continue to be a big part of your parents' lives. It is not too strong a statement to say that they need you. You two don't want to live in a bubble all by yourself. This is a common mistake, and for each of you it would be a big mistake.*

Allen wanted to know. *Why a big mistake for us in particular? Didn't you make your own decision about becoming a Brother?*

*My mother cried, Allen, when I told her. She wanted grandchildren. But we remain close. I often spend an evening with her; my father is not in the picture. I wanted the community of Brothers, and she understands that now. Building community became my ministry and she is part of it. As far as why a big mistake for you in particular, it will be your family and friends who will give you the support and context you will need when PTSD tries to come back and dominate your lives, and it will.*

*How can we be part of what you call a supporting community and still make our own decisions?* Sue wanted answers.

*Ah, Sue that is the dance of life.*

They got no answers, but they loved Brother Nick.

~~~

ALLEN

To Allen the getting married part of his relationship with Sue didn't seem all that important, but if it was going to happen he wanted it to be the way she wanted it. Right now he felt he wasn't able to help make marriage decisions because he didn't know anything about Church weddings, or even Catholics for that matter. He liked the Catholics he knew, Sue, her parents, Brother Nick, even Father Mike, but he felt useless when Sue wanted to talk about what kind of wedding to have, or none. He needed information and he remembered Father Mike's open door invitation.

*Allen, come on in. I was enjoying some sunshine. It looks like it will be a glorious day. What's on your mind?* Father Mike always remembers names.

*I am not sure where to start. Sue and I want to make some decisions but I don't know how to be helpful.*

*What kind of decisions are we talking about here?*

*It's about our getting married.*

Father Mike leaned back in his chair trying not to think of all the couples and family stress he had experienced around the subject of weddings. Large parishes hired wedding planners, and printed lengthy rules that couples had to follow. Father Mike had not done that - yet. He was more interested in the couple. The required marriage classes were conducted by a team of married couples that he trusted, Megan did the scheduling, but he wanted to know who the couples were, what were they like. He did not like the idea of presiding at a wedding for strangers. He had a few rules of his own, like he wouldn't conduct a wedding for an inebriated man or woman. Now what were Allen's troubling decisions? *What in particular are we talking about Allen?*

*Sue is divorced from a very bad marriage and she had a Church wedding with all the extras. She experienced that all as a big mistake and doesn't want our wedding to feel like a repeat of a mistake.*

*Do you think Sue wants a Church wedding?*

*She is undecided and I don't know enough to be of any help. It's OK with me if we just skip the wedding, for now at least, or get married by a JP. What I want most is for her to be happy.*

*I can explain the Catholic rules, but I see no reason a Church wedding isn't possible, and it need not be, "with all the extras", if that helps. The main thing you both need to know is that it can take some time. It could take several months or even longer before we could even schedule a wedding. Sue would need to come see me to start an annulment process. Have you been married before, and have you considered becoming Catholic?*

*No I have never been married, and do I have to become a Catholic to marry Sue? If so then the answer is yes.*

*No, Allen, you do not need to become a Catholic, and it is good that you were not married before, that makes things easier. But if you are thinking that you may want to become a Catholic we have a class that has just started that will bring new people into the Church next Easter. You are welcome to join this class with no commitment on your part. It would even be a good idea if Sue went along. What do you think?*

*I think you are telling me that this all takes a long time. I'll talk to Sue about it and see what she thinks. Isn't there any other way?*

*Some couples don't wait for a wedding. The Church discourages that and I agree. Getting married needs to be a completely free choice on the part of both people. If you are living together that freedom to say yes or no becomes difficult, especially for the woman.*

*Getting married is a big deal for Catholics isn't it?*

*It really is Allen, but the time goes fast and usually it is well spent for everyone. Have I answered your questions?*

*I think Sue and I need to talk about how all this works. We may need to come back and talk again.*

*Tell Sue I will pray for you both. My door is always open.*

~~~

ALLEN AND SUE

*You went to see Father Mike?*

*Yes, he told me I could come to see him any time, so I did.*

*He tells that to everyone, Allen. What did he say about me?*

*He didn't say anything about you. I told him you were divorced from a bad marriage and he said you would need an annulment for us to get married in the Church. I thought I was doing the right thing by asking questions about Church weddings.*

*I don't like being left out of the conversation.*

*I can see that now, and I wish we had gone together. The important thing I learned is that he thinks we probably can get married in the Church, but that it would take a long time, he said months or longer. I guess that could mean a year or more.*

*My ex used to do things behind my back and I don't like it.*

*I am sorry. I should have asked you to go with me.*

*What else did he say?*

*He wanted to know if I had thought of becoming a Catholic and if I was interested there was a class starting now. He even said that it would be good if we went together.*

*So he thinks I don't know how to be a Catholic?*

*He didn't say that, but we need to lower the temperature of this conversation.*

Allen took her hand and resolved to let things settle down. No one said anything for a couple of minutes, which seemed like hours to Allen. Then Sue began to cry. Allen held her hand tighter but said nothing.

*I did it, didn't I? I did what Brother Nick said not to do.*

Allen thought he may never let go of Sue's hand, and he would leave talk of wedding for another day. He would take a little different path.

*I like the idea of us going to a class about me becoming a Catholic. I like Catholics, especially I like you, and I would like you to go with me.*

*I love you Allen, and I am sorry I got angry.*

*I have no doubts about that. Come with me.*

*OK, let's do it together.*

They had come through their first disagreement. The experience was a confidence builder and they knew it. Life really could be good.

~~~

#### ALLEN AND SUE

When Allen agreed to look at the apartment Sue's friend had told her about, all the questions about Church weddings were set aside. The leasing agent had given Sue the key.

*It's clean, but the kitchen, dining room and living room are all together, and the bedroom is kind of small.*

*I have been living stooped over in the attic so this seems big. There is a nice big shower in the bathroom.*

*So you like it?*

*It's only one floor up, and I saw a bus going down the street so it's on a bus line. I like the big shower. I like it.*

*I have a few things for the kitchen and some sheets and towels. We could get a bed and a few other pieces from Ikea.*

*I know where we can borrow a truck.*

*So you really want to do this?*

*Yes.*

*There is something I need to tell you before we take this step.*

*That's becoming a familiar line, and you already know my answer, but, OK, let's sit down.*

*On the bare floor?*

*Yes.*

*Sue took a deep breath. I have been afraid to tell you because I didn't know what you would think. I had an abortion. I hated my ex and I didn't want his child.*

*Can we still have children?*

*We can have children, but I don't know what it means to you.*

*It means you trust me enough to tell me, that's what it means, nothing more.*

*Sue leaned toward him and whispered, I love you.*

*Allen slid his hands behind her and unhooked her bra.*

*Allen, not here.*

*You said make love to me and I am only following orders.*

*You need to get your hearing fixed. This is a bare floor.*

*So you want to be on top.*

*I didn't say that.*

*That's what it sounded like to me, and today you are the boss, and he pulled her over on top of him.*

In a flash Sue saw a future, a future with a level of control over her life that she had never imagined. The possibilities raced through her mind so that her breath caught.

Allen loved the way Sue could go from shy to bold. In the days ahead they would wonder if this was the time new life happened, and if so how old would the child need to

be before they told him or her the story of their being conceived on the bare floor in a bare apartment. Then again, maybe it was their story to keep.

~~~

ALLEN

Allen was beginning to realize that he had a wife. It wasn't official yet, but yesterday Sue took him to the store, got him some new clothes, even some new shoes, and sent him off to the barber for a fresh haircut. When Allen told her that he had been called in for an interview she had taken charge. Today he looked good; he looked like he had a wife.

He thought the interview went well. Mostly they were interested in what he did in the Army, and they told him where to go to have a physical and pee in a cup for a drug test. They asked for three letters for references, and a copy of his honorable discharge paper. Who to use for references? He would talk it over with his "wife".

*How did it go?*

*I think OK. I was able to answer their questions and they seemed interested. I need three references. Whom do you think I should ask?*

*Someone from the Army maybe?*

*My platoon sergeant and I got along well, that could be one.*

*What about Brother Nick?*

*OK, that's two.*

*Does your Dad, I mean Pop, know someone? You know, someone important?*

*No, my Pop doesn't know any important people. I'll ask the supervisor at the Terminal. He knows I always show up when he calls me.*

*What will you tell them about PTSD?*

*I guess I need to be up front about it. I will bring it up with the Doctor when I get my physical. Brother Nick will write an honest letter, and he thinks I am doing OK.*

*I hope so. I invited Dave and Alice to dinner. They will be our first guests. I asked them to bring their own chairs. Some day we will need to get more dining room chairs, but they didn't seem to mind when I asked them. Their apartment is only one floor up.*

*It's nice to have friends in the same building who don't mind bringing their own chairs. What's for dinner?*

*Pot roast.*

Allen had a wife.

~~~

## ALLEN AND SUE

*Was there really an Adam and Eve?* The question came from the back of the class only because that person had the courage to say it first. The leader of the RCIA Team responded, *we will get to Adam and Eve, but we have two new members, Allen and Sue. Please introduce yourselves to the class.* The class had already met once, and they had been given a reading assignment, *Genesis 1 & 2.*

Allen tells the class, *I want to become a Catholic. Did a tour in the Army. Always lived on the South Side.* Sue added, *I was raised Catholic only had a little Catholic schooling so I came along.* The Team and the class all understood what “came along” meant. Most of them had come along themselves.

Speaking to the two new class members, *We start these classes with a brief walk through of The Bible, and we use it as a reference in the rest of the classes so get yourself one off of the table please. Briefly what we covered in the first class is that The Bible is two collections of writings, the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures, so The Bible is not a book, but a collection of books. There are many writing styles including allegory. The Book of Genesis is allegorical.*

Allen had expected to learn about standing and sitting and kneeling and he was getting a class in literature. Sue remembered her toy ark and animal pairs, and now Noah was an allegory. They were not getting what they expected, and now, maybe, there was no Adam and Eve. Sue thought about her father. He would not like this class. The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults was really different than what she remembered from her 3<sup>rd</sup> grade Catholic School classes. The teacher wanted to hear more from Allen.

*Allen did you have Bible School in another denomination?*

*No, I didn't go to any Church.*

*The reason I asked it that sometimes we have a really good person in our classes from another Church, and they could tell us things about The Bible that we didn't know. Catholics use The Bible, but most of us are not Bible scholars.*

*Catholics read Genesis as allegory, that means not literal, but with very important things for us to know. So we don't read this first book as a newspaper story. The Adam and Eve story teaches us about God's creative work and that we are an intended part of God's creation.*

*Why are there two creation stories? It was the questioner in the back again.*

*If these were literal stories having two different stories wouldn't make any sense would it. However, each story contains its own important message to us, and we can guess that is why the ancient people put these two stories together.*

*We were taught to believe these stories were true, and now you are telling us they aren't true? Sue was getting involved even though she had just "come along".*

*This is our way of introducing you to adult Catholic Bible reading. They are great stories for children, but as adults we learn to read them for their deeper meaning, such as all creation is good and we are part of it.*

The one-hour class went fast, and they got their next reading assignment along with a cartoon pamphlet that showed how *The Bible* was organized. Allen wasn't sure he liked what he was hearing, and Sue didn't like relearning old comfortable stories. What was next? It was like when she learned there was no Santa Clause or Easter Bunny. They would have a lot to talk about between now and the next class.

~~~

ALLEN

*Why are you bringing dumb bells and a gym mat in here? You can't turn our apartment into a gym.*

*I have to get in shape, Sue. My Fire Academy Class starts in six weeks and I am soft and out of shape.*

*You told me that conditioning was part of the Academy program. Don't they have a gym?*

*I can't start their conditioning program out of shape; it would kill me.*

*You look good to me.*

*That's nice, but I know what it's like to be in good shape and I have gained weight. The weights and mat can go behind the couch when I am not using them, and I have to start running. Run with me, it could be fun.*

*I ran with the softball team in high school, but I never thought it was fun. Right now I don't think I could run two blocks.*

*We will both need to get some running shoes. We will start out slow; you set the pace.*

*OK, but if the weather is bad, you run by yourself.*

*The class starts the first of the year. It's not going to be nice weather. I'll ask Pop about the "Y". They probably have a running track.*

Sue had missed her period, but she wasn't sure she was pregnant, and she wasn't sure about running if she was. It was time to get some answers. She wanted to support Allen, and she could tell getting back into good physical condition was important to him even though he looked good to her. She would make an appointment and get answers.

*My mom and dad are working at the Church festival. Let's go see them and have some fun.*

*How about asking Dave and Alice?*

*Good idea, especially since Dave has a van and we won't need to spend money to get there.*

*Did you ever see Dave's van?*

*Yes, it looks like it has more travel stickers than paint. I think Alice is good for him. He isn't always rushing off to some far away place.*

~~~

ALLEN AND SUE

*I'm pregnant and I want to get married.*

*You don't sound happy about this. I thought that this was what we both wanted. Are you sure you are pregnant?*

*I went to the doctor to be sure. I feel sick and I am going to get fat and sag and ugly and this apartment is too small.*

*Can we take this one thing at a time? Let's start with "I love you" and I am happy that we are going to have a baby. I want to invite everyone over, buy a good bottle of wine and celebrate.*

*Where are people going to sit? You and your dumb bells, and you want a big screen TV and where are we going to put a crib and the Doctor says no alcohol. This is not going to work.*

*Can we please sit quietly for a minute? And Allen took Sue's hand and said nothing. It was the best thing he knew to do and it had been helpful once before.*

*I am going to get fat and ugly.*

*You are going to be even more beautiful. I love the way pregnant women look, and I am not looking at other women.*

*I will get all saggy.*

*You will look like a movie star fertility queen.*

*Do you really think so? How can I run with a big belly?*

*Did you ask the doctor about running?*

*She said it was good exercise.*

*I'll get rid of the dumb bells and mat as soon as my Academy classes start. I will be using their gym. I don't need a big screen TV. If we want to watch a game we can go to one of our parents' houses.*

*This apartment is still too small.*

*We will make due until our lease is up then we will find something bigger.*

*Do you really want to celebrate?*

*I do. We need to tell our families and friends. They will be as happy as I am.*

*I am not so sure about my Dad.*

*He will come around. I know he didn't like our moving in together, but he hasn't made a big fuss about it.*

*I want to call my mother.*

*That's a good place to start. Can we leave talking about getting married for later?*

*I want to get married, Allen. I don't like the feeling of being single and pregnant.*

*OK, should we talk to Father Mike?*

*He told you it would take a long time and we don't have a long time.*

*But he said we could get married in the Church. Does it really matter how long it takes?*

*Something could happen, Allen. I don't want to wait a long time.*

*Nothing is going to happen, and I will marry you tomorrow if that's what you want. But I like the idea of having our families and friends with us. Let's go talk to Father Mike, together this time, and then decide what to do about a wedding. Call your mother.*

*OK, I love you.*

~~~

ALLEN AND SUE

*Mom, Allen and I are going to have a baby.*

*Are you sure? Your father is going to find this very difficult. You know how he felt about you two living together, and this will confirm his fears, you pregnant with no husband.*

*Mom, we want this baby and we want to get married.*

*It takes a long time to plan a wedding. People are making reservations a year out, and won't you need an annulment?*

*We are going to have a simple civil wedding.*

*What about the flowers, the photographer, the reception hall, the invitations, the gift register, the dress for heaven's sake?*

*We will not have any of those things.*

*When are you going to have this; is it really a wedding? And where will it be? In two weeks, and we thought McDonald's.*

*Oh, this is crazy. I will never get your father to a wedding at McDonald's. This is impossible.*

*That's where we got to know each other Mom, and that's where our friends get together every Sunday morning.*

*Are you set on this hurry up wedding?* Dorothy knew the answer before she asked it. She knew Sue.

*Yes, I don't like the idea of being single and pregnant any more than Dad does, but we want this baby and we want to be married.*

*Why not a Church wedding?* Sue expected this.

*Mom it didn't work out the last time. We did talk to a priest, and it would take a year before we could even start planning a wedding because my annulment could take that long.*

Dorothy could see the direction of things. *OK, OK, so whom would you invite to this wedding?*

*Only you and Dad and Allen's parents, and 8 or 10 friends. No fancy stuff of any kind.*

*OK, but not McDonald's. How about that little Italian restaurant? They have a party room.*

*I'll talk it over with Allen. We only want it to be simple with families and close friends. I think he would go along with using a party room. We want this baby, Mom. This baby is going to be a blessing for all of us.*

Allen and Sue were back at their apartment after Sue had visited her mother, and Allen his parents.

*How did it go?*

*Dad wasn't there, but I think Mom understands, but she doesn't like our idea of McDonald's. What did your parents say?*

*Mom loves the idea of us being married and her having a new grandchild. Pop thinks I am crazy, but that's nothing new. He thinks that way about everything I have done since I got out of the Army. The McDonald's idea nearly through him into a fit.*

*My Mom suggested a party room instead of McDonald's. What do you think of that?*

*It will be more difficult to keep it simple. Things could get out of hand. Next they will want a cake, flowers, and, you know what I mean.*

*What if we agree to the party room and none of the extras? But that will be hard on my mother. She likes to do things big and celebrate. We could let her do the cake and flowers. It would give her something to do. What do you think?*

*All right. That would also ease things with my Pop. You should have seen him when I said McDonald's!*

There was a knock at the door and Dave and Alice came in and wanted to join the conversation. Dave asked, *are you really going to have a very simple wedding in two weeks?*

*We are, and we are going to find a party room, invite only family and a few friends. That includes you two. We want you there with us.*

Dave looked at Alice and she nodded "Yes". Dave went on,

*We want to get married, and we really like what you are doing. We have been together for over a year, but the cost and all of the hassle of a wedding seemed out of reach. So we want to get married just the way you two are going to do it.*

Sue jumped in. *Get married with us. We can do it together. We have the same friends, mostly, and would your families come?*

*Our families have been pushing us to get married. They would be delighted.*

So it was agreed. There would be two simple weddings with families and a few friends, and they agreed not to forget Brother Nick.

~~~

ALICE

Alice may have given Dave his life back, but she would never acknowledge such a thing. Everyone knew that she was the reason that Dave stopped running away from memories, and really anything that he found distressing.

They knew each other in high school, but only connected much later when they happened to meet in the Super Market produce aisle. She approached their friendship like she would any homeless stray who needed help with life. When he eventually got up the courage to ask her to move in with him she agreed because she didn't want to disappoint him. Perhaps she sensed his new courage toward her as promising, and she could not say no and risk crushing it. Turned out she was right, and Dave stopped running away.

Before they went to see Allen and Sue about wedding plans Alice told Dave, *Sue told me they were going to get married.*

*Who is going to pay for it? I heard that the average wedding costs \$30,000, and we know they have to watch their money.*

*She says they are going to have a very simple wedding. No fancy stuff. No big expenses.*

*When did she say they were going to do this?  
Right away. No more than two or three weeks from now.*

Alice stopped talking. Dave had mentioned getting married “sometime” but she knew that Allen and Sue's plans would give him a new way to think about it. She had opened up the door, but it had to be Dave's idea to walk through it. She was delighted when he said, *Do you think we could do that?*

Taking Dave gently into this new possibility Alice suggested,

*Why don't we talk to them. Maybe they will tell us more about how this is going to work.*

*OK, let's go talk to them. Do you like the idea of a simple wedding?  
Yes I do, and I think our families would too.*

*I can't believe they are going to do without the limo ride, the thousand-dollar dress and all the rest.*

*Let's go talk to them.*

Alice hoped that Allen and Sue would do the work of convincing, and Dave would do the deciding. She was not a conniving woman, but she would help Dave to grow into the man she knew he wanted to be. It was almost incidental that it was also what she wanted. Her little girl fantasy wedding dreams were nothing compared to her new sense of growing together with Dave. But she couldn't help thinking about what she would wear.

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## WEDDINGS

The little sign on the door read “Maximum Capacity 50 People by Order of the Fire Marshal”. Allen was tempted to count heads, but he didn't. He did, however, look to see if the exits were not obstructed.

The party room was full. There would be a cash bar, to save money, but not until after the ceremony. There was a little knot of people around Brother Nick, as usual, led this time by Sue's mother, Dorothy. Someone was tapping on a glass to bring order out of

chaos. It was the distant cousin of Allen's family who had succeeded in getting through Law School only to discover that she would never pay all the bills doing family law. She had gotten a license to conduct weddings to help pay for two kids in college at the same time. She had not doubled her fee for a double wedding. Perhaps she should have taken a minor in business, but she was a happy person and it showed. The tapping worked. One would have thought that the communion host was being elevated.

*Would the couples come to the front of the room, please?*

Sue and Alice had conspired so that both themselves and their future husbands were dressed in similar fashion. They were not the same, but like two couples going out for an up-scale evening together, wanting to look good, but not competing.

*I would like you to stand facing your families and friends, so Allen and Sue here, and Dave and Alice there please,* as she turned her back to the room and faced the couples.

*Do you have the rings?* Nods in the positive.

*There will be two separate ceremonies so that there is no confusion about who is marrying whom.*

There was a small ripple of laughter from the room.

*At the end of the two ceremonies I will ask your families and friends to bless both couples, and to make a firm commitment of support for your future lives together. Allen and Sue we will begin with you. Please speak loudly enough for everyone to hear.*

The ceremonies went smoothly. The woman was a professional, a nice combination of professional and happy. Then she turned and faced the full room of family and friends,

*Dear Family and Friends, Do you promise to support these couples in their commitments to love one another?*

*WE DO.*

*Let us now ask God's blessing upon them.*

*Most loving God,*

*You have touched the hearts of these two couples with your deep and abiding love.*

*We ask you to bless Sue and Allen, and Alice and Dave in their marriages.*

*May they praise you when they are happy, and turn to you in their sorrows.*

*May they know that you are with them in their need.*

*May they be surrounded and embraced by family and friends, and enjoy each other's companionship well into old age.*

*In gratitude we pray. AMEN.*

The congratulations and hugs continued until people were asked to take a place at the tables and the bar was opened. The time for “best man” toast had arrived. Allen and Dave had asked Brother Nick to be their best man. Everyone had at least one memory of a best man toast gone really wrong. Some of their memories were from their own weddings. When Brother Nick stood up with his glass there was a sense of hopeful relief that a religious person would not ramble on or say embarrassing things.

*I feel more like a mother hen than a best man. The room was quiet, people not sure where this was going. My ministry is to hatch and raise people into new friendships and communities, and look what has happened! And he pointed at the couples. Now everyone cheered! Aren't these the four most beautiful young chickens you have ever seen? More cheers!*

*These four young people are my friends for life. You all blessed them, but they will be blessings to you. I suspect you already know that, but I encourage you to allow them to make your lives bigger as you help them through their newly married lives.*

And he raised his glass, and everyone joined him in toasting the new couples. There was a little relief that their hope for a short and great toast had been achieved, and they would remember what the little man in the brown robe had said. Blessings were to be had in both directions.

Only Dave noticed that Brother Nick had said “four young people are my friends” because he didn't think Brother Nick knew Alice. He let it go without comment in the joy of the moment. Maybe Brother Nick was just being his all-inclusive best self. But he would remember later, and wonder if he was missing something important.

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DAVE AND ALICE

*It was a great wedding wasn't it Alice. And it didn't cost us a fortune. I liked the blessing by our family and I liked Brother Nick's toast.*

It wasn't like Dave to talk much about anything, so all this talk about the wedding surprised Alice.

*I didn't know you knew Brother Nick. He talked like you were friends or something.*

There was a hint of accusation in his tone as if he thought Alice was hiding something. This made Alice nervous. Up until now she hadn't experienced a suspicious side to Dave. She found that possibility an unpleasant thought. What should she do? She decided to tell the whole story.

*Do you remember when we spent the day at Brother Nick's home? This is when Sue and I became friends. Later she told me how bad her first marriage was, and how Brother Nick had helped her.*

*You never told me that.*

*It was a personal thing Dave. Women talk, and Sue and I became friends. I told her that for some time I couldn't ride in a car. I was afraid. Sue thought Brother Nick might help me so I went to see him.*

*What do you mean you couldn't ride in a car? You ride in my van just fine, at least I thought so, and why didn't you tell me this?*

*Maybe I should have said something, but it was a personal thing. I was in a car accident; a very bad accident. My friend was killed and I was in the hospital for days. I kept hearing sounds that frightened me, and I couldn't get back into a car. Eventually I began riding in cars again, but I was always afraid. Talking to Brother Nick, and riding in your van has helped. Big cars make me feel safer and not so afraid.*

*Are there a lot of other things you haven't told me?*

Alice didn't like his questioning. Maybe telling the whole story wasn't the best thing to do.

*I don't know Dave. I don't have a lot of secrets if that's what you mean. I don't like being accused of hiding things from you. It was personal, and I didn't think it caused a problem for us. I don't want secrets between us.*

Dave was having a hard time letting go of feeling left out, but he finally said,

*I'm sorry you were in a bad accident. If there are times you don't want to ride in a car, now I will understand.*

That was when they both realized that being married was not going to be easy, but that telling the whole story was probably the best thing to do.

~~~

ALLEN AND SUE

*I have never made love to a married, pregnant woman before. Get use to it, Allen.*

*It was really nice wasn't it, the wedding, I mean.*

*Both, but, yes, the wedding was even nicer than I expected. Your cousin was great and Brother Nick was a big hit. My mother thinks he is the cutest thing.*

*We will have to tell him.*

*We had said no gifts, but we got a few cards with some money. We can use it to buy some baby things, and my mother wants to have a baby shower. If I know her she will see that we get some things she knows we need. We will be OK money wise. For now at least.*

*What about your job?*

*They will give me some time off, but then I am not sure what to do. I don't think we can make it on your junior salary especially if we get a bigger place. My Mom is the only one not working, but I can't ask her to baby sit five days a week.*

*Would they let you work part time?*

*I don't know, but that is one possibility.*

*What about this annulment thing? Are you going to start that?*

*Allen, I am not in a hurry any more. Maybe some day. I'll think about it. Do you want to continue in RCIA?*

*Yes, I do. I like what we are learning and I like the people. Us being married should make it better, not be a problem.*

*They had to know that we were living together, and I don't think we were the only ones, and that seemed to be OK.*

*It will be better when we don't have to sit in the pew any more when everyone else goes to communion.*

*You could go to communion couldn't you?*

*I think so, but I was not going to leave you sitting alone in the pew.*

*I think I married the right woman.*

*I sure hope you did, and I hope we are in the right Church.*

~~~

ALLEN AND SUE

*OK class, let's come together. It is almost four weeks until Easter. This is an important time in your preparation. The next three Sunday Gospel readings are chosen especially for new Christians starting with the story of the Woman at the*

*Well. We will read and discuss this story in class tonight, but first Allen and Sue told me they have an announcement.*

*We were married on Saturday, and we are expecting a baby in June. The class erupted in congratulations, handshakes and hugs.*

*Do you know if it is a boy or a girl?* came from the back.

*Not yet. We should find out on the next doctor visit.*

*Is there anything you need?* We would like to help, another person asked.

It took the facilitator a few minutes to regain some control. Everyone thought Allen and Sue had given them good news. She was happy for them too, but feared a “train wreck” with Church rules. She would need to take Allen and Sue's situation to Father Mike. But now people were happy for Allen and Sue, and so was she, and she had a class to facilitate.

*First some background. Three things that are not obvious from just reading the story: (1) Jews, like Jesus, did not talk to Samaritans. They didn't like each other. It was even unusual for a Jew to be in a Samaritan village. (2) Jewish men did not talk to women in public, ever. (3) Note the time of day when this conversation happened. Now read the story, and we will talk about it.*

A few minutes passed.

Allen had to ask, *you said that this story was especially selected for new people to hear. Can you tell us why?*

*Place yourself in the story. Who would you be?  
The woman, or maybe someone in her village.  
What about this woman seems important to you?*

*She was not a perfect person, yet Jesus told her about himself and she went and told everyone else about him.*

*Thank you Allen. You just taught my whole class for me.*

Then to herself, I am not going to like what Father Mike is going to tell me.

~~~

MARY THE RCIA TEAM LEADER

Allen, Mary's star, has married Sue, who was previously married in the Church and has no annulment of her previous marriage. How can Allen receive his Easter Sacraments

knowing that being married to Sue is against Church rules? And how can Sue be Allen's sponsor when the Church says she cannot receive communion now that she is married without an annulment? If they had a year maybe this could be fixed up, but in four weeks it seems impossible.

*So that's the story, Father Mike. How can Allen go to Confession and then receive the initiation Sacraments, and how can Sue, his sponsor, go to Communion with him. If I tell Allen to go get your marriage regularized and come back next year we will probably never see them again. Also, the whole RCIA Team and the class think Allen and Sue have done the right thing. If I send the newly wed couple away we could lose the others in the class, maybe even my Team.*

*This is my fault. I should have seen this coming. We may have been able to work around them living together, we have done that often enough. Now that they are married, with a child coming, and everyone knows it, you say the class thinks they did the right thing?*

*More than that, Father Mike. They all think it was the best thing to do. They love them for it. They want to know all about the baby and how they can help. Maybe it's not my place, but I really like Allen and Sue, and I too really hope they did the right thing.*

*Mary, would you see if Brother Nick is in. I would like him to be part of this discussion. She checked and he was.*

*Hi guys. How can I help?*

*Tell us about Allen and Sue. We are in a tough situation with bringing Allen into the Church at Easter now that they are married and going to have a child.*

*They are a great couple with good family connections and good friends. They have both come through some difficult times, but they are obviously good for each other. I was at their wedding and gave no thought to how it could complicate things with Allen and RCIA.*

*What do you think would happen if we told Allen to get their marriage regularized and come back next year?*

*I think we would never see them again. Also, it would cause big problems with Sue's family especially, but probably his family too, even though they are not Catholic. They are sure to think that all the bad things they had heard about the Church were true. And, and this is a big "and" for me. My support groups would hear about Allen and Sue being turned away and they would not understand. Now that I have said this much, I wouldn't understand either. Here are two people recovering from traumatic experiences who find love with*

*each other and we are going to turn them away? Is that what you are thinking? That is really a bad idea.*

*My hands are tied Nick. I don't know what else to do.*

*Can't the Cardinal Archbishop give a dispensation or something? Surely there must be something you can do.*

*Right now I don't see any good way out of this. Now that you mentioned our Cardinal, maybe I should also ask the Pope.*

~~~

FATHER MIKE

*Father, I don't know why you called me about this. We have a staff at the Diocese that takes care of marriage issues, and, besides, what needs to be done is clear enough. Why call me?*

*Bishop, it's a pastoral question and not a question of rules.*

*Your Excellency.*

*Sorry. It's difficult remembering formalities when we were in the same class at the Seminary.*

*Perhaps, Father, that is why you are still trying to keep the boiler working and the roof leaks fixed and I am an Auxiliary Bishop.*

*Your Excellency, Brother Nick, and our RCIA Team Leader and I all see multiple problems if we turn this couple away. We cannot always hide behind the rules when we are dealing with real people and their lives, and in this case the good of the Church is also at risk.*

*Father, it looks like you and your staff are responsible for allowing this couple to proceed when you should have foreseen what would happen. And you say Brother Nick actually participated in their civil, and irregular marriage? You need to rein him in.*

*Yes, Your Excellency, we should have foreseen this problem, but we didn't. That is another reason that we should not just read the rules to them now. We bear a heavy part of the responsibility.*

*Father, be careful how you use the word "we". I had no part in this, and I want no part in it now. If things go badly, as you suggest they will, there is not going to be a black mark in my file.*

*Your Excellency, I called you with a pastoral issue because our Cardinal Archbishop's instruction are that Auxiliary Bishops are to become more involved in the parishes. I don't intend to place any pastoral burden onto you.*

*I hope not Father. My advice is to follow the rules. This couple's marriage is irregular because of her lack of an annulment. If they proceed in RCIA that defect must be corrected, if possible. A Church without rules is no Church. It would fall into chaos. I would rather that we did not even have this conversation.*

*Thank you Your Excellency. Our conversation will be kept confidential. We here at the Parish are looking forward to your next visit.*

*Follow the rules Father. You know them well enough.*

Father Mike can't let this go so he takes his problem to the top, the Cardinal's secretary.

*Father Mike, it's nice to see you. We seldom see you here at the Diocese. The Cardinal told me you were coming and that I should squeeze you in between his appointments.*

*It's nice to see you too Mary, as cheerful as always, but you are right, I avoid coming in here as much as I can.*

*His visitor is leaving now. You can go in. Please don't take a long time. His Eminence has a heavy schedule.*

*Mike, it's good to see you. How are things in the South?*

*We would love a visit. It would mean a lot to the people to get noticed from on high.*

*Maybe we could work a visit in. So what brings you into this high place?*

*I have a pastoral issue I want your advice on. If I follow the rules all kind of bad things could happen, and if I don't follow the rules there could be accusations that people are getting preferential treatment.*

*Give me the short version.*

*Brother Nick got to know these two young people as part of his PTSD support group. The young man had nearly gotten blown up by an IED and she was divorced from a violent, abusive marriage. He went out of his way to create an extended supporting community for them and they responded well and everyone likes them. They are on their way to being a healthy couple and an asset to Church and community.*

*Bravo for Brother Nick. What's the problem?*

*Her marriage was in the Church, and she has no annulment. They were civilly married recently and they will have a baby this coming summer.*

*I still don't see the problem, Mike.*

*Allen, the young man, is in our RCIA program scheduled to be baptized at the Easter Vigil. Our Team Leader tells me he is her star candidate. Her Team, and the whole class think highly of this couple. She fears that her whole Team and class will not understand if we turn Allen away because of their irregular marriage. Brother Nick thinks he would lose people from his support groups, and I feel responsible for not seeing this coming.*

*Thank you for bringing this to my attention. If the subject ever comes up I will know the whole story. I don't like surprises. You are the pastor for these people, Mike. You do what you think is best for everyone involved.*

*Thank you for taking the time to hear my story. Come see us when you can fit it in.*

*I will. Send Mary in here on your way out, and blessings on your Parish.*

~~~

ALLEN AND SUE

*I asked the two of you to come and see me because we have an irregular situation that we need to talk about.*

*Are you talking about our marriage or my RCIA preparation?*

*Allen, it is actually both. Because Sue does not have her first marriage declared null, your civil marriage cannot be recognized by the Church. She can apply for annulment and then a marriage can be celebrated in the Church.*

*Sorry for interrupting, but we knew this, and we thought that was OK. Why do we need to go into it again?*

*It is a problem because Sue's annulment could take a year or more and Easter is less than four weeks away.*

*That's crazy Father Mike. Are you saying that I cannot become a Catholic until Sue gets an annulment? We thought we had done everything right. I don't like hidden rules. This is not my kind of Church.*

*I am sorry that it seems that we have hidden things from you. That was completely my fault. Rules work well for ordinary circumstances, but not always, and this is one of those times. I have made some inquiries, and I am going to propose a path forward if you agree.*

*Sue responded, I trust you Father Mike, but you cannot turn Allen away because of me.*

*First, I have an important question for you, Sue. When you married in the Church were you aware that your husband-to-be had a court ordered restraining order that stated that he was to have no contact with an earlier girl friend, and that he had a history of making terroristic threats?*

*God no, Father Mike. I would have never married him if I had known that. How did you find that out?*

*We don't run criminal background checks on people before they are married. Having made a mistake does not mean that a person can't be married, but hiding things, that creates a defect in one's ability to make free and honest choices. You were not able to make a free and honest choice. Today I will put a statement of nullity in the records because your first marriage had serious defects, and I will specify what they were.*

*You can do that?*

*It depends on whom you ask, but I think I have asked the right people.*

*Now there is a second part of my proposal. How do you feel about having another wedding ceremony in the Church?*

*Allen and I had a beautiful wedding. Our families were there. They all gave us their blessing. I don't want another fancy wedding.*

*I agree. Sue has told me that another fancy wedding in Church could bring back bad memories. I don't want to do that.*

*I thought that may be the case. I am pleased that your families blessed your marriage. One last question, are you aware of anything you may have hidden from each other that would have an effect on your or their decision to marry?*

*Sue responded first, No Father Mike I have kept no secrets from Allen.*

*We are not perfect people, but I have not intentionally hidden anything from Sue.*

*Good, then I propose I add the Church's blessing to your families blessing. Tell Megan to find Brother Nick and to come in here. We will need two witnesses.*

Father Mike looked over at his copy of *Amoris Laetitia* sitting on his desk and smiled.

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ALLEN

*How long is this going to take Allen?  
I don't know Pop, maybe 2 hours or more.  
I better go to the bathroom. Where is it?  
I'll show you. It's downstairs.*

While Pop is using the urinal Allen was going down the line of stalls opening all the doors and looking inside.

*What are you doing?*

*I don't know Pop. Sometimes it's just something I have to do.*

*Allen you are not in a war zone any more. You need to get over this.*

*I'll be OK. I feel better every day.*

*Are they really going to dunk you in that pool of water?*

*Baptize, Pop. And yes, that is part of the ceremony of initiation they call it. At the end of the service I will be a Catholic.*

*Never thought I would see the day.*

*There are reserved seats for family, but we had better get back into the Church.*

Pop finds his seat next to Allen's Mom. *Ruth, they are going to dunk Allen in that pool of water.*

*It's OK, that is all part of the ceremony. Then they will pour oil over his head.*

*Really? Never thought I would see this day.*

The Vigil Mass did take more than 2 hours, and Pop was glad he had made the trip to the bathroom. There was a reception in the basement and almost everyone made their way down the stairs to a big display of cookies and punch.

*I see Sue's parents. I want to talk to with her mother. Get yourself some cookies.*

Ruth made her way toward Dorothy. *It was a wonderful service, and Sue just glows. It's like that for some women when they are with child.*

*We think Sue was the prettiest woman in the Church, but then we are her parents. Did you know, it's going to be a girl?*

Allen found Pop at the cookies and gave him a big hug. They had cleaned Allen up and dressed him in new dry clothes so Allen's hug did not make Pop a Catholic.

*Are you happy you did this?*

*Very happy, Pop. These are really nice people. I would like you to meet Father Mike. Come with me.*

*Father Mike, this is Mr. Baxter, my father. Pop, this is Father Mike.*

*Nice to meet you, Mr. Baxter. We think Allen is a great young man, and we are very glad to have him in our Church. What did you think of the service?*

*I thought you were going to read the whole Bible. Do you do that every Sunday?*

*No, only at the Easter Vigil. Catholics wouldn't like a two and a half hour Sunday service. Do you belong to a Church?*

*No, never thought about it.*

*With a son like Allen you must be a very good father. If you ever have any questions about the Catholic Church my door is always open. Come see me sometime.*

Pop never thought he would see the day.

~~~

ALLEN AND SUE

*Put your hand right here.*

*Wow, she has quite a kick!*

*Are you disappointed that we are going to have a little girl?*

*Not as long as I can teach her how to swing a bat and catch a ball.*

*That's my job, Allen.*

*Then I'll take her to the Fire House with me and she can learn to drive a truck.*

There was a long pause in their conversation about "baby girl" and Sue began to cry.

*It's too perfect, Allen. I'm afraid something really bad is going to happen.*

Allen was getting smart about Sue's fears and knew this was not the time to argue against them by listing all the good things that were happening to them so he said,

*Tomorrow is Sunday. Let's go to early Mass and then to McDonald's for breakfast. We haven't done that in a while and it would be nice to see our friends. Then we could stop and see your Mom and Dad. I could watch some TV with your Dad. What do you think?*

*I would like that. Mom had asked me to come by. She wants to have a baby shower and she likes to plan.* So it was agreed.

At Mass the readings included Jesus and the road to Emmaus and they began to talk about that story on their way to breakfast.

*First Jesus appeared to a woman and said, "Go tell the Brothers". Then he walked with a married couple to their home teaching them. We didn't talk about that part in RCIA.*

*How do you know it was a married couple?*

*Well, the man is named, not both of them, and they invited Jesus to stay at their house. It can't be two women, and unlikely to be two men living together.*

*It feels good to think that Jesus walked with a married couple like us. Then they were greeted as they walked in on their breakfast friends.*

*Hey, it's Allen and Sue and baby. Good to see you. Have a seat. Where are you going on a beautiful day like this?* It was Pat, of course.

*We were on our way to Emmaus, but thought we would stop and have breakfast with you.*

~~~

JENNIFER

*Did you call our parents?*

*I did, and they were not happy that I didn't call when you went into labor. I told them that everything went really fast and there didn't seem time for phone calls.*

*What time is it? It must be late.*

*About 2:30 in the morning. I suggested they come after 8. You can get some rest, and have some breakfast before they get here.*

*Turn off that ceiling light. Isn't there another light in here?*

*There is light in the bathroom. I'll turn that on and leave the door half open.*

*We talked about calling her Jennifer is that still OK?*

*I like the name if you don't mind people calling her Jen because they will.*

*God Allen, my mother will call her little Jenny I just know it.*

*How are you feeling?*

*Tired.*

*At 8:01 all four grandparents were at the door to the hospital room.*

*Look at all the hair! Did you ever see such beautiful hair on a baby?*

*Oh, Sue, she is just beautiful. How much does she weigh?*

*Seven pounds twelve ounce, 20 inches. The nurses have been showing her around. You would think they were the proud parents.*

*When do you think they will let you go home?*

*They said probably tomorrow.*

*Tomorrow! Things sure are different today.  
I'll plan to take tomorrow off and help you get settled at home.*

*I would like that, Mom. It would be nice if you could fix supper for Allen. He gets home about 6 o'clock.*

*Beautiful baby. I think we should let Sue get some rest. I would like some breakfast. Allen, you want to come along? Pop finally had something to say.*

*They brought me breakfast here a little while ago. You all go and get something. There is a cafeteria in the hospital if you like.*

*They brought the father breakfast? Things really are different.*

*Let us grandparents have breakfast together. We can talk about how we can help. It was Sue's mom, the planner.*

*Good idea Dorothy, Ruth added. I can make some casseroles that they can have in the fridge, and I'll have time later in the week to check and see if they need anything.*

So the grandparents went to breakfast to plan their supporting role. In the cafeteria they realized that they had not taken any pictures so they had to go back to the room. By the end of the morning "Little Jenny" had her picture all over the internet.

~~~

#### JENNIFER

Dave and Alice have been asked to be godparents for Jennifer. They were all together in the Church basement for baptism class.

*Brother Nick, we didn't expect to see you here.*

*Father Mike likes to do the baptisms, but he delegates meeting with the parents and godparents. We don't have a deacon so it falls to me to run the baptism classes. Actually, I like meeting with families with new children. You lift my spirits. Allen and Sue, you went through the RCIA program so I feel good about your being ready to bring up a child in the faith. So I will only talk a little about baptism and answer any questions. I guess Dave and Alice are going to be godparents. And he stuck out his hand to Dave and gave Alice a hug.*

*We asked Dave and Alice to be godparents for Jennifer and they agreed.*

*Ah, so it's Jennifer is it? I can see already that she will break a lot of hearts. Baptism is the Sacrament that brings a person into full and permanent membership in our Church. Allen, you experienced baptism at the Easter Vigil. What was that like for you?*

*I had, and still have, a new sense of belonging, a sense that I am OK with God and the Church. I feel connected, Brother Nick.*

*You have correctly named the role of parents and godparents. You will promise at Jennifer's baptism to raise her to feel welcome in the Church and OK with God. This is not always an easy task. Godparents must be people prepared and willing to assist. That is why we ask that at least one godparent be an active Catholic who can give witness and encouragement to a child growing in faith.*

Dave and Alice looked at each other suddenly uncertain about how being godparents was going to work.

Dave asks, *Brother Nick I was raised Catholic but I haven't been involved in the Church for several years, and neither has Alice. Does this mean that we cannot be godparents?*

*Dave it's common and I think good that parents want their friends to be godparents, but it is not always the best thing to do. The Church's first interest is in the spiritual welfare of the child to be baptized. That's why we ask the question about how well godparents are connected to the Church. As a minimum we ask for a copy of your baptism and a statement from your parish that you attend Mass.*

*I haven't been going to Mass. What should I do, Brother Nick? Alice and I would really like to be godparents for Jennifer.*

*Start going to Mass, Dave. We have known each other for many months. This is an opportunity for you to take the next step. How do you feel about this, Alice?*

*I love little Jennifer. I will always want the best for her.*

~~~

ALICE

Alice was a very caring person. Most people she knew would say that about her. It was clear to everyone that she had been good for Dave. If Alice had a problem it was that she didn't do a very good job of standing up for herself when she probably should have. Today she was in the inner circle around the baptismal font. There were two more outer circles of families and friends. Jennifer had been baptized "In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit" and everyone leaned in to take pictures. Sue had handed Jennifer to Alice to help get herself and the baby all straightened up.

Father Mike lit a pretty candle and said, "*Receive the light of Christ*" and handed the lit candle to Alice. The light of Christ was for Jennifer, and Alice had Jennifer, everyone knew that, but it was Alice's first baptism. In that lit candle moment Alice knew a lightness of spirit that she didn't expect. Time stopped for her and she said,

*Father Mike, what am I supposed to do?*

Father Mike had seen the movement of the spirit before so he knew Alice was not asking him what to do with the candle. There was no answer to Alice's question in the Book of Rites for Baptism, but Fr. Mike knew the answer.

*Alice you must be your best self for you and for Jennifer.*

*Later. Something happened to me at the baptism, Dave.*

*What do you mean, Alice? I didn't see anything.*

*I felt really close to little Jennifer, and to the other people too. I think I would like to start going to Church. The baptism and the people all seemed so natural to me.*

*You have not been going to Church; what's the push now?*

*It's just something I want to do, and I would like you to go with me. When Brother Nick said he thought this was an opportunity for you to take the next step, didn't he mean for you to start going to Church again?*

*It was a suggestion, Alice. He didn't tell me it was something I had to do. The kid is baptized. What does it matter?*

*We agreed to be good godparents, Dave. What if something bad happens and Jennifer needs us? It's a responsibility.*

*Just because you were in a bad car accident doesn't mean something bad is always going to happen.*

*But it could, and we agreed to be godparents.*

Alice knew that she had pushed Dave pretty hard. It wasn't how she intended things to go, but that was how it turned out. She didn't want to make Dave go to Church with her. That would be bad for both of them, and she knew it. Maybe some day he would tell her why he stopped going, but she wasn't going to ask.

*If I go to Church by myself will that be a problem for you?*

*No.*

*OK, I promise not to push you about it, but what Father Mike said to me seems really important.*

*What was that? I guess I missed it. Now you are having more private conversations like you had with Brother Nick?*

*No, Dave. He said I must be my best self for me and for Jennifer. He said it in front of everyone and that's what I want to do.*

*I hope you don't go off in some crazy new direction. I like you the way you are and I don't want you to change.*

*Father Mike said I must be my best self not someone else, and that is what I want to do.*

~~~

#### ALLEN AND SUE

Sue and Jennifer were sitting in the back row of seats so that if Jennifer got fussy they could slip out. There were some announcements, greetings and thank-you's. Then came the part everyone was waiting for.

*We will award graduation certificates in alphabetical order. When you come up for your certificate please take a place on stage behind me. Allen Baxter.*

Sue couldn't imagine anyone looking better than Allen did at that moment. If she hadn't been married to him she would want to be.

*Latoya Cortez, come forward please.*

There was some foot shuffling as a young black woman walked up, took her certificate, and stood next to Allen. Sue felt her abdominal muscles tighten as her brain said, "don't be silly about this". But she knew she would have to ask Allen about this person.

There was a reception after the ceremony with many introductions, but Sue was not introduced to Ms. Cortez. Sue wanted to go up to her herself but decided against it.

*You look really great, Allen. When will they tell you where you are going to be assigned?*

*They told us, and I don't think we can put off buying a car any longer. Let's talk about that when we get home, and then I'll talk to Pop about it. He knows people who would give us a fair deal on a used car.*

That evening in a quiet house Sue asks the question that has been bothering her all day.

*I was surprised to see a woman get her certificate. How is that going to work, Allen?*

*You're right. There are very few women firefighters so a lot of people wonder how it will work. Latoya is smart and strong. They think she can do the work and so do I. We teamed a couple of times and I would trust her to hold her end up if things ever got tough.*

This was a good answer, but not to Sue's question. She would need to be more direct.

*What I mean Allen, is how is a woman going to fit in an all male fire station?*

This was still not her real question, but it was getting closer.

*There was a lot of talk about that. I think most of the guys are OK with it. A lot of us were Army and we have worked with women. There were some problems in the Army, but maybe fewer problems than in the civilian world.*

*I think it could cause a big problem.*

*You may be right, but why would there be any more problems than men and women working in the same office or the same hospital or wherever.*

*The difference may be that you will be "teamed" as you call it, and in dangerous situations. I could see problems, Allen.*

*Why all this concern about a young black woman. Yes, she a "looker" as they say but?*

Allen was beginning to see some light. Allen may have been a little slow about this, but he was not stupid.

*We probably will not be assigned to the same Station, but even if we are there is nothing, absolutely nothing, for you to worry about.*

*When I saw you standing next to her on the stage I imagined a problem. OK, so maybe I was being a little silly, but I couldn't help the way I felt.*

*I am a happily married man with a daughter who is the light of my life. Why would I risk all that? There is nothing going on except a work-related friendship. Nothing.*

*Some men might be tempted, Allen.*

*I am not "some men" and I never will be. Come sit on my lap and I'll prove it.*

~~~

ALLEN AND SUE

*We need a new car, Pop. Who do you know who can help us get a fair deal?*

*I may not be the best person to ask about cars. You know I drive a car until it dies. My old Chevy could have antique plates. I would give it to you, but it has problems that you don't want.*

*Pop, we need something big enough for a baby seat, and maybe two.*

*Sue, you going to have another baby?*

*No Pop, but we should plan ahead. It could happen.*

Allen wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed that Sue was not pregnant. They really had not talked about child number two until Sue just now brought it up.

*Well then you want a four door. Maybe a station wagon for all the baby stuff.*

*Pop, they don't make station wagons any more.*

*That's what I mean. Why are you talking to me about cars?*

*Because you know people.*

*OK, how much you going to drive this car?*

*A lot. I'll be driving it to work, and we may want to travel some.*

This was the first time Sue had heard "travel". They definitely needed to talk more.

*Then you need something that gets good gas mileage. Maybe a hybrid, which I know nothing about, but they get good mileage. What do you think of a mini van?*

*I don't like the idea of pulling up to the Fire Station in a mini van. They look so domestic.*

*What's wrong with being domestic?*

There was a little edge in Sue's voice, only a little, but it was there. That was when both Allen and Sue realized how a car purchase could bring up issues. Manly verses baby carrier. They had never thought about it before.

Pop sensed a little tension, only a little, but it was there.

*Let's go talk to my friend, Al. He always has to have the latest thing including cars. He buys and sells them like candy.*

They got into Pop's old Chevy and left Jennifer with Allen's mom.

*Al, you remember Allen, and this is Sue, his wife. They need a car. They have a new baby, and Allen will be driving it to work. Allen is a firefighter, just graduated from their Academy, doesn't want to look too "domestic". What's out there that might work for them? Also, they don't have a lot of money.*

*I think you need to have a Fit. Al laughed, but the rest didn't understand the joke.*

*I have a four-year old Fit, a Honda hatch back, that I would sell for a fair price to good friends. It gets good gas mileage, it's fun to drive and it has four doors, and, for Allen, it's a nice manly red. It's around back. It's my third car so it doesn't get driven a lot. I have been wanting to get something different, maybe a Mini. Let's go look at it.*

They followed Al. Sue was thinking "red"? Really? Allen needs a red car to feel manly? A little red "fire truck"? Men.

*Take it for a ride. Keep it for a couple of days. See what you think. Pop and I go way back. I know you aren't going to run off with it. Do you have cash or do you need to go to the bank? The reason I ask is you could talk to the bank while you have the car. They could see the car, get the VIN if they wanted to.*

Allen and Sue looked at each other. The Fit would fit, but they had never taken out a loan before. Now they would be in debt, with car payments. Being married with a new baby was full of surprises. They would need to talk more.

~~~

ALLEN AND SUE

*Allen, what's that you are doing?*

*Shifting gears.*

*You have to shift gears with this car? I don't want this car. I can't shift gears.*

*You can learn. This has everything we talked about and we can trust Pop's friend, Al. Pop and Al go way back.*

*I know, and it's red.*

*I can teach you how to shift.*

*Oh no. I remember what it was like when my Dad taught me how to drive. Your trying to teach me how to shift could lead to an early divorce. What about Pop? Does he know how to drive a car like this?*

*Sure he does, and he would be happy to teach you. I'll ask him.* Pop agrees on the phone and they will drive over to Allen's house on Saturday.

On Saturday Pop asks, *do you have a driver's license, and do you know how to drive?*

*Yes, Pop. I have my license and I know how to drive.*

*This will be easy then. You only need to push in the clutch when you want to shift gears.*

*Why didn't Allen just tell me that?*

*It will take some getting use to and some practice. We will go to a big parking lot and start there.*

On their way to the parking lot to practice Sue found her bold side perhaps because she was going to learn something bold, at least in her mind it was bold.

*You didn't like me when we first met, did you, Pop.*

*I didn't know you, but I did think Allen was making a mistake. I don't think that any more. Allen was lucky to find someone like you.*

*Thanks, Pop. I am not feeling so special right now.*

*Sorry to hear that. A baby brings a lot of changes. Hang in there and things will get better.*

Sue stalled the car so often that they began to laugh about getting whiplash. When they got back to the house they were like conspirators with a private joke. Allen couldn't understand what was so funny.

*Can she drive it now Pop?*

*Oh yes, she drove it back here from the parking lot. Good thing I have an appointment with my Chiropractor this week, but she can drive it OK. Sue, you want to have a beer with me?*

*No, Pop. Not while I am still nursing Jen, but later, sure I would like that.*

Allen was amazed, but very pleased. He never expected bonding. He had half expected that they would come back unable to speak to each other, but now they were laughing like kids.

*We need to be getting home. Thanks for the lesson. I'll let Allen drive home.*

*Don't want to send another man to the doctor's today. You and Ruth come over soon and I'll make a nice dinner for you both.*

Allen remembered on their way home why he loved this woman. There would always be surprises. Life was good.

~~~

ALLEN AND SUE

Sue was standing at the sink, and Allen came up behind her, reached around and took a breast in each hand.

*Not now, Allen, I'm fixing dinner.  
I was only checking Jen's dinner.  
Her dinner is just fine. Leave me alone. I don't like my body.*

This was impossible for Allen to believe. He remembered the fascination he experienced the first time he saw Sue. It was the way she walked, the way she climbed the Church stairs, fabulous body he thought. That experience of seeing her for the first time was a permanent memory. Now she doesn't like her body – crazy.

*I love your body.  
Not now, Allen.*

Later the dishes were done and Jen was in bed and the room was quiet. No TV. At first it had been like they were missing something, but they had come to like the quiet. If they ever had a TV it wouldn't be in the living room, always on. Allen decided to try again.

*I love your body.*

*All the bad things I thought would happen have happened. My hair is flat, my boobs are too big, my hips too wide. I have stretch marks on my stomach, my ankles are puffy and my feet hurt.*

*Is it OK if I like you this way?*

*I guess, but I don't know why you would.*

*You haven't had much time to spend on yourself lately. You should go have your hair done nice and buy a new outfit.*

*So you think my hair is ugly and I am getting too fat for my clothes. Why don't you just say so?*

This wasn't what Allen meant at all. Should he shut up? Think Allen.

*Have you ever thought of being a model?*

*What a ridiculous idea.*

*I don't think it's so silly. You are tall enough. You have great legs, and right now you wouldn't need a boob job.*

*What put that idea in your head? Why would I ever want to do such a thing?*

*It isn't any crazier than "I don't like my body". One of the guys told us his wife was going to modeling school, and that she likes it. She doesn't want to be a model, but it is helping her to see herself in a new way he said. So it's not so crazy.*

*I don't want to be a model.*

*Maybe not, but it could be fun for you to learn all the ways to fix yourself up like one.*

Allen had to be careful here. Push too much and Sue could think he doesn't like her the way she is, so he says, *Oh, and I like your feet.*

*My feet are lumpy and my toenails are too small.*

*Would you like a foot rub? Come sit next to me and put your feet up here on my leg.*

Sue's feet were tired and her ankles were puffy and putting her feet up for a foot massage was a wonderful idea. Once again she realized she had married the right man.

*I really like your feet.*

*I really like you Allen.*

*Think about modeling school.*

*I will, but not tonight. Oh, that feels so good.*

~~~

SUE AND ALLEN

*I think we should talk about how many children we want.*

*Why talk about it now? You brought it up when we were buying a car, but I still don't know why.*

*I guess I should say it. I don't want to get pregnant again right away, and two kids seem to be enough. Baby number two, OK, a year or two from now, but not right away, and that is what will happen if we don't talk about it.*

*You want me to sleep on the couch?*

*Don't be silly, Allen. How many children would you like?*

*It's not a big deal for me. Two or ten, I want a happy wife and a happy family. It would be nice to have a little boy, but again it is not a big deal for me. If you don't want another baby right away, that's OK too, and maybe we should talk about that.*

*When I had to take marriage prep classes for my first marriage they talked about family planning by not having sex during certain days of the month. I don't think anyone liked what the class leader said. I am glad you and I didn't have to go to more classes.*

*I don't like the sound of that. How do you know what days?*

*I don't remember the details, but it doesn't always work to keep you from getting pregnant.*

*I can see one good reason why it wouldn't always work. If sex is something you can turn off and on it's not very good sex. I don't like the idea of fussing with condoms. What about pills or IUDs or whatever?*

*I was hoping we wouldn't have to do any of those things. We could change our minds later when we finally say no more kids, but not now when we only want to wait a while. If I learn to count days we could find different ways to have sex on my fertile days.*

*You have been thinking about this haven't you? What do you mean different?*

*Use your imagination, Allen.*

*I can imagine quite a lot, but I never wanted to ask you to do things you may not like. I didn't want you to think I was just using you like a toy.*

*I would always want to be asked.*

*And I would always want you to tell me what you want or like or don't like.*

*Will you do the same, and tell me what you like or what you want?*

*I will, but shouldn't we take new things a little slow, you know try things out.*

*Slow sex? Maybe you have a good idea, Allen. I bought some KY today. Want to try it out?*

*The guys would never believe this if I told them.*

*You better not. Close the window.*

*Close the window?*

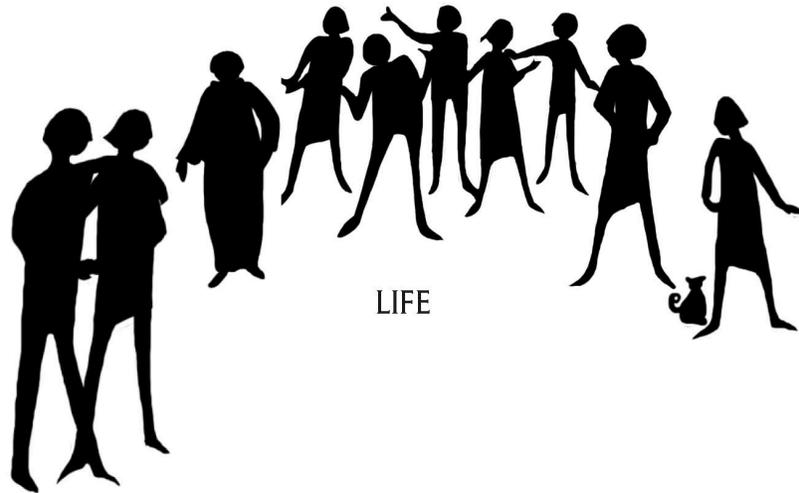
*You might get kind of loud, Allen. You don't want the neighbors to know what we are up to do?*

*Me get loud?*

*Could happen, Allen.*

*I never imagined that not getting pregnant could be like this.*

*Use your imagination, Allen, and close the window.*



*If you do not live what you believe, you will end up believing what you live.*

Archbishop Fulton Sheen

## JENNIFER'S FRIENDS

The arc of our lives begins very early, but it is bumped, pushed and pulled as the years go by. So it has been with all of Jennifer's friends. This child bumps, pushes and pulls in ways large and small. Do not underestimate the power of the butterfly.

Dorothy and Bill and Ruth and Pop have been renewed. It is like they are young again. Allen and Sue and Jennifer light up the lives of their parents, and now grandparents. But that is only the beginning. The "old" people have now become centers of life and energy for others.

Brother Nick continues to create joy and community. The new family he helped start confirms for him the arc of his own life. He will continue his ministry with new vigor.

Father Mike looks out his window and sees in the sunshine what he has long believed, mercy trumps justice. He will continue to be just a "good priest". He will never be a bishop. He experiences his career limitations as a kind of validation. He knows who he is and likes what he sees, both out the window and in himself.

The arcs of Dave's and Alice's lives are diverging. Dave wants a protective shell and Alice wants to bloom. Even their friends can see that all is not well, but they will continue and hope.

Pat will insist on being who Pat is. Pat's parents will struggle to move beyond tolerance to acceptance and finally to embrace their child. This will give Pat a wonderful new freedom that began with a sense of belonging and breakfast with friends.

John will still occasionally go to Church, but he will sit in the last pew and not stand against the back wall. His best friend Fran will continue to offer her hospitality to everyone. They will keep faith with each other, which is much more than either of them had before they met. They opened the long closed window blinds to let in some sun the Sunday Jennifer came to dinner and they have not reclosed them.

Jerry will not go back to being a gambler, and Larry will not go back to using drugs. They will continue to be support for each other in their almost heroic effort to avoid future addictions. Their friendship will grow as they watch Allen and Sue and Dave and Alice, and they wonder if they will ever experience having a partner for life.

The homeless shelter will continue to operate at capacity. People will continue to tell their stories to each other and to new people. Their stories will grow to include the times when a beautiful woman and a little child came to their tables. It was like someone cared, like they were real people too.

~~~

JENNIFER

*Can we take a walk, Grandma?  
Sure, where does your Mom keep the stroller?  
I want to walk with feet, Grandma.  
OK, get your shoes on. Your Mom will be home soon.*

It was a late afternoon in June and the neighbors were out in their yards.

*Hi Jennifer, come see my flowers.*

*Dorothy, bring her over here to see the little green tomatoes.*

It took some time for their little walk because everyone wanted to say Hi to Jennifer, and show her growing things. When they got back to the apartment Grandma Dot asked Jennifer,

*You have a birthday coming soon. We should have a party. Who would you like to invite?*

Jennifer knew about birthday parties; she had been to other children's parties. *I want to invite everyone, Grandma.*

*I am not sure we can invite everyone. Are there special people you would like to invite? Your friends from preschool maybe?*

*And my friends from swimming class and my friends from McDonald's and my shelter friends.*

*My, you have a lot of friends, Jenny. I think your Mom is coming in.*

*Thanks for coming on short notice, Mom. They had a problem at work and they wanted me to take care of it.*

*Jenny and I took a walk, then we were talking about a birthday party and who she would like to invite. She tells me "everyone".*

*That's Jen, Mom.*

*She says she wants her shelter friends to come. What's that all about?*

*Oh, she must mean the homeless shelter. We took her there to show her off and she got passed around like a little princess. That was a while ago but she must remember.*

*Sue, how are you going to invite those people to a birthday party?*

*I don't know Mom, and it's not "those people", Mom. Everyone is Jen's friend.*

*I can see that, but I still don't see how you can have all of Jenny's friends to a party.*

*I'll talk it over with Allen. I am surprised she didn't mention the guys at the Fire Station. Allen likes to take her there. She loves to sit in the trucks and the guys gave her a little toy fire truck. When we talk more I know she will want them included. I'm going to order pizza. Do you want to stay?*

*I need to get home. Let me know how I can help with this party. You can be sure that your Dad and I will be there.*

Later with Jen tucked in for the night, Sue tells Allen about how Jen wants "everyone" to come to her birthday party.

*We can't do that. We need to tell her to invite special people like grandparents and maybe preschool friends.*

*Allen, there are no special or unimportant people to Jen. What if we have a traveling party? Take the whole day. Take the party to her friends?*

*I never heard of that kind of party Sue, but I guess it could work.*

*I think we never heard of that kind of party because the adults plan children's parties instead of the kids. There are no unimportant people to Jen.*

And so it was decided. Jen would have a traveling, "everyone is invited" party, and "everyone" loved it.

~~~

SUE

*I like the lunch buffet here at the hotel. Glad you could get away, Mil. I was so sorry you couldn't come to Jen's birthday party. It was some party; you would have liked it.*

*Did you really take the party on the road?*

*We did. You should have seen the clerk's eyes when we ordered ten dozen chocolate cup cakes with pink icing and 120 chocolate ice cream cups with spoons. That's what Jen wanted, chocolate cake with pink icing and chocolate ice cream. The clerk said "that's going to be some party" and I said, "yes it is".*

*Where all did you go?*

*We started at McDonald's because we knew what time people would be there. They were surprised, especially when they saw the fire truck escort. Yes, we had an escort; it was great, Mil. When the guys at the Station heard what we were going to do they insisted on giving us an escort.*

*Now I am really sorry I wasn't there to see it.*

*That's not the best part. Then we went to the shelter. Everyone came running out when they saw the fire truck; he had the lights on and was blipping the siren. We had to shoo them back in and pass out the cup cakes and ice cream. When they realized it was Jen's birthday they wanted to sing "happy birthday". It was the worst happy birthday song you can imagine, a whole room full of people all off key. Jen loved it. Then we went to the Station and had pizza, Jen's favorite, and a little cake with three candles. Then we went home so Jen could get a little nap. Later in the afternoon we had a party for family and some of Jen's little friends. It was quite a day.*

*You told me Jen wanted to invite everyone, and I think you did it.*

*Now I have a problem, Mil. Well two problems. One of Jen's little friends brought her baby brother to the party and guess what Jen said?*

*I want a little brother, right?*

*You guessed it. Allen and I haven't talked about it yet, but there is a second problem. They want to train me to move up to management.*

*I don't see "problems" Sue. Didn't you tell me a long time ago that you and Allen wanted a second child? And they think you are management material, isn't that good news?*

*The problem Mil is that I don't know how to do both at the same time.*

*This is not the 50's, Sue. Women have children and a career.*

*Maybe so, but I don't know how Allen will see it. He would be happy with another child, I know that, but will he be happy with me having less time for us. It could be a lot less time, Mil.*

*He should like the extra money, don't you think?*

*He has always encouraged me to look good, remember the modeling school? And he has never said anything negative about my working. I know not all the other guys are like that. What if I start making more money than he does? I am not sure what to do, Mil.*

*I think you need to trust him, Sue. If something is not working you can change it.*

*Can't send a baby back.*

*You are right about that.*

~~~

ALLEN AND SUE

*Jen wants a little brother.*

*When do we start?*

*It's not that easy, Allen.*

*OK, I'll be serious, but you know I like the idea.*

*And they want to train me to move into management.*

*When do you start?*

*Stop that. I see problems for us and it worries me.*

*OK, OK, but really Sue, this seems like good news.*

*We are not super people, Allen. Another child and more responsibility could mean less time for us, a lot less time.*

*I'm really OK with another baby and your moving up, but you are right, there would be more work for you and less time for us. So maybe Jen will need to wait for her little brother.*

*I'm not getting any younger. This would be the best time. So we could have number two and then stop. What do you think?*

*I think we should be more relaxed about this. If you want to stop at two OK, but things happen. You can't plan everything.*

*You know how I am. I worry. If we say we stop at two, then it doesn't seem so big. We can do that.*

*Agreed. Your taking on more responsibility at work is not a problem to me either, but it could be difficult for you. I saw guys make sergeant and didn't like it. They couldn't be one of the guys any more. Friendships can suffer. It's not the same.*

*I hadn't thought of that. Thanks for the heads-up about how things could change with my friends at work. What about money, Allen?*

*What about money? We could finally get a little ahead, build up some savings.*

*Yes we could, but I could be making more than you.*

*Oh God! That could be a terrible blow to my manhood, Sue. How could I ever be a lowly firefighter with a successful wife.*

*You keep making fun of my worrying. I wish you would stop doing that.*

*They like me at the Station. How would you feel if I got a promotion?*

*It's not the same.*

*We would celebrate wouldn't we?*

*Yes, but it doesn't seem like the same thing as my getting a promotion. I have seen other couples have problems.*

*You have to trust me about this, Sue.*

*That's what Mil said.*

*You women are something else. You already talked this all over with Mil. What else did she say?*

*Only that she didn't see problems and that I should trust you.*

*I like her. Invite her over for dinner sometime. Does she have a boy friend?*

*Not right now.*

*Too bad. Sounds like she would make someone a good wife, and don't raise your eyebrows at me, Sue. I like the one I have.*

~~~

## BOOTS

The neighbors called him Old Man Schmitz. There was no disrespect involved. That's just who he was. They knew he got Meals On Wheels and that a visiting nurse sometimes stopped to see him, otherwise, he preferred to be left alone so they didn't bother him. On a nice day he might come out on his porch and sit. That was as far as the tube from his oxygen tank would reach.

No one paid much attention to Mr. Schmitz, that is until the day when a neighbor heard him yelling, and when they went to investigate they saw smoke. Someone dialed 911, and another neighbor had the presence of mind to turn off the oxygen. When Allen and his crew got there a few moments later the couch was on fire and so was Mr. Schmitz. It didn't look good for the old man as the EMTs took him away.

Allen went through the house to make sure there was no other fire, nothing left on the stove to start one, and then he came and stood at the front door thinking that smoking and oxygen was a really bad idea. He felt something on his leg and looked down and saw a cat. He picked it up. There were still a couple of neighbors standing around. Not much exciting happens on this street.

*Is this Mr. Schmitz cat?*

*Yes, we think that cat is his only company.*

*Is there a relative or friend who would look after it?*

*No one ever comes to see the old man. We don't think he has any relatives.*

*Would one of you look after the cat?*

No one wanted anything to do with the cat as they drifted away. So Allen tossed the cat up onto the seat of the truck thinking he would take it to an animal shelter at the end of his shift.

*What are you going to do with that old yellow cat?* the man at the wheel asked.

*I couldn't leave it. By the looks of him I don't think the old guy will ever come back to his house and there wasn't anyone who wanted to look after the cat.*

The cat, however, had made up its mind. It stuck to Allen. One of the guys was going to the store to buy some food and Allen asked him to get a bag of cat food. When he put down a bowl of food, that sealed the deal as far as the cat was concerned. The cat adopted Allen.

Allen remembered that Pop had a cat, and having a cat may be nice. Jen could feed it, learn some responsibility, but really, Allen just liked this cat. So when his shift was over the cat went home with him.

*What's that, Allen?*

*It's a cat.*

*I know it's a cat. Why did you let it follow you into the house? Put it back outside.*

It was then that Jennifer came into the room.

*Oh, a kitty! Can I pet it?*

It was like the cat sensed salvation in the little child, and went to Jen like an old lost friend.

*Allen, I don't want a cat.* Sue could see what was happening and didn't like it.

*The old man it was living with almost burned himself up today and there was no one to look after his cat, so I brought it home.*

*Isn't this something we should have talked about?*

*Pop has a cat, and you told me that you once had a cat.*

*Pop has a basement and his cat is not allowed upstairs. We don't have a basement, and I didn't have a dozen things to look after, including Jen, when I had a cat.*

Meanwhile the cat was making its own choices. It had found Allen's favorite chair and curled up on the seat.

*What's his name, Daddy?*

*I don't know.*

*I'll call him Boots. He has four white feet.*

It seemed like Boots had found a home. At least he thought so.

~~~

PAT

Sue called Allen at the Fire Station. *What do you need, Sue? I'm in the middle of something. Can it wait?*

*Alice called me. Pat had surgery last week and is back in the hospital with an infection and pneumonia.*

*Thanks for the call. Do we know how bad it is? Not really, but I thought you would want to know.*

*Can you get away to go see her? No I can't Allen, but don't call Pat "her". Maybe one of us can go this evening. OK, love you, bye.*

Pat had finally made the decision to have "top" surgery, a double mastectomy. There was a small chance for complications, and Pat was unlucky. Pat's long-term prognosis was good, but he was in for some difficult times. After his shift Allen went to see him.

*Hi Pat, how you doing?*

*That's a stupid question Allen, but thanks for coming to see me.*

*We have been friends for a long time. Remember how I almost threw your gym bag into the dumpster thinking it was a bomb?*

*That really was stupid, Allen. Asking me how I was doing says you haven't improved much.*

*You got that right, but what are the doctors telling you? How long are you going to be in here?*

*They have me on IV antibiotics. Could be I'll be here several days. Do you need anything?*

*A Big Mac would be nice, but you don't need to run out and get me one. They gave me a good meal.*

*I'll spread the word. We will see that you get well fed.*

*My parents haven't been in to see me yet. They don't understand why I had to do this.*

*I liked you just the way you were. Maybe they did too.*

*You may be right, Allen. They never pushed me away, but they never understood either. It took me a long time before I could tell them that I was a man in a woman's body.*

Allen didn't want to go on about how he didn't understand either. He knew that Pat was someone who took the initiative, a leader, a strong healthy person. If Pat was a he or a she didn't seem that important, but he knew it was important to Pat.

*I'll stop by tomorrow to make sure they are taking good care of you. Thanks, Allen. I'll be OK. Say hi to Sue and Jen.*

When Allen got home he need to talk about Pat.

*You know it was Pat who invited me into the Friar Tuck Club, and it was they who told me about Brother Nick's PTSD group, and that's how we met. If Pat hadn't taken me in when I needed it, we wouldn't be here talking.*

*How does he look?*

*Sick, but says they are taking good care of him. I still struggle saying "him", but his folks haven't been in and that bothers him.*

*I'll talk to Alice. She knows them. She could encourage them, tell them how important it is to Pat for them to go and see him.*

*Good idea, and have Alice tell them they can take Pat a Big Mac.*

~~~

JENNIFER

*I'm going to see Mr. Schmitz and Pat too. I think I'll take Jen along. I know they would like it, and Jen would learn what hospitals are like.*

*She's a little young Allen, don't you think?*

*She won't see anything really ugly, and they will both enjoy her visit. I know Pat will, and I bet Mr. Schmitz will too.*

*OK, I brought some work home. I can do that while you are gone.*

Mr. Schmitz had been badly burned. Especially his hands and face. His lungs were in bad shape, which is what worried the doctors most. That, and no one ever came to see him. If he was going to get better, he had to want to get better. When Allen and Jen walked in, it was a surprise to everyone.

*Hello Mr. Schmitz. My name is Allen. I was part of the crew that came to your house when you had a fire, and this is my daughter, Jennifer. We came to see you and have a little visit.*

Mr. Schmitz didn't say anything. He only turned his head slightly away.

*Daddy, why are his hands and face all covered up?*

*Remember I told you he was burned in a fire. That helps him get better.*

*I love your kitty. I give him water and food every day.*

*You have my cat? I thought he died in the fire. His voice was terrible.*

*I call him Boots because he has four white feet. I wanted to bring him but Daddy said he wouldn't be allowed.*

*I never gave him a name. He just showed up one day and stayed. What did you say your name was?*

*Jennifer, but Grandma calls me Jenny.*

*Well, Jennifer I can tell you are a really nice person. Thanks for taking care of my cat and giving him a name.*

*Does it hurt?*

*Only a little. They have good doctors here.*

They talked for a little while longer and Jennifer promised to come back. As they were leaving Mr. Schmitz' nurse took Allen aside.

*You were his first visitors. I could tell he really enjoyed it. Please come back.*

*Will he get better?*

*We aren't sure, but you and your little daughter could make a difference for him. He will never recover the full use of his hands. So he will go from here to a nursing home if he makes it.*

*Thanks for being up front about his condition. I know I don't have a right to know. Would you give me your name and number so I can call and ask about him? I promise not to get you into any trouble. I was one of the firefighters that responded when Mr. Schmitz had the fire.*

So it was agreed as long as Mr. Schmitz was only the "old Man", and Allen and Jen went on to see Pat.

*Hi Pat. Why are you in the hospital?*

*I had surgery to remove parts I didn't want.*

*Jennifer didn't see any bandages, but she saw the IV.*

*What's that for?*

*That's to make me feel better.*

*We brought you something that Daddy said would make you feel better, and Jen handed her/him (it didn't make any difference to Jen) a McDonald's bag.*

*Oh, a Big Mac. How nice, Jennifer. That will make me feel better.*

*I have a kitty. I call him Boots.*

*You have a cat. How nice, with a little wink at Allen. Pat suspected that not everyone was happy about a cat in the house.*

*Do you need anything? This was always Allen's question.*

*No. I may go home tomorrow with pills instead of the IV. I am feeling a lot better.*

*Got someone to come and take you home?*

*My Dad said he would come.*

*How is that working, with your parents, I mean?*

*Better. They want me to stay with them for a few days until I can take care of myself.*

*Call me if you need anything. Come on Jennifer, you need to give Boots his lunch.*

~~~

ALLEN AND SUE

*This is my fertile week. Is this the month Jennifer gets her baby brother?*

*I'll take the week off. We can send Jen to your mother's, order pizza delivered.*

*You don't need to take time off. I need to work anyway, but sending Jen to Mom's for an evening and having dinner delivered sounds nice.*

*It's a date. Is tonight too soon?*

*Whenever your next shift ends is soon enough. I also want to talk about buying a house.*

*OK, we'll buy a house. Now lets talk about our date to make a baby.*

*Be serious, Allen. You know how I like to plan and worry.*

*What's to worry about? We have been putting money away since Jen was born. We can get a VA loan so we only need to be able to cover some closing costs and be able to make the payments. We can do this. If you want a house we can have a house. Come sit on my lap.*

*Not now, Allen. I want to talk about a house. If we are going to raise two kids I want our own place with enough rooms, a basement and a yard for the kids to play in.*

*So you want a basement for the cat and a yard for the kids.*

*Boots hasn't been a problem. He won't have to stay in the basement, but a place for a TV, a fun place, that would be very nice.*

*Sue, I don't want a place 20 miles out where we need two cars and we would be far away from everyone else.*

*And I don't want to raise kids in a bad neighborhood. You know, where people don't care about their kids or their houses.*

*The neighborhood where my folks live is changing. Pop is worried about the value of their house going down, and that is really all they have. It's not just Black people, although some White people run and that causes property value problems, but like you said, it's people who don't care about the neighborhood they live in.*

*Allen, you work with all kinds of people and so do I, but Black people move into a neighborhood and property values go down. That's what happens.*

*Maybe, and when money moves in poor people can no longer afford to live there. OK, the neighborhood is as important as the house, but I do not want to move way out. I like the idea of our kids growing up with all kinds of people. That's the world they will work in.*

*I want a safe place, Allen.*

*What about a place near one of our parents?*

*I'll think about it, but there is such a thing as being too close.*

*Pop knows some people we could talk to.*

*Pop knows everybody, that's nice Allen, but I think we should have an independent person to talk to, not one of Pop's buddies.*

*Let's drive some neighborhoods this weekend. We don't need to be in a hurry about this. We have at least nine months starting today.*

*Starting when your next shift ends, Allen.*

~~~

## THE HOUSE

The house had not heard the laughter of children in many years. It stood back from the street with an old maple tree half obscuring the front. The style, and the brown brick, gave away its age, but the windows were modern, showing that someone cared a little.

By the pale colors inside one could see that this was an elderly woman's house. A woman about twenty years older than the house, the original owner perhaps, with her husband and children. She had left the black and white tile in the bathroom with the old

toilet and tub, but there was a newer sink with imitation marble top cabinet. She had cared, a little.

The carpet was worn, but there was hardwood under the carpet. The appliances were dated but usable. Even the drapes were still in place. Only the furniture was missing. One could see the marks where the couch had been and the table. Even without the furniture you could see that this had been someone's home. A forties house that had been upgraded a little, perhaps in the nineties, with insurance money one could guess.

The elderly woman was gone, but it was unmistakably her home. You wanted to meet her, to hear her stories of family, home and neighborhood. The agent said she had died; the house was being sold by her son, and Allen and Sue felt a loss.

The roof and furnace are new within the last ten years, and there is whole house air. The agent droned on, but Allen and Sue had stopped listening. This was a home, not a house, and they had made their decision to buy without saying a word to each other.

They made an offer and were waiting to hear if they had a purchase contract.

*Allen, that's not the best neighborhood.*

*We know Pop, but it is convenient to everything. We have compared prices and it's a bargain, and it's not a flip. Nothing has been covered up. It is like the owner just walked out and left it for us. We really like it.*

*Did you check the utilities?*

*They seemed OK, no big monthly bills.*

*What about a basement?*

*It's unfurnished, but there is room enough for a playroom, a TV room and there is a work bench. We will finish the basement when we have the money.*

*I'll help. It could be a fun project.*

They got the call. Their offer had been accepted. Closing date was estimated in about 60 days. Could they go back in the house to measure windows and take pictures? Yes, but not to do any work. The bank requires an inspection and the owner will provide a warranty. They need to arrange for insurance.

*Mom, I want you to come with me. I want to choose colors and new drapes. After closing we will get the carpet cleaned. We will redo the floors when we have the money.*

*OK, Sue. Are you going to make your own curtains?*

*I don't know. I am just excited to look at it with you.*

*What does little Jenny think?*

*She said, "there are no beds or chairs", but she loves the yard. Allen was telling her how they will plant flowers and some tomatoes.*

*Does she know about baby brother yet?*

*Not yet, and we don't know if it will be a boy or a girl.*

*She will be so excited, Sue.*

*It's all wonderful, Mom. I hope it's not too perfect.*

~~~

## HOME

The closing had gone well. Some quick cleaning and the movers had brought in the heavy things. Father Mike had been asked to come bless the new home, and invitations had been made to family and friends and neighbors. Collectively this was the family's new home, but it needed to become personal for each member of the family. This is "our new home" needed to also become this is "my new home".

Boots visited every closet and looked into every corner. The look of his fur after his visiting behind the furnace told Sue that there were still places that needed cleaning. His cheek marked every corner. When he discovered that the window sills were wide enough to sit on, he was home.

Jennifer discovered that she could open the back door and go out into the yard all by herself. She was going in and out every few minutes enjoying her new freedom. She loved her room. Sue had told her that she could pick the paint color and together they would repaint the walls. Jennifer already knew she wanted pink. It was the little girl in the next yard with the beautiful brown skin that completed her discoveries. They would be friends. Jennifer was home.

Sue worried about the older kitchen range, and the refrigerator made little strange noises, but it was her kitchen. She had never had her very own kitchen before so even though Allen often helped in the kitchen this was her domain. Sue decided where the dishes and pots were to be kept, how to organize the food pantry. This was her place. But it was the front porch that she loved. It needed a swing; Allen had said it was on the top of his to-do list. The AC will be nice on a hot humid night, but the porch, with its promised swing, was where Sue would look out at the world and invite everyone to join her. Sue's home was going to be a welcoming place. She would place a small table and two chairs at the far end she thought. The chairs and the swing, maybe some flowers, would draw people like a welcoming magnet. The feeling was almost overwhelming.

Allen saw something solid. There was a sense of permanence about the brick walls and large trees, just the right distance from the street. He no longer felt the need to

imagine a defensive perimeter, but he couldn't deny that a house that looked substantial and solid made him feel good. He would need to put his personal marks on this house not unlike Boots scent marking every corner. He would put his swing on the porch, his TV room in the basement, plant his flowers and his vegetable garden. He would do these things, and many others, for and with his family, but everything he built or fixed or planted would come ultimately from his own imagination. This was his home and he would put his personal stamp on it. He could hardly wait to get started.

The street was full of cars when Father Mike and Brother Nick drove up so that they ended up parking several houses down the street and walking back. Sue greeted them as they came in the front door.

*Father Mike, Brother Nick, you are just in time for some lunch. The food is on the table and drinks are on the counter. Get something and find a place to sit. Allen is in the back yard.*

*Thank you, Sue. A little lunch would be good. When do you want the house blessing?*

*After you have had something to eat. I think everyone is here who said they were coming.*

Sue's mom spotted Brother Nick. He didn't have a chance. She made sure he had some of each of the best things on the table, found him a chair and got him a Coke. Father Mike got his plate and saw Pop sitting at the end of the couch.

*Mr. Baxter, it's nice to see you again. What a fine day we are having.* Father Mike then stopped and waited for Pop to take the conversation where he, Pop, wanted it to go. Right now Pop was interested in the food, but asked Father Mike if he had seen the basement that Allen was going to fix up.

Sue saved Pop by saying, *Allen, would you ask people to come in, Father Mike is going to bless our house. Father Mike, where do you want to start?*

*We will walk through the whole house. People can follow along. I have the Holy Water and a branch so we can begin.*

*Most Holy one,  
from whom all blessings come,  
we ask for your blessings upon this home.*

*Blessed be this porch where the sway of a swing will lull a child into afternoon naps, and neighbors gather and chat in the cool evening air.  
Blessed be this doorway, a threshold of welcome to all who knock on the door.  
Blessed be the living room filled with laughter during joyful celebrations,  
and quiet times for reading and relaxation.*

(Father Mike led the crowd into the other rooms)

*Blessed be the dining room where bodies are nourished and spirits are lifted at mealtime.*

*Blessed be the kitchen where food is prepared with spices and love combined.*

*Blessed be the bathroom where bodies are refreshed and made clean.*

*Blessed be the bedroom where tired, aching bones give way to sleep,  
and bodies are rejuvenated for waking to a new day.*

*Blessed be this house as a sacred space where you dwell within as family.*

*Amen.*

*Thank you Father Mike. That was a lovely blessing. It was Pop. Who knew!*

~~~

## NEW NEIGHBORS

*What do you think of our new neighbors?*

*I am going to miss old Mrs. Lawrence. We had peace and quiet. Did you see that bunch yesterday. There was no place to park.*

*It was a house blessing. We were invited. We should have gone.*

*There wasn't a black person in the whole bunch.*

*That's because we didn't go.*

*They have a loud kid, and did you see the wife, she has another one on the way. It won't be long before there will be a dozen noisy kids living next to us.*

*Anne will have someone to play with.*

*Next thing they will have a dog that barks all day.*

*They have a cat. I saw it sitting in the window. Really, you should not make snap judgments; we should invite them over.*

*Invite them over if you want, but our quiet neighborhood is gone for good.*

*I'll take her a covered dish, and let her know that all of her neighbors are not grouches like you.*

~~~

JENNIFER AND ANNE

*My name is Jennifer, but my Grandma calls me Jenny.*

*Hi, I'm Anne. Are you going to live here?*

*Yes, I have my own room. Would you like to see my cat? Mom! Can Anne come in and see Boots?*

*Don't yell, and ask Anne to ask her mother if she can come over.*

*Mom! Can I go over to Jennifer's house?*

*Don't yell. Yes, but come straight back home.*

*This is Boots; he has four white feet.*

*Oh, he's big.*

*My Dad says he eats a lot. Want to see my room? Mom says we are going to paint it. I like pink.*

*How old are you, Anne? Jennifer is going to be four in a few weeks.*

*I'm four.*

*Did you have a party? Jennifer remembers her birthday party.*

*We had cake and ice cream.*

*I'm going to have a little brother. He's in Mommy's tummy. He kicks. What to feel it?*

*Mom!*

*Yes, Anne can feel it. Put your hand right here, Anne.*

*Oh, I can feel it.*

*Want to see my room? Mom says its light plumb, but I call it purple. It's my favorite color*

*Mom?*

*Yes, you can go over to Anne's house, but come straight back.*

The back screen door made a loud bang, and Sue thought, "I need to get Allen to fix that".

*Mom this is Jennifer. She is going to be four like me. She is going to have a little brother. I got to feel him kick. When can I have a little brother? I want to show Jennifer my room.*

Anne's mom, Tina, knew that Anne's little brother question could be ignored for the moment, but Anne would surely bring it up again. She knew she needed to be prepared with a good answer.

*Yes, you can show Jennifer your room, but don't make a mess.* Tina knew that was a useless request. Anne would want to show her new friend every toy and every doll. She and Anne would practice "putting things away" later. After about 30 minutes she called into Anne's room. *Tell Jennifer it's time to go home now.*

*Can we play in the back yard?*

*OK, but don't make a lot of noise.* Again she wondered why mothers kept saying useless things.

*My Daddy is a firefighter. He drives a big red truck with lights and sirens. I get to sit in it sometimes.*

*My Dad works in a bank. He counts money. It's really big with lots of people.*

In the years ahead they would remember when they first met. Jennifer will remember Anne's "purple" room and Anne would remember feeling Jennifer's little brother, but right now they were being called in to wash up for dinner. The screen door made a loud bang, but this time Sue thought, "this is what home sounds like" and she may just leave it like that.

~~~

ALLEN AND SUE

*My doctor says I have preeclampsia.*

*What is that? I never heard of it.*

*She wants to deliver the baby as soon as possible. I listened carefully, and I said I want to wait.*

*It sounds serious, Sue. Are you sure about waiting?*

*She says that because I am in my seventh month the baby would be premature but OK. But, the longer I wait the better for the baby. There is a risk that things could go bad quickly, but I want to wait.*

*Do you mean go bad for the baby?*

*She said both of us.*

*I don't like the sound of that. Waiting puts you at risk?*

*She wants me to come in every week instead of once a month, and she wants me to get a blood pressure cuff and use it every day. And if I get pain or bleeding or a sever headache I must go straight to the hospital.*

*Is that what you want to do? I don't like putting you at risk to gain more time for the baby. Didn't you just say that if the baby were delivered now it would be OK?*

*I want us to have a healthy baby. It's what I want to do. Premature babies can have a rough time, and can have lingering problems.*

*I want you to have this baby now.*

*Let's give it another week. I'll watch my symptoms carefully and see what my doctor says in a week.*

*If that's what you want, but I don't like it.*

*It will be all right, Allen. I feel fine and I will be careful.*

*Are you going to work?*

*I need to keep training Linda so she can keep things going when I am on maternity leave. There are still things she is not up to speed on. I will hurry her up in case I need to go early.*

*Your doctor is OK with this?*

*She just said no physical stress. I guess that means no sex. We will be OK, Allen, and we will have a healthy baby. Put your hand here and feel for yourself.*

*I love you Sue, and I don't want anything to happen to you. Come sit on my lap.*

*I'm too big for that, but I will sit beside you. It will be OK, Allen. I will be very careful.*

*~~~*

TINA AND SUE

*Did your doctor tell you that you could have a seizure, and that it could be fatal?*

*She did, but she agreed to careful monitoring. I take my blood pressure every day and see her once a week.*

*I didn't work in maternity. Mostly I was in ICU, but I know you are taking a chance, a pretty big chance.*

*Tina, I do worry about this. I put on a brave face for Allen, but still, he would like me to have this baby now.*

*How far along are you?*

*Probably a week or two from being 8 months. My biggest worry is having a premature baby who could have life long problems.*

*Preemies have a much better chance of growing into healthy children than they use to.*

*Do you think I am making a mistake by waiting?*

*Anne was two weeks early, and she has been just fine.*

*I think Jenny and Anne are going to be best friends. They have a great time playing together. My next appointment is on Wednesday. I'll make a decision then. I feel lucky to have an RN as a neighbor. How do you manage working with Anne at home?*

*I tried, but it didn't work so I am not going to work until Anne is in school next year. May I see your blood pressure cuff?*

*I bought the best one in the store. I feel fine so I have to make myself remember to use it.*

*Best to take it at the same time every day and keep a record. The doctor will want to see it. Show me how you are using it. -- OK, make sure it is completely up on your upper arm. OK, 140 over 80; that's why your doctor is concerned. How do you manage to work with Jennifer at home?*

*She has preschool and my mother helps. It also helps to have an understanding boss. I'll get some maternity leave with the new baby, but I haven't figured out how to manage work after that.*

*There is a woman who helped me with Anne. I will give you her number, but she isn't cheap. I could help in an emergency.*

*We had better check on those girls. You have already been a big help. I will let you know what my doctor says on Wednesday.*

~~~

SUE

*Tina, it's Sue. I know it's late, but I don't feel well so I took my blood pressure and it's up some. Allen is at the Fire Station tonight and I wanted to talk to someone.*

*What are you feeling, and what is your blood pressure?*

*I'm kind of sick in my stomach and I have a headache. My blood pressure is 160 over 90.*

*You need to deliver the baby now.*

*Allen left me the car. I'll call my doctor and go to the hospital. Can you watch Jennifer?*

*I will come right over to watch Jennifer, but you need to call 911 for an ambulance. Do not drive yourself.*

*Are you sure?*

*Yes, call your doctor's emergency number after you call 911. Get some clothes on and turn on the front porch light and sit by the open door. I'll be right over.*

Tina made sure that the EMTs knew Sue's condition and that they needed to call the hospital and tell them what to expect. "Tell the hospital they need to deliver this baby now!" They didn't seem to mind being told how to do their job. Sue was in the ambulance and gone in a flash.

Strange what you remember coming out of anesthesia. Sue remembered the bumpy ride, the bright lights and faces covered by surgical masks. She didn't remember calling Allen, but there he was. Her head was all fog.

*How did you get here?*

*Our new baby gave everyone an exciting night. How do you feel?*

*How did you get here so fast?*

*You told the EMTs where I was and they called me.*

*Why is my head so foggy?*

*They did a C-Section. The baby is fine, but you are going to be here for a couple of days.*

*It happened so fast, Allen.*

*I have seen the baby. He is beautiful. The nurse said she would bring him to see you when he is all cleaned up and you are fully awake.*

*I want to see him, Allen.*

*In a few minutes. You will have him for the rest of your life.*

~~~

ALLEN AND SUE

*I want to call him William after my father.*

*OK, but.*

*I know. Everyone will call him Bill, and my mother will call him Little Billy. I know, but William is a good name.*

*Your Mom is bringing Jennifer. They will be here after Jen has her breakfast. Tina was a big help.*

*She may have saved us, Allen. It was the middle of the night and I wasn't sure what to do. It is still all a blur for me. Tina's clear thinking made the difference for us. I do remember how fast the ambulance guys were. I flew off the porch and into the hospital.*

*They didn't want another delivery in their ambulance. They told me it happened only a few days ago. I want to tell you before Jen and the grandparents get here. This will be our last baby, Sue.*

*I know. We had agreed on only two, but this was kind of scary. I don't want to do it again.*

*You won't have to. I had a vasectomy.*

*Oh, Allen. Shouldn't we have talked about that?*

*We sort of did a long time ago. When I realized how serious this pregnancy was for you a few weeks ago, I couldn't let it happen again.*

*We should have talked about it.  
Are you OK?*

*Yes. It will not cause a problem for me or for us. It was the right thing to do. I hear an excited little voice. I think Jen and your Mom are here.*

*Is that my little brother? Let me see. Oh, he's so little.*

*That must have been quite a night. Are you OK?*

*Yes, Mom it was, and I am a little sore, but OK. WE aren't going to do that again. This is William.*

*Oh, a Little Billy. Your father will be delighted.*

~~~

ALICE

*Hi Jennifer. Do you remember me? My name is Alice.*

*Mom, Alice is here!*

*Hi Sue. I had to come see that new baby I have heard so much about. I see Jennifer now answers the door for you, mother's little helper.*

*She answers the door and the phone, wants to dress herself, help with the baby. Jen is my helper. The baby is sleeping. How about a cup of coffee? We haven't talked in a while. How is Dave doing?*

*Coffee would be nice. Dave's fine, but there is something I would like to talk about.*

*Good, I'll put the coffee on.*

Jennifer went to the kitchen with her mother to see how to make coffee.

*I heard that your pregnancy was kind of scary. Are you and the baby OK?*

*We are both doing fine. He was a little thing and that worried me, but he is growing like a weed and all his numbers are good. He will be awake soon.*

*I didn't know what preeclampsia was, but it sounded serious.*

*It was serious. I have a wonderful RN for a neighbor. If it wasn't for her things could have gone badly. Two is our limit so there is no need for me to be concerned about it happening again. Tell me about yourself. It has been a while.*

*I have never felt better. Dave doesn't want any children and that's OK with me, although I do think about it sometimes, but what I wanted to talk about was Church. I was really impressed with Father Mike at Jennifer's baptism, and after thinking about it for a while I started going to Church.*

*That's quite a change for you. How does Dave feel about it? I remember he didn't like Church things. Did you go to Church when you were younger? You never talked about it.*

*Dave doesn't like my going to Church, but that's not all he doesn't like. I stopped going to Church when my parents stopped making me go. They would go to Church, and I would have the house to myself. I really liked that. That's when I discovered sex. I would take a long shower, and -*

*We can talk about that later if you want. Little people have big ears. I think the coffee is ready.*

Sue went to get the coffee. Jennifer had to see. She had her own "tea service", but she wanted to see how big people did it.

*Thanks, Sue. What I really want to ask you about is that some people at Church want me to belong to their group and I am not sure it is a good thing. Dave doesn't like them at all.*

*What kind of group are you talking about?*

*They call themselves Charismatic, and they keep asking me to come to their prayer meetings, but Church seems to be all consuming to them. I want to be part of things at Church, but I don't want it to be my whole life. I wanted to know what you thought.*

*I don't know anything about them. It is strange that they would keep asking. What if we call Brother Nick, to hear what he has to say.*

Brother Nick was in Sue's contact list so she only had to scroll down and tap. Jennifer was watching closely.

*Brother Nick, this is Sue Baxter. Do you have a minute?*

*Hi Sue. Nice to hear from you. How are you and that new baby doing?*

*We are both fine. I am going to put you on the speakerphone. Alice is here and we have a question.*

Jennifer's eyes opened wide; she hadn't seen this before.

*Hi Alice. How is Dave doing? I haven't seen him in a while.*

*Dave is fine. What do you know about the group at Church that calls themselves Charismatic?*

*They are sort of Pentecostal Catholics, Alice. If that sounds a little strange to you, it does to me also. I am not part of their group. I have forgotten what they call themselves, but they are under the Church's big umbrella.*

*They have been asking me to join them, and they don't seem to want to take "no" for an answer.*

*My recollection is that they are something rather new. They began 50 or 60 years ago here in the U.S. That's new for us Franciscans. We are 800 years old. But being new is not a bad thing. And it is normal to want to share something we find good for ourselves, but it is not so good to think we are better than other people.*

*Maybe that is what bothers me, Brother Nick. It's like they are telling me that I am not really a Catholic unless I am one of them.*

*I admire enthusiasm for a cause Alice, but our Church has some unfortunate history of thinking we are better than everyone else. Now you definitely are Catholic and part of the Church, even if you don't belong to their group. So I would be cautious about a group that won't take no for an answer, and may think they are better than other Catholics.*

*Thanks Brother Nick, you have been a big help.*

*Come see me, Alice. I am always looking for people who are interested in knowing more about their faith.*

Sue clicked off. Jennifer saw how she did it. Sue noticed and knew what was coming. Jennifer would want her own phone.

*I really like Brother Nick. You should go and talk with him. He has the greatest fish tank. He says watching his fish is better than Prozac. There are some great groups at Church. Allen belongs to a men's club, and I have been invited to come to a women's interfaith group, and I will start going when the baby is old enough to go along. That might be something you may like. Speaking of baby, I think he just woke up. Come meet him.*

So they went to Little Billy's room with Jennifer watching every move.

~~~

ALLEN

The alarm rings and Allen asks, *What's the address? Oh, bad street. I know it. Mostly abandoned houses. Fire probably started by squatters or some kids. Need to come in from the East end. Abandoned cars at the other end. No room to turn in.*

As they roll up to the burning house Allen yells, *put the ladder to that upstairs window!*

*What are you doing, Allen? This house is abandoned. Look at the plywood on the downstairs windows.*

*I saw something in that window. It might have been a face. I'm going up.*

*If you break that window it could flash over.*

It was an old wood frame window. Allen broke the glass pulled out the cross piece and raked the glass on the edges. Smoke billowed out and as the air rushed in along the floor there was a clear space for only a second. Allen saw a small foot and reached in and grabbed it.

*Bring the oxygen! Get an ambulance over here.*

As the EMTs were trying to find a pulse a woman came screaming up the street.

*My child is in there!  
How many?  
Only my little boy.  
We got him.*

*We got a pulse. Get him in the ambulance.*

*Let me through. Oh God, is he going to be all right? Where are you taking him? I have to go with him.*

The guys looked at each other. There was no telling who this woman was. She looked like she was living on the street. Finally they agreed with a look, and they put her in the back with the boy. Allen grabbed the driver.

*Let me know if he makes it, and the man nodded.*

The fire was out, the hoses picked up and they were on their way back to the Station.

*How did you know there was a kid upstairs?*

*I thought I saw a face. It was quick. I wasn't sure but it could have been a face. I had to find out.*

*The kid didn't look good. Too much smoke.*

*My shift is over. If you hear anything about the boy let me know.*

Allen cleaned up and went home. A little later his phone rang. He knew the number.

*Yeah.*

*The kid made it to the emergency room, but they had another call and had to leave. They said you wanted to know.*

*Thanks for calling.*

*What was that, Allen?*

*We got a kid out of a house and I wanted to know if he made it to the hospital. Lots of smoke, didn't look good.*

*You don't usually bring these things home. I always liked that. You didn't want our home to be an extension of the Fire Station, why now?*

*I thought I saw a face Sue, but the smoke and the condition of the kid when I got to him says I couldn't have seen a face, but I did. Anyway, we got him out and he made it to the emergency room. That's what the call was. I told them I wanted to know if he made it.*

*Love you, Allen.*

*That's why I keep coming home. Where's Jen?*

*Next door playing with Anne.*

*They are good neighbors. Living here was a good decision. What's for dinner?*

~~~

JENNIFER

Sue was changing Little Billy's diaper and Jennifer was watching.

*What's that little thing?*

*It's called a penis. All little boys have one.*

*When will he talk?*

*He talks like all babies. He laughs when he is happy and cries when he is hungry.*

*When will he talk like me?*

*Soon enough. When he does, you will think he talks too much.*

*Anne wants a little brother. When can she have a little brother?*

*That's for her mother to decide.*

*What's that thing she wears on her head?*

*My, aren't you full of questions today. It's called a hijab; we usually call it a headscarf. I use to wear one when I went to Church or when the weather was bad. I still have it.*

*Can I see it?*

*Let me put Billy on the bed and I'll get it for you.*

*Oh, it's blue. Can I wear it?*

*Come here, I'll show you how to tie it.*

*Can I wear it to show Anne?*

*Yes, but be careful with it. It's one of my special things.*

Jennifer goes out the back door with a bang, and Sue remembers how Allen loved that blue scarf. It was a gift from her mother. Was it time to give it to Jen? Not yet. Maybe when she gets married. It was the first time Sue had thought of Jennifer growing

up, and she had to sit down. This evening she would tell Allen. When the house was quiet.

*I started thinking today about when Jen will be all grown up, maybe get married. What if she makes the kind of mistake I made?*

*Don't you have something a little more pressing to worry about?*

*I worry, Allen.*

*I know and I love you anyway. But why worry about something years from now which probably won't happen.*

*Jen was full of questions today and we were talking about headscarves. She wondered about Tina's and I showed her the blue one I used to wear. She wanted to put it on and I started to see her all grown up.*

*Isn't it normal for her to be full of questions?*

*It is, and she is so sweet about it. I would love to keep her just like she is.*

*Just enjoy today without worrying about years from now.*

*It was the scarf, Allen. It brought back memories.*

*Do you have it handy?*

*It's right in the bedroom.*

*Put it on.*

Sue went to the bedroom and put it on. She didn't need a mirror even though it was the first time she had worn it in a long time. Then she came back to the living room.

*You were wearing that scarf the first time I saw you, and you are just a beautiful now as you were then, maybe even more beautiful.*

*You really think so? I'm saggy and I have stretch marks.*

*And you have beautiful legs. Turn around, and your rear view is fantastic.*

*Can I worry a little bit?*

*Only if you let me remember all the good things about you and about us.*

*I'll give it to Jen on her wedding day.*

*Would you wear it for me once in a while?*

*Whenever you ask me to.*

*You mean like I just did. OK, you can be sure there will be more times.*

~~~

THE MAN IN THE RED HAT

*Anne is going to the zoo. Can I go too?*

*Did she ask you to go?*

*Yes, and her mother said it was OK. They are going tomorrow. Can I go?*

*If her mother says it's OK. I'll keep your seat home from our car so you can use it.*

Next morning at exactly 10 o'clock Jennifer is dressed and waiting when Anne knocks on the door. Sue calls out to Tina, *it's nice of you to take Jennifer. She has never been to the zoo. What time do you think you will be home?*

*We will have lunch there and we should be home by 2, no later than 3.*

*OK, have fun.*

Sue didn't realize how quiet it was without Jennifer in the house. She even had time to take a nap with Billy. Then Jennifer was home with a bang.

*Well, how was the zoo?*

*The elephants are my favorite. I don't like the snakes. I had a hot dog and ice cream for lunch.*

*It sounds like you had a really good time.*

*We did, except for the man in the red hat. He yelled at us and told us to go home and said "you don't belong here". He wasn't very nice.*

*I see. What did you do?*

*We walked away. Some other people told him to be quiet.*

*I'm glad you just walked away. That was the right thing to do. Go wash your hands and then you can play.*

Sue called Tina.

*Jen told me about the man in the red hat. I am so sorry that happened. Jen said you just walked away.*

*That was all we could do. There were other people who told him to be quiet. It helped to know that not everyone is like that. Where do people expect us to go? I was born here.*

*I'm sorry it happened, but maybe it was time for our children to know that there are ignorant people, and that not everyone is nice. Is Anne OK?*

*She's fine, doesn't understand the man in the red hat, but had a great time seeing all the animals. The elephants were her favorite; mine too.*

*Call me if you need anything, and thanks again for taking Jen to the zoo with you.*

Jennifer came out of the bathroom with clean hands.

*Your Daddy will be home soon. It would be best if you didn't tell him about the man in the red hat.*

*OK, Mom.*

When Allen got home Jennifer met him at the door.

*How was the zoo?*

*It was a lot of fun. The elephants are my favorite. I am not supposed to tell about the man in the red hat.*

*I see, well then maybe you shouldn't say anything.* He looked at Sue.

*Later Allen, but it's OK now.*

In the evening quiet Allen asks Sue, *So, what's this about a red hat?*

*When Tina and the girls were at the zoo a man yelled at them that they don't belong here and they should go home. Tina just took the girls and walked away. Jen remembered he wore a red hat.*

*Tina did the right thing. There has been some violence against Muslims; we hear stories, best to remove yourself if you can.*

*I worry about letting Jen go places with Anne.*

*I don't know how much worse it is going to get, but we can't be part of it, and don't talk about separating Jen from her friend. I don't think we should say anything more about it unless something else happens.*

*OK, but I don't like it at all. Father Mike called today. He asked if we would be on the RCIA Team this year, and he would like us to be a host family for the marriage prep program. What do you think?*

*I know what the RCIA Team means, one evening a week for six months. That's a big commitment, and I can't plan to be available every week. If that's what he wants, I don't see how we could do it.*

*I remember not all the Team was there every week. If we needed to miss some maybe it wouldn't be so bad. We could drop the kids at my mother's or even take them along. I would like to do it.*

*Classes don't start until September, so let's think about it for a few days. What is this host family thing?*

*In marriage prep couples are paired up with a family. We could have them over for dinner and an evening a few times - on our schedule Father Mike says. It sounds easy enough.*

*We are going to teach people how to be married? Why does that sound like a stretch to me? I never thought of ourselves as some kind of model couple.*

*Father Mike knows us, and he must think we would be a good influence for other couples or he wouldn't have asked.*

*Sounds easy enough, especially, if we can do the scheduling, but I don't like the idea of putting on a show. I'm no actor.*

*Well, I don't think we should get into any big arguments when we have company, but I agree, it will be easy if we can be ourselves. Can I tell Father Mike we can do this? I think the next group starts soon the way he talked.*

*Go ahead. Did you say anything about Billy's baptism?*

*I'm getting to that, Allen. One thing at a time. I asked Father Mike if we could do it here and have a party.*

*You sure about this? What did he say?*

*He said he would do that if we wanted; even sounded like he might enjoy it. I want to invite people that may not want to go to the Church. What do you think?*

*You mean like our neighbors?*

*Yes, and some people I work with. The weather is nice this time of year. You could get that grill you have been wanting.*

*You sure know how to get me to agree to things.*

*Maybe that's why Father Mike thinks we are a model couple.*

*Don't get too sure of yourself. Who all do you want to invite?*

*Everybody.*

~~~

ALLEN

Allen couldn't go to the mall without remembering his overreaction to the kid with the big cell phone in his pocket. That event cost him his mall cop job and nearly got him charged with assault. So today he was intentionally minding his own business as he walked through the mall looking in shoe stores for a new pair of running shoes when something didn't look right. At first he dismissed it and tried to refocus on shoes, but his eyes kept coming back to the person a few steps in front of him with a small backpack.

From the back this was a slender person, probably young. Wrong kind of clothes for the weather, and you seldom see backpacks in the mall. The person looked out of place. Allen argued with himself that he was not going to make another hyper-vigilant fool out of himself over an out of place looking, probably young kid. He was about to turn into the next shoe store when he looked again. Two small wires had slipped out from under the backpack's shoulder strap on the left side. Allen stopped thinking, took two quick steps, slipped his Leatherman out of his pocket and clipped the two wires, first one, then the second.

The person had felt the light pressure on his shoulder and turned to face Allen. He was young as Allen suspected. His eyes were blank. Allen had seen this look before, drugs.

*Drop what is in your left hand. Do it now!*

*Allen could see his jaw muscles tighten as he raised his left hand and squeezed. His eyes opened wide and he squeezed again. Nothing happened.*

*I cut the wires. Drop it now!*

The kid dropped to his knees and a stain appeared on the front of his pants. Allen took the switch from his hand and put it out of reach. Then tapped 911.

*I've got a bomber at the mall. Need police and the demo team now. Who am I? I am Allen Baxter. I am a firefighter and I am at the mall; get those people over here now. Yes, I'll stay on. Move it!*

The curious and the stupid began to gather. Allen didn't want a panic, but he wanted them away, far away.

*Get away. Far away. This person is dangerous. The police are on their way. Get away! Now!*

*Baxter where are you?* It was the 911 dispatcher.

*I'm in the east wing of the mall about half way.*

The kid with the backpack hadn't moved, but he had begun to cry.

The police came quicker than Allen expected. Isolate, crowd control, they were good.

*Step away,* one of them told Allen.

*No. Not until your demo team gets here. The backpack is live. Get everyone far away except you and me. I don't want this kid to move. We don't let him move. Understand?*

The demo team was two guys with worried looks who came running up. Allen stayed in charge.

*The backpack is a bomb. It's live. I cut the wires. The switch is over there on the floor. There may be a second switch, maybe a cell phone, can't say for sure. Be careful moving him. Don't let those two wires touch. I'm going to back away.*

*Who are you? How do you know this was a bomb?*

*Army Specialist. Eleven months working with IEDs.*

*Want a job?*

*No, I have a job. Be careful with that backpack, it's live.*

Allen gave the police Sgt. his name and address and phone number, decided he didn't need a pair of shoes and started home. He knew he would get calls and have to answer a lot of questions. He didn't even make it home. His phone rang.

*Baxter we need you to come in and fill out a report today. Now would be best.*

*OK, did they clear that back pack?*

*Yes, can you come in?*

*I'll be there in a few minutes.*

Allen went to the police station and told his story.

*You just walked up behind him and cut the wires?*

*Right, but it happened faster than it took you to say it.*

*What tipped you off to look for wires?*

*Sometimes I see everything. Can't say why that happens.*

*Did you know this kid?*

*Never saw him before. He was prepared to commit suicide, but he wasn't prepared to fail. Could be he is afraid of what might happen to his family. The people who get people to do these things are nasty people.*

*You know the news media will want to talk to you. Be careful what you say.*

*Hadn't thought of that. Don't worry; I don't have any secrets to tell.*

When Allen got home there was a van out front and a TV crew on the porch. Sue was worried, for once with a good cause.

*Mr. Baxter we would like to ask you some questions for tonight's news.*

*I don't have the answers you want. So it will be a waste of your time. I don't know who this person is, why he was going to do what he tried to do, who taught him how to make a bomb, and paid him or his family to do it. I don't have answers to any of your questions. You are talking to the wrong person.*

*Mr. Baxter you said someone may have paid him to do this? Are you sure about that?*

*No, I am not sure, but there were many rumors that bombers were doing it for the money, which would be given to their families, poor families, often desperately poor families. That's really all I have to say. I need to talk to my family, and Allen turned and walked into the house.*

Sue was sitting with Tina in the living room.

*What really happened, Allen?*

*I was in the right place, and did what I was trained to do. Nothing else. Thanks for coming over, Tina. I didn't mean to cause worry at home.*

*If you need anything let us know. We like being your neighbors.*

*Same here. Sue, what's for supper?*

*What if I order pizza. Tina, can you and Anne stay?*

*Sure we like plain cheese.*

~~~

#### POP AT BILLY'S BAPTISM

*You look good on TV, Allen.*

*Thanks Pop. It's not something I ever wanted.*

*I hear they are going to give you some kind of civic award or something.*

*This is Billy's day, Pop. I don't want to talk about me.*

*That's a nice new grill you have. I never had one that nice.*

*Sue encouraged me to get it; said it would help when we had company, get the heat out of the kitchen.*

*Speaking of company. This crowd is like the UN. Did you see that little Black gal? She introduced herself to me, told me she was from Nigeria. What a looker.*

*You're the only one who noticed, Pop. We went to the Academy together, and she has been assigned to my Station. She's good. Everybody likes her. She probably weighs about 110 and her boy friend is about 6-5, 250. They make quiet a pair. Pop, I need to get started on the grill.*

*OK, Allen. I'll mingle. There's Father Mike. I'll go talk to him. Hi, Father Mike what's new?*

*Good to see you, Mr. Baxter. What a great day for a baptism. Sue said she was inviting everybody, and it sure looks like it.*

*I like parties too, but never expected Black people and Muslims at Billy's baptism. I don't know what to say to them. By the way, you can call me Pop; that's what everybody calls me.*

*Well, you just stick out your hand and say, "my name is Pop" and say what's on your mind.*

*You do that all the time don't you?*

*Yes, they teach us that at the Seminary. Come along, I'll show you.*

*Hi, I'm Father Mike, are you friends with Sue and Allen?*

*My name is Tina. We are neighbors. Our daughter Anne, that's her over there, and Jennifer are great friends.*

*I heard a story about a neighbor who made Sue call an ambulance when Billy needed to be born in a hurry. Was that you?*

*I'm a nurse and I knew she had to deliver that baby right away.*

*This is Mr. Baxter, Allen's father. He tells me he likes to be called Pop.*

*Nice to know you Pop, my name is Tina. You have a famous son.*

*Allen is full of surprises. Ever since he came home from the Army it has been one surprise after another. I never expected to talk to a Muslim woman at my grandson's baptism. Do you cover your head like that all the time, or shouldn't I even ask? Father Mike says I should just say what I think, but that seems kind of dangerous.*

*It's OK, Pop. We know we look different. It's called a *hajib*, and there are times in our own home when we don't wear it. It's our custom, and you are right, Father Mike's advice could be dangerous, but I think you are a gentleman. I've never been to a baptism before. How old were you when you were baptized?*

*I have never been baptized, but Father Mike says his door is always open.*

*So, you are a Christian and have never been baptized?*

*Well I guess I am not really a Christian.*

*It seems like we have something in common, Pop.*

Pop heard Allen's call to eat and decided he would try to sit with Tina. Maybe saying what you think was dangerous, but he was beginning to like it.

~~~

## RUTH AND POP

Ruth and Pop are having breakfast. Eggs just the way he likes them.

*That was some party, Ruth. Allen said Sue wanted to invite everybody and it looked like it. Did you see that little Black gal? What a looker.*

*I think everyone noticed, but she seemed to fit right in.*

*I know. Allen says she is really good. They went to the Academy together. Never thought I would see a Black woman at Billy's baptism. And how about that neighbor with the headscarf? Their neighbors are Muslim, Ruth. Never thought I would see the day.*

*It's called a hajib. She's the one who told Sue she had to get to the hospital. Sue could have had a seizure and we might have lost them both.*

*She said the strangest thing to me. She said we had something in common. I believe she meant that she and I were both not Christian. I never thought about it before.*

*How did she get the idea that you were not Christian? Did you say something nasty to her? Really Pop, you should be careful what you say. She seems like a very nice person.*

*I know I can shoot my mouth off, but I didn't. She asked me how old I was when I was baptized, and I said I had never been baptized, that's when she said we have something in common.*

*Well I am glad you were not nasty to her. I like her, and Jenny is good friends with her little girl.*

*It still bothers me Ruth, to have someone say I am not Christian.*

*You are not, really, I guess, but neither am I. We don't belong to a Church, but we don't lie, cheat or steal either. Does it really matter to you that you are not baptized?*

*It never did before, but I tell you Ruth, it felt strange to hear a Muslim woman say it. Makes me wonder, here I am going to my grandson's baptism and she says I'm not Christian, just like her. It made me feel strange, Ruth.*

*How are your eggs?*

*Perfect as usual. No one makes eggs like you do. Do Muslims go to heaven?*

*How do I know? I like that Tina person. Go ask Father Mike. I would like to know myself.*

~~~

ALLEN AND SUE

*You haven't said much about what happened at the Mall.*

*I didn't want to talk about it. It wasn't much different than the many other times.*

*It could have been really bad, and you stopped it. Everyone thinks that you did a great thing. I think you did a great thing.*

*I am glad that some mixed up kid didn't kill himself and other people, but I thought it was over and it isn't.*

*I'm sorry, Allen. I wasn't thinking about what it was like for you. I could tell that you didn't like the attention, the TV and all, but surely that part is over.*

*I think I will never be completely sure if something is real or my imagination. I am not going back to the Mall.*

*You don't ever have to, I suppose, but the kids and I could go with you.*

*I want to be able to come home and forget. I don't need you to tag along. How is Billy doing?*

*He still has some diarrhea and a cough, but no fever. I think the worst is over. Kids bounce back.*

*You were worried yesterday that you may need to take him to the doctor. I hadn't seen your worry face for a while, but I saw it yesterday.*

*Billy is OK, Allen. It was just a little upset. I didn't mean to worry you; that's my job.*

*You used to worry everything to death.*

*I know; everything always seemed too perfect. I was always afraid something bad would happen.*

*Maybe we both should stay away from the Mall.*

*We are a pair aren't, we?*

*Brother Nick would be pleased. He was concerned that we were going too fast. He asked me to give you time and space.*

*I never knew that. I saw what I wanted and it was you. Why wait. Now we have two kids and a house.*

*Maybe it's time for you to stop worrying so much.*

*I'm working on it. Let's all go to the Mall. Billy needs his first shoes.*

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#### HOSPITAL

Sue's father, Bill, has been diagnosed with prostate cancer and it may have spread. He is in the hospital with surgery scheduled for later in the day. There is a parade of family and friends past his bed to wish him well. Father Mike is making his hospital rounds. He gathers the visitors around Bill and blesses him with the Sacrament of the Sick. Allen's father Pop followed Father Mike out into the hallway.

*Hi Pop, nice to see you. How is Ruth?*

*She has a cold, didn't want to bring her germs to the hospital. Bill and I have become friends and I wanted to wish him well. Do you have some time?*

*There is another person I need to visit then I could use some lunch. Can you meet me in the cafeteria in about 20 minutes?*

*I could use some lunch myself. How's the food?*

*Avoid the premade sandwiches and you will be OK. See you in a few minutes.*

Father Mike met Pop at a table by the windows. Father Mike likes windows.

*What were you doing for Bill?*

*Pretty much the same thing you were doing Pop, wishing him well. We Catholics call it the Sacrament of the Sick. It's a prayer of the whole Church to ask God to help him get well.*

*I'm not Catholic. I guess I am not even Christian. Could you pray for me like that if I got sick?*

*Yes, I can pray for you Pop, in fact I have.*

*You did? When did you do that?*

*When we first met. I asked God to walk with you. It was a short prayer. It's what I do.*

*I'll be damned. I didn't know you were praying for me. Sorry about the language.*

*I hear worse, don't worry about it. Anyone can pray, ask for something, be thankful for something, or like you did today wish Bill well. A wish can be a prayer even though you may not call it that.*

*Do Muslims go to heaven?*

*You've been thinking, Pop. Short answer, yes. They may even pray for you.*

*I'll be damned.*

Early on the day after Bill's prostate surgery Sue and Jennifer come to visit.

*Mom, how are you holding up?*

*Your dad told me to go home, but I wanted to be here. This recliner is comfortable and I got some sleep.*

*Why don't you take Jennifer home with you and I'll stay a while.*

*Why don't the two of you go on home? I am doing fine. The nurses are in and out of here all the time.*

*We thought you were sleeping. How are you feeling?*

*Probably better than your mother. Make her go home and get some sleep.*

*I have a new doll, Grandpa. Want to see? And we brought you some flowers. Mommy says Billy is going to be a problem when he learns to walk.*

*My aren't you chatty this morning. Let me see your new doll.*

Sue sees some movement on the edge of her vision. It's Father Mike.

*Good morning Father Mike. How do you do that? I mean how do you move around without making any sound? I have wondered about that for a long time.*

*First, how are you doing this morning, Bill? The nurse gave me a smile. That usually means good things.*

*They told me it's Stage 2, and I'll need to get some treatment. It could have been worse I guess. I'll probably go home in a day or two.*

*Being able to go home is a good sign.  
Sue, I wear soft sole shoes. These are Hush Puppies.  
It's one small way I use to be non-intrusive. I don't try to sneak up on people,  
but it may seem like that sometimes.*

*Father Mike, I never thought you were trying to sneak up on anyone.*

*I invite. I don't push and I don't argue, but it's not just for me, Sue. It's my way  
of trying to give good example.*

*Well it works. I'll try to be more like that. Tell my mother to go home.*

*Let's start over, Sue. Dorothy, would you like to have some breakfast with me?  
Sue and Jennifer can keep Bill company for awhile.*

*I would Father Mike. Then maybe I'll feel like going home and taking a nap.  
You keep an eye on Grandpa for me, Jenny.*

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#### ALLEN AND SUE

The evening after Sue and Jennifer visit Bill in the hospital Sue says to Allen, *I want us  
to grow old together.*

*Of course we will. That's a long way off, but it's a nice thought. Why bring it up  
now?*

*My father looked like an old man when I saw him in the hospital. It was the  
first time I ever saw him like that.*

*People don't look their best in the hospital, Sue. Your father has years left.*

*I guess we are lucky that our parents are still together.*

*I agree. We have great parents, and there is no reason we won't grow old  
together, but I'm not in any hurry about it. I have always thought we were  
permanently stuck together, but this still seems like a strange conversation.*

*It's not strange, Allen. Couples are divorcing all around us. It happened to me.  
I don't want it to happen to us.*

*Are you worried about something I am doing? If so, I'll stop doing it.*

*You are a good husband, Allen. I don't want you to do anything different. I just want us to grow old together.*

*What did you think of that couple we had over for dinner last week as part of their marriage prep? I like the idea of being a host couple, but it was hard getting them to leave. The woman was a real talker.*

*I thought she was a nervous talker. She really did go on and on, but he didn't seem to mind. He hardly said a word, but maybe that works for them. A quiet man can be comfortable with a woman who likes to talk. It takes the burden off of him to think of something to say.*

*Maybe so, but if she doesn't draw him out he may come to resent her, may even feel dominated. It's not a good way to start out.*

*They are young, Sue. There are a lot of things to worry about when you are planning a wedding. He may be happy to be in the background. I was happy to follow your lead on a lot of things.*

*Did you feel I was pushing you around? You never said so. If you ever feel that way speak up.*

*I am speaking up. There are times when I like you to take the lead. I always have. Your taking the lead or even doing all the talking has never bothered me. We will grow old together.*

*I love you, Allen. I'll make a pot roast for dinner tomorrow.*

~~~

ALLEN AND SUE

*Who are we Allen?*

*It's a little early in the day for you to be drinking, Sue.*

*I've been thinking of Jennifer and Billy. They need to know who they are.*

*We could buy them bracelets with their names, addresses and phone numbers.*

*Don't be silly, Allen. I want them to grow up knowing who they are.*

*You mean like American?*

*Yes, only being American isn't enough. There are all kinds of Americans.*

*Well, I'm mostly German and you are mostly Irish. So they could be mostly German and Irish Americans.*

*Sit down with me, Allen. We are not making any progress. I worry about them growing up without being able to know, to say, who they are.*

*OK Sue, it is important that they know what kind of person they are, what is important to them and what isn't, I understand that. I think we have been doing a pretty good job of that.*

*I agree, but some of that is just Jennifer. She likes everybody.*

*You are right about that. Jennifer is a little Brother Nick. I think it helped that we followed his example and did things like take her to the homeless shelter and bought a house in a mixed neighborhood.*

*We need to do the same kinds of things with Billy, but that's not enough, Allen. I think one of the reasons I made mistakes as a young person is that I didn't know who I was. I don't want that to happen to them. Kids want to fit in, be part of the crowd, but they also need to be their own person. That is what I want us to talk about.*

*I hope one of them doesn't go in the Army, especially if we keep fighting brush fire wars, but the Army gave me confidence in myself.*

*Our parents are good people, but at least mine; sort of let me grow on my own. I am still not sure who I am.*

*This is not all about kids, is it?*

*I guess not. It is like I can't give them something I myself don't have. You had the Army. Now you are a firefighter. You joined the Church; you help other people join. Being an office manager is not the same.*

*OK, but you have been a mother twice; I can't do that. I am trying Sue, but I can't get a hold of what it is that is bothering you. I really like who you are.*

*It took me a long time to grow into whom I am, and I am still not sure.*

*Now we are getting someplace. You can't expect our kids to be mature, confident people from year one. It is something we grow into, and it was messy for both of us. We can't save them from that.*

*I don't have any roots, Allen. That's what I mean. That's what I want for our kids. I feel good about helping our kids to live with all kinds of people, but we need to give them roots. We can't just let it happen, because it may not happen. We have to help them to know their roots.*

*Are you talking about our family history? If so I think learning about our history could be interesting and fun for both us and our kids.*

*Yes, that could be part of what I am trying to say, but we also need to connect them today with people and groups they can identify with and be able to say, "That's who I am".*

*OK, family history could be fun, and we can also encourage them to be what? Scouts? Swim team? Band? How do we know what is best for them?*

*We let them tell us.*

*What do you think of Catholic school?*

*I'll let that up to you, Sue. You know what it's like. How would you like to take a trip to Ireland?*

*I would really like that. My Dad says the Connollys are from the Western part of Ireland. I would like to go there. We will do it when Billy is a little older.*

Allen and Sue know that connecting with others, support groups when bad things happen, family for their history and example, friends for life, neighborhoods and Church, all brought them together and gave them confidence that they would stay together. They want all that for Jennifer and Billy. Sue especially also wants roots for herself and for her children. She knows that to connect with others she must also have a self. When she asks the question, "Who am I", she wants a clear answer.

Sue, the cook, knows what makes a good pot roast. The potatoes stay potatoes, the carrots and onions taste like what they are, and the beef roast flavors everything. She would never put her famous pot roast into a blender.

Allen didn't understand at first. He knew what brought them together and partly answered Sue's question was their bad times. He didn't want that for Jennifer or Billy. He would do what he could to keep that from happening. It was like a dance, he thought, all the communities we are part of dance with who we are, but we must be ourselves.

## EPILOGUE

This story has many loose ends, but we can guess the possible direction of the lives of the people we have come to know. If you are old enough to read this, then you know there are always loose ends; life is like that. Do not try to tidy up Allen and Sue's story. Everyone deserves to be a little mysterious. Who am I? They wanted to know, and so do we.