

JOEY



Authors, Joan and John Houk
Illustrated by Jane Pitz



Yara Nardi / Pool Photo via AP75

*Pope Francis standing alone in St. Peter's Square
March 27, 2020*

*Pope Francis presides at The Statio Orbis prayer,
in which the people of the world participated in the shelter of their homes
during the COVID pandemic.*

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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.

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. In 2019 she retired as bishop, but continues in active participation in 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.

2023

Preface

We began our life as storytellers in our senior years as extensions of Joan's ministry to preach the Gospel of Jesus the Christ and John's search for a creative outlet. These two life forces bubbled up into one continuing story with discrete episodes, which we have made public sequentially. The sources for our stories are the people and situations we have experienced in our lives and in the lives of the people around us. There is no intention of being autobiographical or even biographical, but the characters and situations are from life as we have experienced it. We write love stories because that's what we know, and a love story is at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus the Christ.

Story 1, "Allen and Sue" is about two people who suffered the effects of violence in their lives. In Sue's words, "It's over" but then she discovers that being over not good enough, and love finds a way to new beginnings.

Story 2, "Megan and Nick" are Allen and Sue's best friends. Their story is all about two people, who, in Nick's words, found "life can flow like a meandering stream in a meadow" only to discover love entering their lives in new and surprising ways, and their meandering stream becomes turbulent.

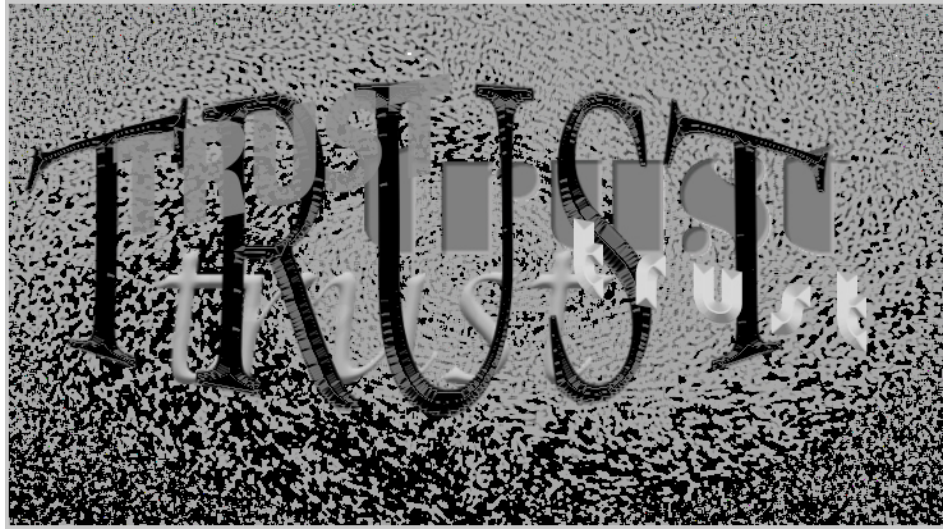
Story 3, "Billy" is Allen and Sue's only son. Billy's Story is the story of a young man looking for love but love finds him and he was, in his words, "only being himself".

Story 4, "Maryam" is afraid. Then she is befriended by identical twin girls, Billy's daughters, Dorothea and Bertha. The twins may look alike, but they are very different people. Will the twins really help? Maryam will find love or will love find her, or maybe not? Even on soft mornings we cannot be sure.

Story 5, "Jennifer" is Allen and Sue's first child whom everybody loved. She had a perfect life. In her words, "I would call it idyllic if it didn't sound fairytale-ish." Then everything changed, and again in her words, "Mom, I don't even know where I am." Can Jennifer find herself? What kind of help will she find, or not?

Story 6, "Joey", a sequel to "Jennifer", begins with Jennifer and Joseph, and Jennifer is afraid of Joseph. COVID-19 happens, and many people suffer. Joey grows up in this world, but it wasn't easy as you may remember. People loved Joey for good reasons. Maybe you will too.

"Joey" and all of our other five stories are available to be read, downloaded and shared from Joan's web site: <http://joanclarkhouk.com>.



John can't sleep...

What time is it? And why am I awake? No sound. Joan's breathing is smooth and soft. Even when she makes a sound it's like a purr, and where are the cats? Sleeping quietly on the quilt at the end of the bed. Before we went to bed we were talking about our next story. Joan gave me some notes and we agreed that "Joey" needed to begin with Jennifer and Joseph, and that the first chapter should be titled "Trust". My head seems clear and the house is quiet. This may be a good time to think about trust, and the Joey story.

I can feel Joan's warmth; why does she trust me? Trust is built, right? And she has shared our bed – let's see, 10,000 times? At least, probably more. So, we built trust, but what about the first time? Why did she trust me enough to share our bed the first time? What do her notes say? It's the middle of the night. I'll look at her notes about trust later when I get up. Go back to sleep.

This is not working – still awake. Think trust. The best way to find out if you can trust someone is to trust them. Someone important said that; can't think who. Maybe my mind isn't as clear as I thought it was. Keeps circling, going back to why did she trust me the first time?

We trust when we must. No options – got to trust. But Joan had plenty of options, one man even followed her through the years with letters until he died. I was the best option? Too calculating. Joan doesn't do calculating. What time is it? I'll use the bathroom and look at the clock. Boots is following me into the bathroom. It's 1:00 a.m. and I can see that he is wondering why I'm awake. Talk about trust. When we brought Boots home from the animal shelter, we didn't see him for a month. There were plenty of places for him to hide, and he did. The food was gone and the litter box was used, but no Boots. Then it took him a year before he would come to me and sit on my lap. Now he is on my lap every day. Here he is in the bathroom with me in the middle of the night. He not only trusts me, he likes me, wants to know why I'm up. He likes me. How did that happen?

Back in my Joan-warmed bed – Joan trusted me because she liked me? OK, that’s good. Why did she like me to begin with? My mind is going around in circles. We like because we like. We trust because we trust. Joan had a context for me – family, school, friends, but little real time with me. Why did I trust her? That’s easy, I loved her. Oh, that’s too easy, must be more to it. Boots is already back to sleep.

It's the middle of the night. Make some notes, go back to sleep. There is a mysterious, even mystical? quality to love and trust. How did Joan experience it all those years ago, and how can we tell a story that begins with trust? Where are Joan’s notes? I need a tablet and pen. I’ll make some coffee and sleep later. Joan’s notes begin, “It’s the little things, John.”

~ ~ ~



Mom, I don’t want a fancy wedding. I don’t even want a wedding.
Jenn, didn’t Joseph ask you to marry him?

Yes, Mom, and, OK, getting married means a wedding, but that’s not how I feel. I am pregnant and starting to show, but it’s how I got pregnant.

You didn’t know what was happening to you, Jenn, and Joseph loves you enough to want to marry you, and you know your family knows how it happened and we love you too.

I care, Mom. How can a raped and pregnant woman wear a virgin white dress and get blessed by the Church at a fancy wedding!!

We need to cool down this conversation.
OK, Mom, but no dress and no fancy wedding.

But you need to be married.

Why?

It’s what we have always done. Jenn, let’s have some lunch.
Mom, lunch is OK. I’ll talk to Joseph about a wedding and then we can decide.

~ ~ ~

That wasn't the conversation Jennifer wanted to have with her mother, Sue, but that's what happened. There was no wedding talk during lunch, and Jennifer gave her mother a big hug and went home to her apartment with a text to Joseph in all caps. NEED TO TALK. MOM WANTS A WEDDING.

Jennifer, the ER doctor, had become addicted to opioid pain killing drugs. She had taken two pills that night at the ER and passed out only to discover weeks later that she was pregnant, and she didn't know who had raped her while she was unconscious. She knew Joseph was in love with her but had been afraid to tell him what had happened to her. She had spent weeks with family and friends and medical help getting free of her pain pill habit, but discovering she had become pregnant was way too much, and she was afraid to tell Joseph. Wouldn't he just walk away? No, that's not right. She was actually afraid of Joseph. Her words to Joseph just before he told her he loved her were, "I'm afraid of you, Joseph. You shouldn't be here." She had never been physically afraid of Joseph, but she was desperately emotionally afraid. How could he love her – a pain pill junky, raped and pregnant – old woman; yes, she was maybe ten years older than he. "Why would he want me? Life doesn't work that way. It just doesn't," she asks herself. But he wants her, he really does, even though she told him everything, he loves her and has told her he wants them to get married, and getting married meant a wedding.

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Joseph texted back all caps, CAN I COME AT 6 – with a red heart emoji. She texted back, YES – with a red heart. They were really going to be OK, and she had to sit with that idea for a minute, then got up and planned a meal for them. Would she ask him to stay? He hadn't asked yet. What if he asked today? Was she ready for sex? She felt a knot in her stomach. Would she ever be ready? Don't think about it. What to fix him for dinner? Maybe he wouldn't ask to stay. She knew she wouldn't ask him.

~ ~ ~

Joseph knocked exactly at 6. Jennifer noticed he's on time. Well, why not – he is the building manager – office on the first floor. Why would he be late to her apartment on the 10th floor? He could even physically run up the stairs and be here on time. Yet it seemed important to Jennifer to know that Joseph was on time. And yes, kept his word. He said 6, and it was 6 exactly. Maybe he is too fussy punctual? Stop it, Jenn, she thought, stop analyzing Joseph. She went and opened the door. Flowers. How nice, Joseph, come on in.

I hope you can stay for dinner, but it's only spaghetti and salad.

I can stay. I like spaghetti. In fact, I like almost anything. I just like to eat.

Jenn made another mental note – he would be easy to cook for.

~ ~ ~

Jennifer didn't like to talk "business" while eating so she waited. Now she wanted to know. Joseph, do you want a wedding? My mother wants me to plan a wedding and I said that I didn't want anything fancy – I really don't even want a wedding. She was not happy, but didn't push. What do you think?

Joseph sensed some rough ground.

Maria, my assistant, is getting married on Saturday. She has invited me, that means us. Will you go with me? Her family is Filipino and they have a reputation for big weddings. What do you think?

Jennifer thought, he's dancing with my question; he wants a big wedding but doesn't want to say so, so she said, yes, we can go. It could be fun. Then she repeated – what do you think? Should we have a wedding?

Now Joseph knew a little more about Jennifer – she will ask her question until she gets an answer. Yes, I would like a wedding because it will show the world how we love each other and have nothing to hide, Jenn.

The whole world, Joseph? The "whole world" thought had made Jennifer feel naked, and she felt a shiver. Jenn, I just meant I want there to be no secrets about how I feel about you, and it would feel good to say so in public. And, I like calling you Jenn, it's what your mother does, is that OK?

Jenn is OK, Joseph, but what you said made me feel naked and a little afraid.

I'm sorry, that was never my intention. Can we let this wedding question rest for a few days?

Sure, let's go to Maria's wedding then we can decide what to do for ourselves.

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Joseph left about 9 with a little kiss and telling her he loved her. He didn't ask to spend the night. Did that mean he was losing interest already or being a shy gentleman and not pushing them to have sex? Stop it, Jenn, she thought. You are over thinking and over analyzing Joseph again. And, was she hiding like Joseph almost suggested? She didn't like that thought, but she didn't like thinking about being naked before the whole world either. They would go to Maria's wedding.

Tomorrow is Friday and the wedding is Saturday. What will he do tomorrow? Will he bring me Starbucks coffee and watch the sun come up with me out my East-facing window? That's how we really found each other, or he found me. She liked the "found each other" thought better. But what if he doesn't come with coffee? No, he will come. She remembered that if Joseph was anything, he is both persistent and dependable. A shy man, who will dance around difficult questions, who doesn't want me, us, to hide, will always be on time, pesty persistent, loves to watch the sun come up, would be easy to cook for, and he loves me, he keeps saying it. Can I learn to trust a man like that? Jenn went to bed, by herself, thinking that maybe she could. Then, as she was nearing sleep the thought lingered, but what if he doesn't come in the morning? She had lost one man and couldn't bear the thought of losing another one. She

checked her alarm clock. It would get her up in time for her and Joseph to watch their sun come up – she hoped – she prayed. Please, God, let him come in the morning. She hadn't asked him to bring her coffee but she knew he would. She hoped he would.

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Joseph had made a pest of himself, Jennifer's word, by bringing her Starbucks each morning – the only person in his managed apartment building, she found out. Then he sent flowers, letters, and even a New Year's teddy bear when she went away. But the deal was sealed, as they say, on the day when he brought Starbucks and she told him about her pain pill addiction, her rape and becoming pregnant, and asked him to leave and not come back. I'm afraid of you, Joseph, she had said. Instead of leaving he told her he loved her and he asked her to watch their sun come up. "Their sun" he had said. Now she waited for her "pest" to bring their morning coffee. So, it was not just nice-to-have coffee, but it was, to her, a kind of proof to her that he could be trusted. Could her pest really love her? Silly me, she thought. He could miss his bus. There could be a problem with one of his other residents that needed immediate attention. He may not be on time or even come today.

She was thinking all these things looking out her East window and saw the grey begin to appear in the sky. Then she heard the tap on her door. She rushed to the door and opened it, and there was Joseph with a large coffee in each hand. She stepped into the hall intending to give him a little hug but when she put her arms around him, her little hug became a desperate cling, then a cling of relief and of hope. Joseph was startled and, at first, thought only of saving the coffee in each hand and flung his arms out to each side. Then suddenly he realized that this was not just a good morning hug, but what was it? Joseph's moment of disorientation passed as Jennifer clung to him and he realized that he had become like her savior, but not sure what he had saved her from. What was crystal clear in his mind was that he must never give her any reason not to trust him. Never. Not even the smallest reason. Then he began to laugh.

Jenn, do you know how this would look if one of my other residents came out into the hall and saw us like this, you giving me a full body hug and me with arms out-stretched and a coffee in each hand? It would look like I was being crucified by Starbucks. Jennifer didn't let go but she began to relax a little and whispered to him. I have to tell you about Jimmy.

Joseph was not ready to let go of the lightness of being he felt so he said, OK, I'll tell you about Phyllis.

Jennifer, still not quite ready to join Joseph's floating emotions said, I'm serious. Don't make fun of me, Joseph. Then relaxing some, is there really a Phyllis?

Well, yes and no. There is a real Phyllis. She will be my new assistant because Maria is leaving, but no, there is no romantic Phyllis in my life – and I don't need to know about any man named Jimmy. Joseph was ready to deal with competition – it was clear to him that he had won the race and didn't need to know anything else. That Jennifer may have had another man in her life was to be expected. A beautiful woman would have another interested man. Joseph was not concerned about any Jimmy.

Then Jennifer said, Jimmy died ten years ago, and I need to tell you about him.

Joseph's mind switched gears again as he thought, oh a man who died ten years ago and she still thinks she needs to talk about him. This is much bigger to her, and maybe to me, than competition with a real live person. So Joseph said, let's go sit and watch our sun come up and you can tell me whatever you need to tell me. The coffee is getting cold and my arms are getting tired.

Jennifer let him go and realized suddenly, mystically that Joseph had lifted her out of the pit that she had been mired in for ten years. She would tell him about Jimmy, but Jimmy's memory had lost its hold on her at that very moment in the hallway and she would never forget it. Well then, come on in, Joseph. Don't just stand there. I liked the way you saved our coffee. You think fast. Our sun is coming up. Is Phyllis pretty?

No.

As Jennifer was telling how Jimmy's death, almost on their wedding day, had driven her to become an ER doctor, to "fix other people's pain" and that his death was part of the reason she became addicted to opioids, she realized that it was as if she was telling someone else's story. A tragic story, yes, but no longer her own dominating story. Her sense of freedom was so powerful that she began to cry. They were in side-by-side chairs facing the East window, and Joseph reached for her hand and he felt an electrifying touch. He almost asked, can we spend the day together? But he said, that's quite a story. I'm sorry that happened to you.

Jennifer felt his touch and wanted to say, can you spend the day with me? but said, how will we need to dress for Maria's wedding tomorrow?

I think up-scale casual.
OK, I'm good with that.

They both knew that they were in a powerful new place with each other but that there were still other bridges to cross. Jenn persisted with her question like she always would. Is Phyllis pretty? Joseph knew for sure that Jennifer would always ask her question until she got an answer.

Well, she is kind of young, petite and pretty in the way of all young, petite women.

I want to meet her, Joseph.

I think Maria has invited her. It's like Maria to do that. Oh, good, I hope so. Then I'll see you tomorrow, Joseph.

Jenn, the sun comes up at about 7:30, is that still OK with you? She almost said, come two hours early, Joseph, but she said, how about 7 and I'll fix some breakfast for us.

OK, Starbucks and breakfast at 7 – and my favorite is eggs over well with rye toast.

So he has preferences. Lots to learn about my Joseph. He was now her Joseph and she felt it like a warm blanket on a cold night. She knew he would come at exactly 7, with coffee, one with double cream. He would remember.

~ ~ ~

Sunday afternoon Jennifer was visiting her parents and Allen, her father, wanted to hear about the whole pig on the grill. I don't know if they always do that, but it was a whole pig, Dad. Firefighter and grill lover, Allen, wanted to know more. Was it a charcoal grill? Did they have it away from the house? Grills and vinyl siding don't mix. It must have been charcoal, Dad, and it was big and out in the middle of the yard.

Mother Sue, had enough of pig and grill talk. What was the wedding like, and what did Joseph say when you talked about a wedding? Mom, the wedding was great, like a festival, fancy clothes, music and dancing, everyone should have a wedding like that. Sue noted the "everyone" comment and pushed ahead. What does Joseph think? Mom, he wants to tell the whole world. Those were his words, but he started with an e-mail to his residents that he and Jennifer Baxter in 1050 were engaged to be married. Mom, he was concerned that people would notice his special attention to apartment 1050, or someone may have seen us hugging in the hall and wonder what was going on. Sue wanted to know about this hugging in the hall but pounced on "telling the whole world". So what about a wedding? Can we start planning? Sue had only two children, and her son Billy's wedding had been planned with almost no input from her. Now she had a daughter, her only daughter, going to get married. This was her big wedding chance, and she was ready with ideas.

Jennifer loved her mother, and sensed her need to really get involved, but she said, we didn't make any decisions. Mom, what if we have a small wedding – in Church, if you like – but not a dress, limo, flowers, big cake wedding – just all of us celebrating together. Allen, trying to lighten things up said, what! with no whole pig on the grill? Jennifer laughed – no pig, Dad. Sue was a little deflated, but agreed – small wedding in Church would have to be OK.

Now Jennifer had to take this wedding plan back to Joseph. They had never talked Church, or even religion. Jennifer took a deep breath and thought, well that talk had to happen so why not now? She had seen the little sign on his office desk that read *Joseph Cohen* and wondered if Joseph was Jewish. That's as close as she had come to any religious thinking about Joseph. She had not been to her own Catholic Church, on a regular basis, for years, but was now remembering a powerful experience at Christmas time with her brother Billy and wife Liesl. She was visiting them in Germany trying to get her life back to some sense of normal while recovering from her pain pill addiction. She had gone to Mass with them and was surprised that she felt at home in the ancient German Church. It had been a warm, wonderful feeling that she would like to repeat. Now she needed to tell her Church story to Joseph. What would he think? She knew he would bring coffee in the morning. Would that be a good time? Maybe, but the time had to be soon. Her baby bump was getting bigger and she wanted to be married. Was this a new thought? Yes, it was a new thought. I want to be married to Joseph – my Joseph.

Tomorrow we will talk about wedding and Church. And what about his family? Why had he never mentioned them? And the Phyllis she met at Maria's wedding really was pretty. Lots to talk about. Easy, Jenn, she cautioned herself. One thing at a time, but he will be spending all

day every day with a pretty woman in his small office. But Doctor Jennifer Cohen had a nice sound to it.

~ ~ ~

What time do you get to work, Jenn asked at exactly 7 a.m.?

I like to be at my desk by 6. Problems often happen at night. People wake up to a problem and they want it resolved quickly, so I come in early.

I worked the night shift at the ER for the same reasons. Bad things do happen at night and the ER can be busy. Even babies are often born in the small hours.

When will you feel our baby move?

Jennifer like the way he said “our” baby. Any day now. When it happens, I’ll tell you. Finally, Jennifer had to get to her real questions.

I talked with my parents, really my mother, about a wedding. I enjoyed the wedding we went to. It was so nice. I have changed my mind, Joseph. I would like us to have a wedding. I want to be married to you, but I would like it small. And she finally had to open the subject, and in my Church, a small Church wedding. I’m Catholic and so is my whole family, and this would please them. She was putting the emphasis on family and pleasing them, hoping that he would follow her line of thought, but he said, I knew you were Catholic and it would be OK with me to have a small Church wedding. He’s dancing around my religious question, she thought, so she became more direct. How did you know I was Catholic? It was the crucifix on your wall. OK, she thought, next step. I saw your name on your desk. Isn’t Cohen a Jewish name? Yes, it is, and I am Jewish – go to synagogue often enough that they know me, but I don’t put my Jewishness on anyone else. Jennifer took a deep breath and surged ahead. What if we have a Catholic-Jewish wedding? Would your rabbi do that? Oh, I know she would, and I would like that too.

They had been sitting in their side-by-side chairs with their Starbucks while watching their sun come up when Jennifer got up and moved to Joseph’s chair and sat down in his lap with her arms around his neck. Joseph thought, she was worried and I should have spoken up about being Jewish and how I wouldn’t put my being Jewish on her or anyone. Maybe I need to learn to be more up front with her, so he said, I love having you on my lap and I hope you do this often, and I would like to have my friend at the Trib put an article in the paper – “Jewish man married a prominent Catholic doctor. They are expecting a child in June.” I want to tell the world, Jennifer. OK, Joseph, but leave out the prominent part, and, June is not the right month. Give me your rabbi’s name and number, and you said “she”, how nice, and I’ll give it to our favorite priest. We need to start planning this wedding. There is a little person here, who has their own schedule and I want us to be married. Breakfast can be ready when you want it. How about now? Jenn got off of his lap and he followed her to the kitchen.

~ ~ ~

Father Mike had been the Baxter family's pastor and close friend for years, but he was now in an assisted-living home and no longer presiding at weddings, so they called Father O'Malley, who had been their son Billy's chaplain in the Army in Germany. He had been very helpful to Billy, and the family remained connected to him when he retired and came home. North Side priest, and they were South Side people. But now they wanted him to preside at Jennifer and Joseph's wedding. They had given Father O'Malley Joseph's rabbi's number.

~ ~ ~

My name is Father O'Malley, and I am calling for Rabbi Bernstein. Is he available? That's whom you are speaking with, Father O'Malley. What can I do for you?

O'Malley had heard a woman's voice, and it took him a moment to get his mental footing. Rabbi, I am a friend of the Baxter family, and they have asked me to preside at Jennifer Baxter's wedding with your presiding with me. And I apologize for assuming you would be a man. Apology accepted. And are we talking about your Jennifer marrying Joseph Cohen? Yes, that's the name. I know Joseph, and he told me to expect this call. How do you suggest we coordinate?

I'm glad we connected so easily. They would like this wedding to be Saturday in two weeks. Would that work for you, Rabbi? No, but Friday of that week would work.

The wedding will be at their church. I'll check with the Baxters, but I don't see a problem with Friday. What time would be best?

Early in the day, Father.
What about 11 a.m.?

That would be OK. I'll check and get back to you.

O'Malley, do you think we need a rehearsal?

As an Army chaplain I presided at interfaith weddings, and a few non-religious ones, so I don't personally need a rehearsal.

Father, it would be nice for us to meet, and to go over our parts so that the ritual flows. Could you come, say, at least an hour early? Oh, and there may be media.

Media, you say. Thanks for the heads-up. I think two hours early would be better. We need to be comfortable with each other.

I agree, Father. Until then we can work out any details on the phone.

Rabbi, that would work for me. In fact, I'm looking forward to meeting you. Who knows, we may have some common interests.

Could be O'Malley. Jesus was a Jew. See you two hours before the wedding. If you haven't met Joseph, you will like him.

If Jennifer likes him, I know I will. Thank you for being so accommodating, Rabbi Bernstein.

~ ~ ~

The morning of the wedding arrived with bright, warm sunshine pushing away the past week's gray and gloomy January weather. Joseph bought new shoes for the occasion, and after considering having his suit dry-cleaned, he decided that this special day called for a new suit as well. He walked straight and tall in his navy pinstriped attire. He and Jennifer wanted to be there first to greet their family members and a few close friends. The door swung open and Jennifer hurried in to escape the winter chill. Joseph came to help her with her coat, and when she smiled at him, he stood gazing in awe. Jennifer was glowing. She had on a light blue dress made of a crepe fabric that fell in soft folds from her shoulders to the hem. He pulled her towards him in an embrace and kiss that left her breathless. Jennifer, you are beautiful!

Just about then, Father O'Malley came up from the hall downstairs where he and Rabbi Bernstein had taken a break to enjoy a cup of coffee. Good morning! You two brought the sunshine today. A swish from the door announced the arrival of Carol, the church musician, and after expressing her "best wishes" to Jennifer and Joseph, she sat down at the piano and began to arrange her music sheets. Before long the prelude music signaled that it was time for Jennifer and Joseph to greet their guests as they began to gather in the church.

The church looked lovely with a floral arrangement of fresh cut flowers set on the floor in front of the altar. In mid-week a small Jewish canopy had been erected in an open area to the right of the altar for the Catholic-Jewish ritual. Under the canopy was a small table covered with a white linen cloth, and placed on it were a candle, a ceremonial binder, a crystal plate holding the wedding rings, and a cup. Chairs awaited the wedding party and officiants.

At 11 o'clock the prelude music ended and Carol began playing "Pachelbel Canon in D". You could feel the music, and the guests' approval of the selection. Joseph took Jennifer by the hand and together they walked to their chairs under the canopy, followed by their witnesses and their Catholic and Jewish co-presiders. Excitement and anticipation were in the air. Father O'Malley and Rabbi Bernstein welcomed those gathered on this very special and holy day.

Joseph had asked his brother, Ben to be a witness to his marriage. Jennifer chose Megan, a long-time friend of her family and former staff member of the Church. The readings were from both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

Standing before the assembly, Ben proclaimed a reading from the Torah, Genesis 1:26-31, the story of creation on the sixth day. *Then God said, let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...so, God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female God created them. God blessed them...and indeed, it was very good.*

David, cantor from the synagogue, then chanted Psalm 148, lifting up a hymn of praise to God.

Jennifer's mother, Sue, always a bit anxious, looked at her daughter whose smile and pride said, you've got this, Mom! Sue was honored to proclaim the much loved and often recited verses from the Christian Scriptures, 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a. *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not*

envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Rabbi Bernstein reflected upon the readings, and spoke to the couple of God's love and faithfulness as a model for their love for one another.

Father O'Malley turned his attention to family and friends gathered, asking the questions, "Will you support Jennifer and Joseph in their marriage? Will you be there for them in joy and sorrow?" Everyone responded in resounding, "We will!" Then Father invited the couple to pledge their vows, and place the blessed rings on each other's fingers.

Rabbi Bernstein extended a cup of wine, which Jennifer and Joseph shared, just as they would now share their lives with one another. Then she blessed them in the ancient blessing, *May the LORD bless and keep you. May the LORD's face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the LORD look upon you with kindness and give you peace.* (Numbers 6:22-27)

In closing, Father O'Malley gave a final blessing to all. *May God's peace live always in your hearts and in your homes. May you be ready and willing to help and comfort all who come to you in need. May God bless you all the days of your lives.* And the people said, "Amen."

Taking a crystal glass, Joseph placed it on the floor and then broke the glass underfoot as a symbol of the seriousness of life, and a representation of the fragility of marriage. The guests shouted out, "Mazel Tov!"

The assembly broke into hugs and well-wishing, smiles and tears. Carol sent them out from the celebration with the jubilant sound of Beethoven's, "Ode to Joy". And what a joyous celebration it was! If anyone was watching closely, they may have seen Jennifer and Joseph actually floating out the church door.

~ ~ ~

They had talked about going somewhere special on their wedding night, but agreed to go to Jennifer's apartment. That's where they felt their strongest connections. It was evening and they were both hungry.

Joseph, would you like to go out for a nice dinner? We didn't get much to eat at the reception. We talked to everyone, but didn't eat much.

Joseph didn't want to go out to a restaurant and was not sure that was really all that was going on in Jennifer's mind, but he wanted to please her.

Going to a nice place for dinner would be OK, but if you have things here for us that would be OK too.

Then remembering that he needed to be more up front and not so shy he said, come sit in my lap. Food can wait.

Jenn looked out the dark window and said,
Joseph, the sun won't be coming up for hours.

Hours will not be long enough. Come sit with me.

They went and sat down with Jennifer on his lap, and she leaned against him and said, I don't think I'm going to be very good at this, Joseph.

Joseph put one arm around her and stroked her hair with his other hand. I want us to be lovers, Jenn, but it will always be when you think the time is right.

They sat there holding each other for several minutes then Jennifer got up and took Joseph by the hand and led them to their bed.

~ ~ ~

Joey was born, like so many babies, in the small hours with Joseph at Jennifer's side and her parents in the waiting room. The nurse said, "7 pounds 3 ounces and 20 inches." You have a very healthy baby boy. He will be a little Joseph, but we will call him Joey. Is that OK, Joseph? Yes, I like it. The next day on their way home from the hospital Jennifer looked at Joseph and said, it's going to be OK, isn't it. She meant it as a statement of fact, not a question.

He's a beautiful baby, Jenn, and yes, everything is going to be OK. I didn't want this baby, Joseph. I know, Jenn, but he will grow up being loved. We both know that. And Joseph was right. All thoughts of how Joey was conceived were put aside maybe to be never talked about or seldom thought about. Maybe, yet there lingered the fact that some day they would have to explain to him how his life began, but today they were family in every possible way.

As Joey progressed through toddler to curious little boy, he enjoyed being the center of his parents' and grandparents' lives. Joey's first years were as normal and as average as his family could make them. Then COVID-19 happened.

"The best way to find out if you can trust someone is to trust them."

Ernest Hemmingway

"It's the little things, John"

Joan

~ ~ ~



PANDEMIC

March 2020...

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
And if I die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

God bless Mommy and Daddy and Grandma and Grandpa and everybody, and you too, Uncle Nick. Good night, Joey. Sleep good.
I miss my Teddy, Uncle Nick.
I know. We will get Teddy tomorrow. Sleep good.

Nick fixed the covers, kissed Joey on the forehead, and turned out the light as he was leaving the room. Uncle Nick, can you leave the light on? What if I leave the hall light on? It won't shine in your eyes. OK. Good night, Joey.

When Nick got to the bottom of the stairs, he could see Megan still at the kitchen table with a worried look. This was not Megan. She never stayed at the table, and almost never had a worried look.

Nick knew he was going to hear something he probably didn't want to hear, and he wanted to ease into the bad news, whatever it was. So Nick asked, how did you like the kebabs? I am going to have a beer. Would you like one?

OK, Nick. Bring me a beer, and the kebabs were nice. Come sit down. What did Jennifer say when she called and asked you to pick up Joey from school?

Nothing. Only that she needed a favor so I didn't ask why. I just figured she got busy and needed my help. We trust each other, Megan, so there was no need for questions. I did wonder

a little when she asked if he could spend the night, but Joey and I get along well – even thought it would be fun so I didn't ask.

Jenn called me while you were putting Joey to bed. Sit down, Nick. You need to hear this. Nick brought two beers and two glasses and sat as instructed. We may need to keep Joey for days and maybe longer.

Is there a problem between Jenn and Joseph? I thought they were a solid couple. No, they're fine, but Jenn isn't, and maybe Joseph. Get to the point, Megan. At first Nick didn't want to hear, now he had to hear.

You know Jenn went back to work at the ER when Joey started school. Yes, that surprised me. Is there something wrong with her? She has contracted a new virus that the ER has started seeing, and it's not good, Nick. People are dying.

Jenn has this virus? Yes, and she is afraid that Joseph may have it too. It's even possible that Joey may have it, and there is no way to be sure. She has been very close to Joseph and her parents. She is really worried about Joseph, but especially her parents. That's why she doesn't want Joey with her parents. I don't like any of this Megan.

I know, but she doesn't know what else to do. She sounded desperate, Nick. I never heard her worried like this before. If Joseph has it, she doesn't want Joey at home. She has taken a room near the hospital until she, well, until she may be a patient in her own hospital.

She didn't want Joey with Allen and Sue? She's afraid that they may have already been exposed by a visit she had with them. She's really worried about Joey.

Nick took a sip of his beer. Can we go sit in the living room? This whole business is clear as mud. You talk like we've got the plague on the South Side of Chicago. That doesn't compute, Megan.

Jenn was perfectly clear about this on the phone. This is a new virus that has just shown up at her ER, and it is both very contagious – she has it and she used standard practice – and she sees people dying. This is really bad stuff, Nick. It's contagious before people know they have it.

OK, OK, I get it, but you say even Joey may have it? That's not good. How will we know? What will we need to do for him? We're not doctors. We may not know until well, until we have it too. It's really bad stuff, Nick.

Jenn promised to call often. If there is something we need to do she will explain it, and we are not to take him back to school tomorrow or get anything from their house.

He missed his Teddy, and he likes school.

I know, but Nick, if he has this virus then it could be a big health risk for us, especially you.

Why me?

It's killing old people, Nick.

~ ~ ~

Next Morning...

Nick didn't sleep well. In fact, he was glad to get up and normalize his day with coffee and the newspaper. Nick was old school, and he liked it that way. So he put the coffee on and went to get the paper only to see a big black garbage bag on the front steps. Who would put their trash on my steps he wondered, a little more than unhappy about it then when he saw the note taped to the bag.

These are Joey's clean clothes and his Teddy Bear. They have been through the washer and dryer. Spray the bag with disinfectant before you bring it into the house. Joseph

This is over the top, thought Nick, but he went and got the Lysol and sprayed the bag then brought it into the house. Megan saw him come in.

What's this? Someone's garbage? Take it back out.

It's Joey's things. I sprayed it with Lysol.

The thought that this virus could come into their home, made Megan angry. Yesterday she had been afraid of the virus; now she was just plain angry.

What's next, Nick? Are you going to make me strip and hose me down before you let me in when I get home from work?

I hadn't thought of that, but now you have me thinking.

Well, unthink it, and make me some eggs and toast while I get dressed for work. I'm running late.

Nick was still thinking about hosing down his angry naked Megan when he remembered the newspaper and went back to bring it in. There on the front was, *China locks down a city of 11 million people*. This is crazy, Nick thought. You can't lock down 11 million people. Then he hoped no one had seen him spraying a garbage bag in his pajamas. Get a grip, Nick. Make Megan's breakfast. The worry Nick was feeling was beginning to show.

As Megan sat down to breakfast Nick asked, are you sure you should go to work today?

Of course, I'm going to work today.

The now really worried Nick pushed the paper over to her and she saw the China piece. What's this, she almost shouted. You think they are going to lock down Chicago! Impossible. Have some breakfast. Have you seen Joey?

Joey is still sleeping. Ginger is curled up on the bed with him. That cat always knows who needs some TLC. OK, Nick. I hope Jennifer calls soon, Megan said in a calmer voice.

Megan took a last sip of coffee then kissed Nick on the cheek and was out the door, leaving Nick with a 6-year-old Joey and garbage bag of clean clothes. How was he going to explain all this to Joey? And how was he going to calm his rising concern, and was that anger he heard in his normally “I can handle anything wife”? What would he and Joey do all day? Then he heard the toilet flush. At least the kid was old enough to take care of that part. Think Nick – can’t meet Joey with a worry face. Think breakfast. What would Joey like for breakfast? How about some Mickey Mouse pancakes. OK, that’s a start. Maybe with a chocolate chip face. No, raisins would be healthy. He will want some clean clothes, so Nick opened the bag. Teddy was on top and looked like he had been in a war, but maybe that’s the way he always looked having been lugged and hugged for six years. Then Joey appeared at the bottom of the steps. This kid moves around without making any sound. I’ll need to remember that.

Hi Joey. Are you ready for breakfast? What happened to Teddy, Uncle Nick?

It looks like he went through the washer and dryer. What if we get out the sewing kit and patch him up after breakfast.

OK. I need a toothbrush and some clean clothes for school.

Let’s have breakfast first. Pull up a stool and you can help me make pancakes.

Is Mom going to come to take me to school?

Not today, Joey. Today it will be just you and me and Ginger the cat.

She was on the bed with me. I want to go to school.

I know, but not today. Maybe your Mom will call later and you will get to talk to her.

As Nick got Joey settled at the table with pancakes with ears and a raisin face, his phone jingled. He didn’t know the number but he answered.

Hi, this is Nick.

Nick, this is Joseph. I’m at the hospital. After I dropped off Joey’s clothes, I went to see Jenn. When I got to where Jenn was staying, they were putting her in an ambulance. They wouldn’t let me go with them, and now they won’t let me see her. They tell me to go home and stay there. I can’t do that, Nick. I can’t just leave Jenn by herself.

I know, Joseph, but things keep getting stranger and stranger. I’ll put the phone on speaker and you can say Hi to Joey. Hi, Joey. Hi, Dad. Uncle Nick made me pancakes with ears. Where’s Mom? Is she going to take me to school?

Mom’s at the hospital, Joey.

Is she at work already? Who’s going to take me to school?

You need to stay with Uncle Nick today. It’s like a vacation day. Do you have your clean clothes? Yes, Uncle Nick says we will sew Teddy after breakfast. That’s a good idea. I’ll call later. Have fun with Uncle Nick.

Nick picked up the phone and turned the speaker off. Joseph, Joey will be fine here with me today. You need to do what Jenn would want you to do, and I think she would send you home.

I'm going to try to talk with someone in charge at the hospital, and see how I can stay with Jenn. If they won't let me in, I'll try to sneak in. I can't leave her by herself. Be careful, Joseph. Be sure to call later. We will be OK here, Joseph, but take care of yourself. Thanks, Nick. Bye.

So, Joey, your Dad wants you to have a vacation day with me. What do you think? Can we sew up Teddy? His stuffing is coming out. We will mend Teddy. Then to himself, I may need some mending. Can't visit sick people in the hospital? Impossible. Is this really happening, he thought? Let's mend Teddy. I'll get the sewing kit.

~ ~ ~

Later...

Joey was dressed in clean clothes and Teddy had been sort of mended. At least no stuffing was sticking out. Nick was straightening out in the kitchen when he looked through the living room and saw Joey standing in front of his salt water fish tank. This fish tank had been in his office for years. As a psychologist / counselor, Nick had found the calming effect of his fish very helpful. Sometimes he would leave a client sit alone with his fish for some minutes before beginning a session and sometimes he himself sat with them to relax after a client left. He had loved his work. Now he was ready to retire, but he still had his fish. He put the dish towel down and went to see Joey.

Do you like my fish?

They have different colors.

Yes, and they are all very different in other ways too. Do you see these guys down here? They are the Cat Fish cleanup crew. They help keep the tank clean.

What about this one? Joey pointed.

That's an Angel Fish. I think she just likes being beautiful. What do you think?

I like them all.

Would you like to feed them?

Can I?

Yes, here, I'll show you how.

As Nick was giving Joey the can of food his phone jungled and this time, he recognized Joseph's number. He took the phone to the kitchen not sure what he was going to hear and how he would need to respond. He answered.

Hi, Joseph. What can you tell me?

I found a supervisor and she made me get a temperature check, and I have a fever. She insisted that I must go home and stay there, and not to go out for any reason. I'm not used to being ordered around, Nick. She said she would see to it that I got a call about Jenn every day. People are dying here, Nick. I would rather die here with her then go home and leave her alone, but what can I do? They wouldn't let me in. The hospital is like a fortress!

Nick had heard about every form of grief there was, but he had never heard anything quite like this before so he paused, letting himself sit with what Joseph had just said, *I would rather die with Jennifer than leave her by herself*. Then he responded.

Joseph, there are other people you need to be concerned about, like Joey.
Joey isn't my child, Nick.

Nick knew that, but now he knew that Joseph was at the end of his rope, and maybe not able to hang on or he would never have said what he just said.

Joseph, you may not be Joey's father, but you love him the same way I love him, and I'm not really his uncle. Go home, Joseph, and call me when you get there. That's what Jenn would want. Do what the nurse told you to do. Go home, Joseph.

The phone went dead, and as Nick turned around, he saw Joey standing next to him. Nick looked at the ceiling and wondered, what did Joey hear and what was he thinking?

Uncle Nick, I can't get the top off of the fish food can.
Nick knelt down and gave Joey a big hug and led him back to the fish tank.

~ ~ ~

Evening...

Between watching the fish and "Sesame Street" the afternoon went quietly. There was enough left-over chicken to make a new batch of kebabs, and Nick saw a chance to introduce Joey to cooking on the grill. When Megan got home the house was ready for her, along with dinner. And talk about fish in the tank. She asked in her normal voice, so, Joey, you helped make dinner. Maybe you would like to be a cook some day?
Joey smiled and ran back to the fish, leaving Nick and Megan alone.

How did it go today? Did you hear any more about Jenn?

Jenn is now sick in her own hospital, and Joseph is at the end of his rope. They won't let him see her, and he has a fever and they insisted that he go home and stay there. Joseph and I were on the phone and when I told him he needed to be concerned about Joey, he said that Joey was not his child. I blurted out things I shouldn't have without realizing that Joey was standing next to me.

Ouch, Nick.
But he hasn't asked any questions or brought up what I said.

Maybe he doesn't want to talk about it now, but you can expect it to come up. You better be ready with good answers.

Joseph surprised me, Megan. This whole virus thing confuses me.
Nick, I was there when they brought Joey home from the hospital, and I saw Joseph with him.

There was strong bonding, Nick. I'm a mother and I know what it looks like and feels like. How could that have changed?

Joseph isn't thinking right and neither am I. I asked him to call when he got home and he hasn't called.

You need to call him! Megan's anger was showing again.

I will, but after Joey is in bed and asleep. You sit with Joey for a little bit while I clean up. Maybe he would enjoy a change from seeing me all day. Do we have any toys stuck away from when Sam was little? Nick was using his best counseling technique – distract, then slowly reconnect.

I'll look. Joseph is a shy introverted person, Nick. He will hold all this in. Megan responded as she began thinking "toys for Joey".

I know. I will call him, but later.

Megan went to a seldom opened closet and found a few puzzles and board games too old for Joey, but there was a box of miniature stuffed animals that might get his interest. She brought the box into the sun porch and sat down on the floor next to Joey, and taking a deep breath to calm her voice said,

I have some things in this box that you may like. Want to see?

Megan could see that the little animals were a hit, and she began to relax herself. Her day had been difficult. Too much uncertainty. No one knew what would happen next. She had even brought her company lap top home thinking she may work a little this evening. Nick came in and saw the toys, including a plastic fish.

Time for bath and bed, Joey. Would you like to bring the fish with you?

Joey smiled. He picked up the plastic fish and followed Nick up the stairs for his bath and bed.

When Nick came back down, hoping that Joey was really asleep, he found Megan in the living room with two glasses of wine.

Did you have any trouble getting Joey to bed?

No, but he was quiet. I think he is struggling with all the changes.

I think you should call Joseph.

Nick picked up his phone and called. It rang several times, then there was a click.

Joseph, are you there?

Yes.

Are you home?

Yes.

Nick put on his counselor's hat and voice. I'm not taking on any new clients, but I would like to be your counselor. That means whatever you say to me stays only with me, and that I will give you advice and expect you to follow through. Are we agreed?

Silence – then,

OK, Nick. I trust you.

Then we are agreed on this, Joseph. I'm your counselor and you will follow through.

First, what do you know about Jenn?

They put her in the ICU. That's not good, Nick.

They are giving her the best care they can, Joseph.

Nick took a deep breath thinking, I'm going to do a lot of deep breathing, then asked, will they call you tomorrow?

They said they would.

And how are you feeling?

Not good, Nick, but I can move about the house.

OK, Joseph.

You manage that large apartment building. How will that work when you are not there?

That's a big problem. I have a new administrative assistant, and she is not up to speed on all that needs to be done.

That means that you will need to be in regular communication with them. Is that right?

I guess so, Nick, but I really don't want to do that.

How many apartments are in your building?

One-hundred and twenty.

All occupied?

Most.

All those people depend on you to keep things running, and could it be that there are people who have been told to stay home and not go out, like yourself, and might they need some help with getting medicine and food?

Yes, I suppose that's possible.

You and your new assistant have a big responsibility.

It's Phyllis, Nick.

OK, you and Phyllis must take care of all these people. Can you do that?

It's my job, Nick.

Then you must do it.

I feel sick and my head's not right. I don't know if I can do it, Nick.

Is Joey OK?

He's quiet. I think it would be good for you to call him tomorrow.

What do I say, Nick.

Tell him that you and his mother love him, and let him tell you what he has been doing.

Tell him that his mother is sick?

I think so, along with that she is getting the best care.

Do you have everything you need?

I'll have Phyllis bring me my office lap top.

Good. Call me and Joey tomorrow, Joseph.

OK. Click

What do you think, Nick? How is Joseph, and how is Jenn?

Jenn is in the ICU. This virus must be really bad stuff.

I feel better about Joseph, but not good.
He saved Jenn, you know.
Yes, I think you are right.
She never prosecuted, did she?
No. It would have been "he said – she said".
She was drugged, Nick.

But she took the drugs. Anyway, when she found that she was pregnant, it was almost too much. Remember how her fiancé died almost on their wedding day? She never really got over that. Then her addiction to pain killers. She was in a bad place, and being raped and pregnant was way too much.

Were you surprised she kept the baby?
Not surprised she kept Joey to term, but surprised she didn't put him up for adoption.
Don't you think that was Joseph?
Yes, I think so, but they probably both knew that this might be their one chance to have a child.
Jenn was over 40 when this all happened.
Could be, but Joseph wanted this child.
Do you think he still does?

When people are highly stressed, they do and say things that are not like them. Like I said, I feel better about Joseph than yesterday. We will help him every way we can.

Nick knew his worry volume was turned way up, but he had ways to compensate – slow down, deep breathing, distract, focus. He knew this game and he could play it well. But he had heard an angry edge to Megan's voice that had never been there before. He had distracted her with toys for Joey, but he needed to express his feelings directly, so he said – as directly as he could – Megan, I think you are feeling angry.

Nick, can't you see what is happening? We may have had a long life, but our son, Sam is still young. He has his whole life ahead of him and this virus could destroy it, or kill him. I'm not angry, Nick, I'm furious. I am so angry my head hurts and my stomach is upset. And you don't help, Nick. You sit there so calm like you are too stupid to see what's going on around us. Sam could die. We could die.

Nick moved next to Megan on the couch and took her hand and asked,
how long have we known each other?
I don't know, Nick – more than 40 years.
Closer to 50, I think, and we have always come through difficult times together. We can do this together.
The virus is killing old people, Nick, that includes you.
I will be as careful as I can – no crowds – wash my hands, but I don't want to hide.
Maybe you will have to – maybe we will both need to stay home like Joseph.
Call our son. Hearing his voice may help.
OK, Nick.

Did I see your brief case?
I thought I might do some work at home, but not tonight.

Good. Let's pray for us. We can do this, Megan.

OK, Nick. Let's pray for all of us.

I have a prayer that our friend, Laura, sent me at the start of Lent. I have been reading it stuck to my mirror while I shave. I'll get it.

Nick retrieved a scrap of paper from the bathroom and took Megan's hand. Together they read:

*God, our loving parent,
in this season of fasting,
reflection and repentance,
make us mindful of the many
needs of children and parents.
Inspire our leaders,
secular and religious,
to act wisely and justly
to nurture and protect
the vulnerable young
and those into whose care
they have been given.
Guide us all in praying, speaking,
acting and almsgiving
in support of all children's wellbeing,
and in support of all parents', caregivers',
teachers' and pastors'
empowerment to love and care for children
as you love and care for us.
Amen.*

Laura Haigwood

~ ~ ~

Next Morning...

Megan and Nick didn't really need to talk. They could read each other's thoughts; talking was optional. They had been close friends for 20 years before they realized that they were attracted to each other in new and powerful ways. When that had happened what little empty space that existed between them had disappeared. Today Megan was up first. Last evening after prayer she had called their son, Sam "just to hear his voice" and make sure he was aware of the new virus and was taking precautions. Megan was angry and Nick could feel it in his own body. After she left for work, he was alone in the kitchen with his coffee and newspaper, but his normal morning didn't help. He wasn't comfortable. He felt like something unwanted and dangerous had crept into his well-planned morning routine; worry had never been part of his mornings. Then as he looked over the top of his open paper, he saw Joey standing there. He took a breath to calm his voice.

Good morning, Joey. I see you brought Teddy with you for breakfast. Would you like an egg this morning?

I like dippy eggs.

Well, so do I so that's what we will have. Climb up on that chair and I will fix one for you. Here is some orange juice to get you started. Do you like rye toast? That's my favorite.

Joey reached for the juice but didn't answer.

I'll put white toast and rye toast on your plate and you can decide if you like it.

It took only a minute to make some dippy eggs, but the silence was heavy.

When Nick set the plates on the table Joey asked,
are you really my uncle?

Nick thought that answered one question. There was nothing wrong with the kid's hearing. Then he sat down not wanting to be a standing presence. So at Joey's level he said, there are different ways of being an uncle. Your uncle Billy is your uncle because he is your mother's brother. I am your uncle because I am your mother's good friend. There are different ways of being an uncle. I love being your uncle, Joey. Have you tried the rye toast? What do you think?

Joey hadn't tried the strange looking piece of bread but he was doing a good job of dipping with his white toast. Nick let the quiet sit for a minute as he poured himself some fresh coffee.

You don't drink coffee do you, Joey?

No, Uncle Nick. Mom doesn't let me have coffee.

When will she come to get me?

I don't know, but maybe your Dad will know. He will call this morning because he promised he would. Would you like more OJ? That's what we call orange juice here.
OK.

Nick felt good about this short exchange on uncles, but suspected it wouldn't be the last. He wiped egg off of Joey's chin and went with him upstairs to help pick out some clothes for the day. Nick's creeping feeling of being alone in a dangerous world had softened only a little with the sharing of dippy eggs.

~ ~ ~

Joey had laid claim to the sun porch as his playroom. The box for his little "critters" was now their make-believe fort. Nick had found some other small boxes and arranging Joey's army of critters was keeping him well occupied. Nick was in the kitchen keeping a watch on Joey from a distance when his phone rang. He answered it.

Good morning, Joseph.

Hello, Nick. Jenn isn't any better so there is nothing to tell Joey.

Oh, I think you should tell him that his mother is getting the best care, which is true isn't it? Have you made progress working from home and how are you feeling?

I feel really weak and my breathing isn't right, but when I told my doctor she said that being at home was the best place for me to be. Phyllis brought me my company lap top. She's great, Nick. Learns quick. How is Joey?

Why don't you talk to him?

Nick called in Joey and put the phone on speaker.

Hi, Joey. What are you doing?

Playing fort with boxes. When is Mom coming to get me?

Joey, Mommy has gotten sick. She is so sick that she needs to stay in the hospital until she gets better.

Can I go see her? I want to go see her.

You can't go into the hospital. That's the rules, but maybe you could wave to her through the window.

Nick, could you take Joey to the hospital so he could wave to his mother?

Not sure how to wave to Jenn in the ICU but he said, yes, we can do that. We could do it this morning.

Nick, the ICU is on the third floor. I'll call and ask if Jenn could wave out the window to Joey.

OK, Joseph. Joey, go get some shoes on and we will get ready to go see your mother.

As Joey ran up the stairs, Nick took the phone off of speaker.

How is this going to happen, Joseph?

The room faces William Street. Third floor. I'll call the supervisor and ask that the staff keep an eye out for an old man and a boy waving from down on the street. They all wear masks, Nick. A nurse can wave back. It won't be Jenn but it's what she would do. What time do you think you will be there? Give us about an hour.

Thanks, Joseph. I think this is important for Joey.

Thank you, Nick. I'll call Joey again today. Bye.

As Nick was putting on his shoes getting ready to leave, Joseph's phrase "old man and a boy" kept running in his head. That's who will be standing on the sidewalk waving. Yes, but that's also who they are. This new image of an old man and a boy settled on Nick like a warm blanket.

Joey came running down the steps in his shoes and jacket.

I'm ready, Uncle Nick. Let's go see my mother.

~ ~ ~

The drive to the hospital was surprisingly easy. Where is everyone, Nick wondered? Then they found what seemed a good spot to wave, and waited not sure which window to watch. Soon a person appeared in the window a few steps to the right began waving. Nick and Joey moved

that way and waved back. Nick was pleased that Joseph had been able to arrange this. That feeling only lasted a few moments because Joey had a long face.

I don't think that was my mother, Uncle Nick.

Nick knew that was the truth and realized that Joey hadn't been fooled. Nick knew that the truth had to be told. It was the only thing to do.

You're a smart boy, Joey. That was your mother's nurse waving for your mother. Your mother is very sick and probably couldn't get out of bed. When you are that sick your nurse does everything for you, even wave to us. I think she probably held your mother's hand with one hand and waved to you with the other hand. It's what a good nurse would do.

I'm scared, Uncle Nick. I don't want my mother to be so sick that she can't wave to me.

I know, Joey, but everyone in the hospital is doing everything they can to help her get better.

Nick took Joey by the hand and they began to walk back to the car.

Do you like Happy Meals, Joey?

I guess.

What if we stop at McDonald's and get two Happy Meals?

OK. Are you going to eat one too? I thought they were only for little kids like me.

I never had one before, but it seems like a fun thing for an old man and a boy to do.

You're funny, Uncle Nick.

Nick opened the door to the Golden Arches. Uncle Nick, do you have a quarter? I'd like to ride the horse. Joey ran over and called back, why is the horse covered up? How am I going to ride it? Nick looked at the kid behind the counter who said, we're trying to keep the kids safe.

Nick was pleased that Happy Meals had been a good idea although he also ordered a large side of fries. As they were finishing their meal, Joey was still wondering why he couldn't ride the horse when an old friend came in and saw Nick, and Nick greeted him.

Hi, Pat. How have you been. It's been a while.

Hi, Nick. Who's this good-looking boy with you?

This is Joey. He's staying with me for a while, and we have been doing things together.

I'll get my coffee and sit with you if that's OK.

Pat got his coffee and sat down across from Joey.

So Joey, what fun things have you done with Nick today?

We went to the hospital to wave to my mother, only it wasn't my mother.

Uncle Nick says it was a nurse.

Oh, that sounds important Joey. I'm sorry you didn't get to wave to your mother.

Nick, what's up that Joey's mother is in the hospital?

Joey is Jennifer's son, and she is sick and the hospital isn't allowing any visitors. She has this new virus. It must be very contagious. They are not letting anyone to visit. Even Joseph, Joey's father, can't get in to see her.

That's really harsh, Nick, when you can't get in to see your mother. I'm really sorry about that, Joey. How is your father doing? I haven't seen Joseph since I guess you were real little.

He's not my father.

Oh, who said that!

Uncle Nick said it.

Pat looked at Nick with concern, then anger, but he only said, I see. Pat knew the general story of Jenn and Joseph, but it was totally out of character for Nick to say what he apparently had said.

Nick would have rather been someplace else, really any place else, at that moment. Nick, the counselor, knew that the truth had always been the right thing to say, but there was such a thing as the right time to say it.

I think Joey is thinking about the phone conversation he overheard between his Dad and myself. I later explained that there is more than one way to be an uncle like me and now I need to say to Joey that there is more than one way to be a father. Joey, Joseph is absolutely your father because he is married to your mother and he loves you the best of all people.

Joey poked at his French fry then said,
then why doesn't he come get me? I want to go home.

Pat raised his eyebrows at Nick clearly saying, the kid asked a good question, Nick. Out with it.

Your Dad can't come get you just yet because he is sick like your mother and he doesn't want to give that illness to you. As soon as he feels better, he will come and take you home.

Oh, that's really, really harsh, Joey, to have both your Mom and Dad sick and you can't be with them. I guess they want you to be safe, and I know your Uncle Nick will take good care of you.

Pat looked across the table and could see Joey shrinking into a scared and unhappy little child. For Pat, it was like seeing himself from years ago and he had to do something.

Joey, when I was little like you, I didn't know who I was.

Joey's eyes went to Pat.

You didn't know who you were? Aren't you Pat?

Yes, now I'm just good old Pat that everybody knows, but when I was little, I didn't know who I was.

Joey shook his head. Didn't you have a name?

Yes, I had a name, and I had a mother and father who loved me, but I had to find out for myself who I was.

Nick saw Pat's direction and wondered how much information was too much for a 6-year-old boy. Nick knew that Pat was a happy, stable transgender man, but that it had been a difficult journey for him and his parents. So Nick moved the focus to himself.

At one time, Joey, I was Brother Nick, and I wore a brown robe every day. Now I am Uncle Nick. I was a full-grown man before I knew completely who I was. I really like being your uncle. Being your uncle is who I am.

I'm Joey. I know who I am.

Yes you are, and I think you have a good start in knowing who you are, and we like you just the way you are, don't we, Pat?

Yes, we do. Say, I have a fishing boat. Would you like to go fishing with me? Your Uncle Nick could come too.

I like fish.

Then it's settled. Tomorrow we will go fishing.

~ ~ ~

Next Day...

People who have gone fishing together on a cool windy day create a special bond. It starts with the feeling of stinging spray, and flourishes with boating the first fish of the day. Nick was not a fisherman, but he could see in Joey's face the look of a child discovering a life-long passion. Pat's love of the sport was working its magic. Joey was going to be a fisherman.

On the run back to the dock it was almost lunch time and Pat brought out peanut butter and jellies, guessing it would be a hit, and discovered it was Joey's favorite sandwich, and as it turned out his favorite, root beer. Lunch was good. The fishing was good, and life was good on a chilly March day when people were staying in their warm houses. Many because they were told they had to.

Nick thanked Pat, and put Joey in the warm car and headed for home. Nick's phone had not jingled all morning and Nick hoped his phone would stay quiet, at least until they got home because there was only one way to answer the phone in the car – speaker – and it was loud. So when the phone rang, Nick pushed answer and said,
Joey and I are in the car on our way home from fishing, and we can all hear well. Right, Joey?

There was a pause. Then Joseph's voice broke as he said,
they have taken Jenn, I mean your Mom, off the ventilator. That means she is getting better, Joey. Your Mom is going to be all right.

Nick could hear Joseph fighting for control of his voice. Joey said, when can I see Mom?

It may be a few days yet, Joey. I will call you every day. Thank you, Nick, for everything. So, Joey, you went fishing today; wasn't it cold?

It was a little cold, but we had a great time, Dad.

Nick, be sure Joey gets some warm soup when you get home.

I will, Joseph. Thank you for the good news about Jenn. We are all OK here.

Nick had to get his own mind straight. What did he just hear! Jenn was going to be OK. That was the best possible news. This virus seemed to happen fast, then go away fast. He will ask Joseph about that. Joey didn't know that his mother could have died. He knew she was sick, but the thought that he might lose his mother had not penetrated. Was that good or was there a serious lack of communication? How can an old man learn to see through the eyes and hear with the ears of a little child?

Joey broke into Nick's thoughts. When can we go fishing again, Uncle Nick?

What if we ask Pat to bring over the fish that we caught, and we can have a fish dinner. Then we can ask about the next time.

That's great. Can we do that!

Pat's number wasn't in Nick's contact list, but he managed to fumble it in. Pat, Joey wants to know if you can bring over those fish, and we can have a fish dinner, and he wants to know when he can go fishing again?

A fish dinner would be great, Nick, and I'll bring a friend if it's OK. Would 6:00 o'clock be good?

Joey took over the conversation. That would be great, Pat. When can we go fishing again?

We will talk about it at dinner. See you then.

This has been the best day ever, Uncle Nick.

Nick could feel tears, and he had to agree with Joey – this was the best day ever. Then he wondered, could I ever be like Joey? Was I ever? Did he ever have a best day ever?

~ ~ ~

Dinner Time...

Nick had sent Megan a short text: *Jenn is out of ICU – great news! We are going to have Lake Michigan perch for dinner. Pat will cook.*

So when Megan came in to a house where someone was frying fish, she was not surprised by the aroma. She knew Pat from years ago, but she didn't recognize the other person in the kitchen. Pat saw her and called out,
Hi, Megan. Thanks for letting me use your kitchen. This is my friend, Chad. He moved in with me last year. We make a good team. Chad, this is my old, I mean, young friend, Megan. This is her kitchen so we need to respect her wishes.

Nice to meet you, Chad. My kitchen will be fine as long as there is nothing missing when you two leave, she said with a wink.

Just then she saw Joey on a stool watching what was going on at the stove. He was all smiles, but she still had her mothering instincts.

Joey, get away from that hot stove. That oil could pop on you. You are too close.

OK, Aunt Megan. And Joey moved back about an inch.

Nick was not involved in cooking the fish so Magen nodded to the front of the house, and Nick followed. What do you know about Jenn? Is she really out of danger now? That's great news, but I don't understand how she improved so quickly. She isn't well, just off the ventilator. Joseph thinks it may be several days before she can come home, and I can tell he still isn't doing well, just hanging on.

Joey is really enjoying this fishing experience, isn't he?

He said that it's the best day ever. I need to talk later about his response to his Mom's getting better. I don't think he ever realized how sick she was. Or didn't want to know. We can talk later. Pat came to the table with a platter of fish and called everyone to dinner. Megan asked, Joey, which one did you catch? Joey looked at Pat and Nick and said, I think most of them. The guys nodded agreement. Joey was a fisherman for life.

~ ~ ~

Later...

Pat and Chad cleaned up the kitchen. Joey wanted to show them the fish tank, and his room, and his box of little animals. That kept the three of them busy for at least an hour. Megan had some news for Nick.

I'll be working from home. The office will be shut down except for a couple of supervisors. Is that because of the new virus? Yes, I know you have had a great day. I could see it on all your faces, but that might be the last time you go out except to buy food. There is a new stay home rule, which will apply to everyone, starting in two days. Joey is already asking about a next fishing trip. It may be a while, Nick. You need to catch up on the news. OK, what about Joey and school? It hasn't hurt him to be out a couple of days, but what now? I think we should call the school. Tell them he is here with us and find out what their plans are. I'll do that in the morning. I'll go get Joey ready for bed.

As Nick turned, Joey was standing next to him. I want to go back to school, Uncle Nick, and when is my mother coming home?

Tomorrow we will try to find out about school and about your Mom. Let's get ready for bed.

I want to tell my class about fishing.

I'm sure they would all be interested. Up to bed now. Let's go.

Megan knew that Nick wanted to talk more. She turned on the TV while Nick went upstairs. There were the numbers on the screen. The number of virus cases were shooting up as were the numbers of deaths. The news anchor was saying the hospitals were running out of ventilators and even PPE. When a funeral director came on the screen saying he was being overwhelmed, she turned it off when they showed a row of white refrigerator trucks in the hospital parking lot.

Nick came in with two small glasses of wine and said, what was it like when your mother died?

We are going to talk about Joey, aren't we?

Yes, I was young when my father died, but not as young as Joey. It was a lonely feeling, Megan, but I think I have blocked a lot of it out.

Do you think your father's death had anything to do with your joining the Franciscans, or even taking up psychology?

Could be. I wanted community with the Brothers. Could they have been a surrogate father? Possible. And I wanted to help people deal with their feelings of loneliness and even abandonment. Could all be connected. How old were you when your mother died?

I was 35. I remember a kind of numbness, and so many details to take care of because it was only me.

We were friends, with our desks within sight of each other, but I don't remember a lot of talk about your mother; maybe "what am I going to do with this big house" kind of talk.

No, I didn't, but I was seeing you as a dependable friend, a close friend, someone who would always be there for me. I trusted you, Nick.

Parents almost always die first. Isn't it natural that we look for stable, dependable relationships.

Yes, on both things, Nick. What do you think is going on in Joey's mind?

I don't think he knew or knows how sick his mother was, and let's hope that's over.

Do you think that's good or bad for him?

I think if Jenn had died without him being able to be with her, it would have been very bad. As it is, I don't think we need to worry over it. He just had a great day. Let's leave it like that.

Nick heard a small noise and turned. Hi, Joey. Do you need something?

You said you were going to find me a kid's toothbrush. Did you find one? I need to brush my teeth.

No, I didn't find one. Tonight, you will need to use the big person's toothbrush I gave you.

OK, Uncle Nick. Are you going to come and help me say my prayers?

I'll be there in a minute. You go brush your teeth.

As Joey went back up the stairs, Megan said quietly, you forgot Joey's night time prayers? That's not like you, Nick.

How long do you think he was standing there? He moves around like a ...!

Like a little kid, Nick. Remember?

OK, but you agree we let this topic go for now?

Yes, I do, especially with big ears and little feet in the house.

Going to say prayers. What's on the TV?

You don't want to know.

That bad?

Worse.

Joey will figure that out too.

Nick, there was an announcement that everyone must wear masks out in public now – this is mandatory. Megan, where are we going to get masks? I guess I'll have to sew some. Can you do that? Yes. They say on TV that the instructions for making them are on the internet. I can't believe this is happening.

Nick, you have some calling to do tomorrow, and you will be seeing a lot more of me.

I always enjoy your company, Megan.

Go help Joey say his prayers.

On his way up the stairs Nick began to think about getting old. He knew all the old men jokes, like why did I come into this room when you couldn't remember why, and he had felt prepared for old age. But he wasn't prepared for the loss of confidence in himself that he was feeling. The telephone call was a huge blunder, and now little things like forgetting his toothbrush promise and bedtime prayers loomed large in his mind. What else was he going to forget? What happens when you can't trust yourself? When he got to the top of the stairs, all he could think of was focus, Nick, focus.

~ ~ ~

Next Day...

The school call surprised Nick with the heavy schedule Joey would have with the new learning from home set-up the school was going to use. Nick was also surprised by Joey's level of skills with the laptop computer that Joey would use. It wasn't going to be "telling his class" about his fishing trip, but Nick could see a big part of Joey's day, and his, was going to be schoolwork. The only saving thought that Nick had was that maybe this wouldn't last too long. Nick would be disappointed. There would be no more in-person school for Joey this spring.

Joseph's call wasn't much better except he was able to get a phone into Jenn. Her voice was weak when she called Joey, and she only told Joey she would see him soon and that she loved him, but Nick could see Joey brighten up. His only question was the same question he had been asking, when are you coming home? And still there was no answer to that question.

Nick took the phone out onto the back porch and Joey went to "his" fish. Joseph, I'm not a doctor, but Jenn was only in the ICU a short time. What did they tell you?

Nick, they were really surprised at Jenn's sudden improvement. They said she started to improve about the time you and Joey were there to wave to her.

That's wonderful, Joseph. Some day you will need to tell Joey that story. Thanks, Nick. You can be sure I will.

Nick got out a large piece of white paper, and he and Joey made a daily schedule for schoolwork. Nick could already see boredom creeping in on top of feeling separated from his parents and school friends. This was not going to be easy. How long would it be, a week? A month? No one knew.

~ ~ ~

*"For weeks now it has been evening.
Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by; we feel it in the air, we notice in people's gestures, their glances give them away."*

*Pope Francis, The Statio Orbis, March 27, 2020
on St. Peter's Square completely empty of people*



COVID FOG

I'm not going back to work at the ER, Nick. In the past I have felt angry, disappointed, I even felt desperate, but never fear. When I was sick with this virus, I was afraid. It felt like I was walking backwards into my grave. I never want to feel that way again, ever. I'm not going back, and this time I mean it!

How is your physical health now? You look OK, maybe a little thin, but OK.

I am regaining some strength, but it could take weeks, I think, to get back to feeling normal. I am so glad that Joseph's experience wasn't as bad as mine, and that Joey didn't get it. They are my anchor, Nick. They kept me alive.

I needed to talk to you quietly about Joey, that's why I asked Joseph to take Joey for a walk or whatever they wanted to do. I'm glad we have this time because there are things I need to tell you. I think Joey said he wanted a Happy Meal.

Jenn now a little concerned,
how has he been? I mean this time with you and Megan. It has been nearly a month.

Joey is healthy. He eats well and sleeps well. His schoolwork on the computer is a drag. He will need constant encouragement, but he eventually gets through it, at least most of it.

It doesn't look like they will reopen the schools this spring but I will be home full time so we will do our best. Joey and I.

The highlight of our time together was our fishing trip. He said it was the best day ever and I had to agree with him even though I am not a fisherman.

We will try to find other fishing opportunities for Joey.

I know Pat would love to take him out again when things get back to some kind of normal. Do you have Pat's phone number? If not, I'll read it to you.

Nick read Pat's number to Jenn and she put it in her contact list.

You need to know that things were said, unintentionally, within Joey's hearing that will almost certainly come up at some future time. I tried to explain what an uncle is, and also what a father is to Joey, but I have no doubt that uncle and father issues are still there at least in the back of his mind.

How in the world did these things come up in the presence of a six-year-old, Nick? What were you thinking?

There was a tension in Jenn's questions that told Nick that she had not stepped very far back from the edge.

I was stupid and unaware of how quietly a little boy moves about and how good his hearing is. There is no way for me to take back anything that was said. I did my best to help him know that there are different ways to be an uncle or a father.

Nick, Joseph and I have talked about how Joey came to be one of us, but we have pushed this conversation with Joey way back into the future.

You will do and say the right things when the time is right, Jenn, but when that time comes may now be out of your control. That's why I needed to tell you now, what happened.

Nick related the phone call and what was said, except Joseph's part. Joseph would need to tell Jenn how he felt that he would rather die with her than be separated. Those things were not for Nick to say and he knew it. So he said,

You need to find a new normal for yourself and Joey. Routines can help. If he wants to visit us here, we can always accommodate a vacation day with Uncle Nick. But what I am saying is as important for you as it is for Joey, and don't leave Joseph out of your circle. The three of you need to find your way back to being family again. I know that, Nick. I am not sure that I can regain the new normal you say I need. This is your family's first day back together. Don't rush, just be together. OK, Nick, I'm not ready to rush anything. Good. Call me tomorrow. That's important, Jenn. Call me. Thanks, Nick. I will.

One more thing. Did you know we waved to your window at the hospital? Joey thought it would be you waving back but he knew it wasn't. He may still think he was lied to. Being separated from you was very difficult for him. No, I didn't know about the waving. I'll be there for him, Nick. This won't happen again. When did this waving happen, Nick? I think the second day you were in the ICU. That was also my last day in ICU, Nick. Yes, Jenn, I have thought about that. Joey needs you. I won't let him down, Nick, not again. If you feel depression, there is help for that. Of course I feel depressed, but I don't want to go down the chemical road, Nick. My experience with drugs almost ended my life. Don't forget Joseph. We are the triple "J's", Nick. I won't forget. They turned toward the front door when they heard Joey say,

What's a triple "J", Mom? That's you and me and your father, Joey. Jennifer, Joseph and Joey. We are the triple "J's".

~ ~ ~

Megan had given Joey the box of little stuffed animals and he carried the box into the house they had shared since Joey was born. It had been Joseph's house and today they all felt comfortable in it. It was home. Joseph picked up all the clothes and shoes. Jennifer found her favorite chair and collapsed into it. Joseph took the clue and said,

I'll settle Joey in his room, then we can order some pizza. No need to do any cooking or cleaning up. The place may not be perfect, but you can just relax.

Joseph, the place looks better than I expected, and pizza is good. I'll read Joey a story at bedtime, but you can get him settled back in his room.

I asked Phyllis to come over and straighten up the house while I went to get you and Joey. She has been a big help to me over the last month.

Tell her thanks for me. I would like to see her, but not soon. Maybe next week I'll stop in at your office.

If you want, but there is no need. I'll take care of Joey.

~ ~ ~

After pizza, root beer, and bath, Joey was ready for bed. Jennifer tried to read Joey's favorite bedtime story, *Where the Wild Things Are*, but the words didn't seem to come out right. By now Joey knew the story by heart so he filled in the blanks. Finally, she just lay down on the bed with him and began to cry. Joey moved closer but said nothing, then as Jennifer got up to leave, he said,
Uncle Nick would leave the light on for me.

OK, Joey, that's what we will do. Sleep good.

~ ~ ~

Joseph was never good at talking things out. He wanted actions to speak for him so he had put the dishes in the dishwasher and the pizza box on the back porch and was sitting quietly in the living room when Jennifer came down the stairs.

Joseph looked up at Jennifer as she came down the steps and sensed that something was not right. They had been married long enough that he knew her expressions so he asked, is Joey OK?

He's quiet, like us. This is not going to be easy, Joseph. I need to sit down, she said, but instead of sitting she continued to stand.

You mean finally getting over the virus? It has really messed with us, hasn't it.

Come sit with me on the couch. Jennifer continued to stand at the bottom of the stairs and said again, I need to sit down. Joseph became more concerned and got up to go to her when she moved to the closet and got her coat, took out her phone and tapped a contact and spoke into it. Can you come now? Then she put on her coat and started toward the door.

Joseph wanted to take her arm and say, what are you doing, but didn't want to alarm her with his own sharp sense of concern.

Then she said, I want my mother. I'm going to my mother.

Can't you call her?

No. No, I can't call her. I have to go to her, Joseph.

When will you be back?

I don't know. And Jennifer dropped her phone and went out the door. Joseph saw her get in a car that he didn't know. For the second time in a month Joseph's world collapsed.

~ ~ ~

Joseph had tried to sleep but eventually gave up and dressed for the day. Joey, however, found sleep easy in his own bed in his own room surrounded by his own toys. So Joey was still sleeping when there was a gentle early knock on the door. It was Joseph's new assistant, Phyllis.

Morning, Joseph. I needed to get your approval and signature on two new leases. They both want to move in today.

Come on in, Phyllis. Is there a problem? You could have called.

One of the leases is a little different, but also I wanted to see Jennifer and Joey and tell them how glad I was that they were back in their own home. I hope I'm not intruding.

No, it's OK. Joey is still asleep and Jennifer is at her parents' house. Would you like some coffee? Tell me about the leases.

No coffee, Joseph, but thanks. Are Jennifer's parents OK? It's such a strange time with this virus being so dangerous to old people. I do hope her parents are OK. About the leases. One lease is for a shorter term than the standard year and the other is an older couple with two cats and we only allow one small pet but I think in this case it may be OK to make an exception.

They have told me that one of the cats is very old and probably doesn't have long to live and they want to keep it with them and they won't replace it if it dies. The short-term lease is for the summer months to meet a work assignment. I think both of these leases would work for us. The units are empty, Joseph.

Just as she finished telling about the new leases she heard a little sound and turned to find Joey standing next to her in clown pajamas with a rough looking teddy bear.

Oh, you must be Joey. My name is Phyllis. I work with your father, and I love your pajamas. And she held out her hand.

Joey looked confused and said to his Dad, where's Mom? She isn't upstairs and she isn't here with you? I want her to help me get dressed.

Your Mom is at Grandma and Grandpa Baxter's house. She went to see them last night to make sure they were OK.

When will she be back? She promised to help me with school today.

Phyllis realized that she had walked into something entirely different than what she had expected. Jennifer had gone to her parents, last night it seemed, and Joey was a very unhappy child. Joseph looked like he had missed a night's sleep and was having trouble focusing. Phyllis took charge and handed Joseph the two leases.

Read these please so we can give these people an approval to move in today. Joey, have you had any breakfast? How would you like to get dressed and have breakfast with me? Can you dress yourself? Joseph, is it OK if I make Joey some breakfast?

Joseph didn't answer.

Can I have pancakes with ears?

I'm sure we can make pancakes with ears, Joey. Go get dressed.

Joey went upstairs and Phyllis turned to Joseph. I think you should go to Jennifer's parents' house. Just sign these leases and go. Joey and I will have breakfast and I'll go to these people and tell them to move in.

I'm not sure I should go to Jennifer.

I am. Just go. Joey and I will be fine.

Are you sure?

Just go, Joseph.

Joey came down sort of dressed and Phyllis straightened him up a little.

The leases are OK, Phyllis. I'll do what you suggested.

It's the right thing to do, Joseph. Joey, let's make some pancakes with ears.

~ ~ ~

After their quick breakfast Phyllis put Joey into her car to go tell the new people they could move in.

Joey said, this car is different.

It's called a Jeep, Joey. It can go almost anywhere, and the top comes off too.

The top comes off? Can we do that now?

It would be cold and windy without the top and it takes some time to take it off so we need to leave the top on today.

As they made their way to the apartment building Joey was looking around inside the Jeep and saw fishing rods in the back. Do you go fishing?

Yes, I like to fish and that's why I have a Jeep to get me to off-the-road places that are good for fishing.

I went fishing with Uncle Nick and my friend, Pat.

Did you like it?

It was my best day ever. Could you take me fishing sometime?

Maybe when the weather gets warmer we could all take a fishing trip. I mean you and your Mom and Dad too.

Oh, that would be fun.

As they pulled into the parking lot Joey was now a bright-eyed child.

~ ~ ~

Joseph knocked on the Baxters' door hoping he was doing the right thing. He felt tension bordering on anxiety. Why did Jennifer have to go to her parents' home last night? Was she worried about her parents, or didn't want to be with him? He had thought about being alone with her after more than a month apart, and it was a harsh blow that that didn't happen. The possibility that she didn't want to be with him was almost paralyzing.

Jennifer's Mom opened the door.

Joseph, how nice to see you. What brings you here this time of morning? I hope everything is OK.

Joseph took a breath. I came to see Jennifer. I hope she is up and dressed. I don't want to interrupt her sleep.

Joseph, Jennifer isn't here.

She didn't come here last night?

No, Joseph, and now you have me worried.

Didn't she come home from the hospital yesterday? Please come in. Don't stand there on the cold porch.

Joseph didn't move.

Yes, she came home after we picked up Joey from Megan and Nick's house, but then she said she needed to see you and she left.

This is not good, Joseph. Where would she go?

I don't know but I need to get back to Joey. My assistant is looking after him and took him with her but they will be home soon and I need to make sure that he is OK.

Is there some reason to worry about him?

No, well I don't know, at least I don't think so, but I need to be sure and then try to find Jennifer. Please call me if she comes here. I'm going to call Nick to see if she has gone there.

I'll call you, Joseph, if she shows up, but you need to tell us what you find out. You know you may need to ask the police for help. She may be confused and lost, Joseph. There is talk about how this new virus can cause mental confusion.

I can't think that far ahead, Sue. I need to go to Joey, and he left.

When Joseph pulled up at his house, Phyllis' Jeep was at the curb and there was a car he didn't know behind it. He jumped out of his car and ran into the house. Phyllis met him at the door. Where's Joey?

He is upstairs getting a picture to show me of his fishing trip. You look terrible, Joseph. Where is Jennifer? Did you bring her home with you?

She wasn't at her parents' house, and I was hoping she might have come home.

She isn't here, Joseph. Where could she be?

As they were talking a person got out of the strange car and walked up to the house. The door was still standing open so he called in.

Hello, can I speak to Jennifer's husband, please.

Joseph turned around. I'm her husband. Who are you? Do you know where she is?

I'm Carl, her favorite Uber driver. She called me last evening and told me to take her to a street address, but it was not the kind of place where she would usually go. She never called me to bring her home. The more I thought about it, the more worried I became so I stopped to see if she was OK. Where I took her was not a good part of town, especially at night.

Joseph stood stunned. Phyllis said,
Carl, can you take Joseph to that address now?

Yes, I can do that.

Joseph, you take Joey and go with Carl. I'll stay here in case she comes home.

Are you sure?

Yes, Joseph. Go with Carl and I'll stay here.

Joey came into the room with a picture to show Phyllis and she said,
what a nice picture, Joey, and that was a lot of fish. You must be a good fisherman. Now you need to go with your Dad to bring your mother home.

OK, let's go, Dad. Who is this?

This is Carl, Joey. He's going to drive us.

OK. We had a good breakfast, Dad.

~ ~ ~

There was litter in the gutters, but no broken windows. It was a poor neighborhood, but not completely forgotten. Carl drove up to a large apartment building and stopped. This is where she wanted me to drop her off. I asked twice to make sure, but she insisted.

Joseph did not know where to start looking. How many apartments in this building, could be fifty or more. Should he start knocking on doors? Joey spoke up.

Is this where Mom is? Joseph didn't answer.

Joseph just shook his head but got out of the car with Joey and asked Carl to wait for them. They started into the apartment building because he didn't know what else to do. Carl said that he would wait, and said, maybe you will get lucky and someone will know her.

Carl, no one would know her in this building. There is no reason for her to have ever been here before.

Dad, let's go. I want to find her, and he tugged Joseph toward the big open door.

OK, Joey.

Joseph couldn't imagine Jennifer in this building. Everything told him to go back home and start calling everyone they knew to try to find her, and if that didn't work, to ask the police for help, but Joey kept pulling and Joseph kept following.

When they entered the run-down building, it looked almost abandoned. Joey let go of Joseph's hand and ran up the stairs to the first landing and banged on the first door. A huge Black woman opened the door. Joey stepped back. The woman bent down and said, you must be Joey, and looking past Joey she said, Joseph. I'm glad you came to get her. She did not rest well. I'm sure she will be glad to see you.

Then coming from inside the apartment Joey heard,
I'm so glad you found me, Joey. I was so afraid. I didn't know how to get home.

Joey called out in a loud voice. Carl knew you were here. He brought us here.

Joseph had regained a little mental balance. Questions could wait. But Joey couldn't wait. He rushed past the big woman and hugged his mother around the knees and they both began to cry.

The big woman reached out and took Joseph by the arm and tugged, almost snatched, him into the apartment then stepped back. Joseph fell against Jennifer and Joey and the three of them almost fell to the floor.

The woman pushed them gently toward the couch then waited. Jennifer was the first to speak. Thanks for giving me a place last night, Paula.

Jennifer, you are always welcome here, but I think your family wants to take you home.

Yes, and that's where I need to be.

Let's go home, Joey. Joseph, still confused, but holding his questions, followed his family out to Carl's waiting car.

~ ~ ~

Phyllis heard the car pull up and went to the door to see the family spill out of Carl's car. She gave a whoop and headed down the walk to greet them. She knew the woman could only be Jennifer, and gave Jennifer a big hug then wondered if she was being too familiar.

I hope you remember me from Maria's wedding. I'm Phyllis, Joseph's assistant.

Hi, Phyllis, I remember. Can we go inside? I feel cold.

Oh, sorry, it was just that it was so good to see you coming home.

Joseph watched this interaction while negotiating with Carl who at first wouldn't take any money. Joseph's mind leaped forward and saw a friendship blossom between the two women right before his eyes. Then together they all went into the warm house, Joey leading the way. Once inside, Joey had to tell about his breakfast and his ride in a Jeep.

Phyllis is going to teach me how to catch trout with flies, aren't you, Phyllis? She says we could all go fishing together if we wanted to. Could we, Mom? It would be great!

Jennifer smiled and gave Joey the third or fourth hug of the morning and said, let's see about that this summer. I need a shower and change of clothes. Can you stay for a while, Phyllis? I would like to know you better.

Yes, I have taken care of our only pressing business. If the boss says it's OK, I'll stay.

Joseph smiled his consent and looked at Phyllis with new eyes. He had seen a rather plain, healthy-looking woman in a white blouse and navy blazer sitting behind a desk sorting papers and answering the phone. Now he saw someone completely different. He was seeing Phyllis through Joey's eyes, an outdoor woman with a Jeep who goes fishing, and takes charge when someone needs to. He was amazed at the different person he saw standing in his living room.

Thank you for insisting that I go to Jennifer's parents. I was uncertain that was the best thing to do. It shook me out of my do-nothing funk, and set me on the path to find her. Thank you.

It was obviously the right thing to do. Where did you find her?

In a run-down apartment complex and not knowing how to find her way home.

Really! How did you know to look for her there? That's quite a story, Joseph.

Carl took us there, then Joey found her.

It was Joey. Right, Joey?

Phyllis turned to Joey. How in the world did you know your mother was in that apartment?

I don't know. I just knew. When can you show me how to fish?

Well not today, Joey, but soon.

Joseph, our two new tenants will move in today. I told them how to use the freight elevator. They were pleased. So tell me how you found Jennifer.

I'll put a pot of coffee on and I think she should tell her own story because I have no idea how she came to be where we found her. So you really drive a Jeep and like to fish for trout?

Yes, and I would love teaching Joey, right, Joey?

When can we go?

Phyllis' taking charge again said, Joseph, you need to call Jennifer's parents.

I did that in the car, but thanks for the reminder.

~ ~ ~

Jennifer looked better after her shower but there were deep worry lines.

Thank you for calling my Mom to tell her that I was home. I don't have any memory of saying that I was going to my parents' house. When I got into Carl's car the only name and address that made sense to me was Paula's so that was where I told Carl to take me. Paula is a no questions asked person. She just gave me some clean sheets and put me to bed. When I woke early, I wanted to go home but I didn't know how to get there. That's the whole story until you found me.

How do you know Paula? I was surprised to find you in that neighborhood but Carl was sure that was where he took you.

Joseph, Paula was a lifeline when I was trying to recover from opioids.

I guess you never mentioned her to me.

I'm sorry if it seems like I was keeping a secret from you. Paula was just part of my difficult life that I tried not to think about, but now that we have reconnected, I will want to see her again. Now I need to go to the hospital to tell them what I experienced.

Can't you call them? Joseph was afraid to let Jennifer out of his sight.

They will want to run tests, Joseph. I may have had a small stroke, or who knows what. They need to check me out. I need to know myself what happened. It may have been the ventilator protocol or it may be the virus is playing games with my mind. They need to know and so do I, and I need to go now.

Right now?

Yes.

I can't let you go by yourself.

OK, go with me.

Phyllis had been quiet, but now she said, I can stay with Joey. We will be fine, right Joey? You go.

While Jennifer went to get her coat Joseph said, Phyllis check our answering service to be sure that we haven't missed a problem.

OK, Joseph. Just go with her. She needs to do this.

A check of the answering service revealed two complaints, a clogged sink and an oven that didn't work.

Joey, I need to make sure the maintenance man knows about some work and check out our two new tenants. Come, let's go back to your Dad's apartment building.

OK, Phyllis, but I'm hungry.

We will get some food while we are out.

I like Happy Meals.

OK, we can do that.

When they arrived at the apartment building, Phyllis found the maintenance man and told him about the two complaints then went to the new short term lease tenants to see if they needed anything. They were getting settled with rental furniture. Then they went to the new elderly couple with two cats. When the woman came to the door, Phyllis welcomed them and introduced Joey.

And this is Joey, our property manager's son. Joey is helping me today.

Joey, you look like someone who would like a cookie.

Joey looked up at Phyllis and she said, it's OK for you to have a cookie, so Joey followed the woman to the kitchen. As he got to the kitchen an orange cat fell into step with him and Joey stopped to pet it. He got his cookie then sat down on the floor to share it with the cat.

The woman exclaimed, well I'll be! Socks never likes strange people, but he likes Joey.

The cat turned its head at the sound of its name but continued to push against Joey, and clearly enjoyed its cookie bits. Phyllis tried to retrieve Joey.

Joey, we need to go.

He likes me. Can I finish my cookie?

OK, but be quick about it. Then talking to the woman, is this the older cat you told me about? It looks healthy enough.

He does, doesn't he? This is not his normal self. He's 18 years old and arthritic, spends his days looking for the warmest spot to lay in and doesn't like strangers. This is more life than he has shown in a long time. He really likes Joey. It would be nice for Socks if Joey could visit. What do you think, Joey? Would you like to visit Socks again?

Could I do that, Phyllis?

We will talk to your Dad about it. Now we need to go.

Joey and Socks had finished the cookie and the cat followed him to the door. It looked like Socks would try to go out too, but the woman put her foot out and he stopped and sat down.

On the way down the elevator Joey asked again. When can I visit Socks?

We will ask your Dad. Let's go get that Happy Meal.

They found the dining area closed but they got drive-up meals and Joey got to eat his Happy Meal in the Jeep.

~ ~ ~

At the hospital they were very interested in Jennifer and wanted to keep her overnight for observation. They ruled out stroke and suggested she may have experienced a COVID-19 brain fog. If so, she would not be their first COVID-19 patient with a similar experience. She didn't want to stay the night, but she agreed to keep a log and call them the following week to report how she was feeling. Joseph gave her a questioning look when she came out of the doctor's office.

They think it may have been a virus brain fog. This is new, but not isolated. It could be a long-term problem with this virus. We can go home now, but I need to keep a log of how I am feeling and report it. Let's go home. I want to be with Joey. Seeing him come into Paula's apartment was like a curtain had been lifted in my brain. Let's go home, Joseph. Joseph felt like his life was slipping out of control. He didn't mind taking directions from Jennifer, or even Phyllis, but he couldn't see ahead. What's next was a blank.

~ ~ ~

On the way back to Joey's house Phyllis asked, this has been quite a day for you, Joey, you must be ready for some quiet time. You found your mother then discovered that Socks the cat likes you. Maybe a quiet evening at home is what you need.

You forgot riding in a Jeep and pancakes for breakfast.

That was fun, wasn't it? We should do that again someday.

And I met Paula, Mom's friend. She is really different, Phyllis.

How's she different?

She is the biggest person I've ever seen, and her skin is really dark. She's really friendly and she gave me a big hug, and Mom really likes her. And you said you would teach me how to fish for trout. This is my best day ever.

I thought fishing with your friend, Pat was your best day ever.

It was. Can't I have two best-day-ever's?

I guess you can, and maybe more. Here we are. I'm going to walk you into the house then I need to go home myself. Don't forget to ask your Dad if you can visit Socks.

As they entered the house, Jennifer met them and gave Joey the biggest hug ever. When she finally let him go, he said,
Mom, I have had the best day ever,
And he told his best day ever story all over again. He even remembered his pancakes with ears and his Happy Meal.



PHYLLIS

I have to go today. The work can't proceed without my approval.

Boss, I just checked on the weather and the cloud deck is less than 1,000 feet above the pass and if the cloud deck comes down there is no place to go. You can't turn around; the valley is too narrow. It's too big a risk, Boss.

You can fly under 1,000 feet cloud deck, can't you?

Yes, but it may not stay at 1,000 feet.

You want this job or don't you?

That was the question the pilot was asking herself – do I really want this job! And the answer was, yes. Without this job and this money, I will never get my business off the ground, she thought. She laughed at her own “off the ground” thought. What else would you call a flying taxi's service in Alaska? Yes, I want the job, she said, but to herself she said, I must have this job.

As they flew north into the Brooks Range, she could see the sides of the pass getting closer and the window of open air below the cloud deck getting smaller. She pointed and said, Boss? Then louder, Boss? Finally, he said OK. OK, turn around, but it was 15 seconds too late.

When they found the plane buried on the mountainside, the boss was dead and the pilot barely alive. The plane itself was a total loss and would never be recovered. At the inquest the boss' company insisted that it was the pilot's responsibility to make the decision to fly or stay on the ground. She had no answer. The only things she had in that courtroom was an insurance policy and her pilot's license, and she lost them both. She had her life. She needed a new start. Where and how? Her brother said, come live with me, and she began to apply for jobs with her brother and his friends as references and a claim that she had been a self-employed Army

veteran. Maria liked her and that sealed the deal, and Phyllis became Joseph's new administrative assistant. Now she drove a Jeep and was not sure she would ever fly again.

~ ~ ~

When Joseph looked at Phyllis, he saw more than an administrative assistant, but he didn't know what he saw. He would never have imagined that she had been an Army pilot, who tried to start her own business and almost died in the attempt. Shy Joseph would never ask, but Joey might.

Several days had gone by and Phyllis was taking Joey to work with her because he kept asking to see Socks, was bored with school on his computer, and she thought Jennifer and Joseph looked like they could use a quiet, private day. It had turned hot so Phyllis had on shorts just above the knee but sitting in the Jeep, Joey could see a raised pink streak down the side of Phyllis' leg from above the knee to mid-calf.

What's that, Phyllis, he said while pointing at the long scar?

That's a scar, Joey. I hurt my leg and that's where it healed. It's OK now.

Did it hurt?

Yes, it did for a while, but it's OK now. It doesn't hurt anymore.

Where did it happen?

In Alaska, and that's where I learned to fish.

Isn't it cold there?

Yes, but summers can be hot. Changing the subject she said, now when we get to my office I will call and see if you can visit Socks.

OK, Phyllis.

Joey didn't ask any more questions but Phyllis knew he would – any curious boy would want to know when and how and why. She had almost forgotten the long scar, but would never forget hitting the side of the mountain. Now she parked the Jeep in her spot in the basement garage and took Joey up the steps with her to her office. There was a message on her phone. She listened, then called Joseph.

Joseph answered. Hi, Phyllis. Is everything OK?

No, Joseph. You know the new old couple with the two cats?

Yes.

They were taken to the hospital last night. The EMT's left a message on the office phone. The people couldn't give the EMT's any other number.

Do we have any references on file?

I'll look, but maybe you should be the one to call them.

OK, Phyllis. See what names we have.

There was only one local name and she gave it to Joseph, who made the call.

Hello, my name is Joseph Cohen. I am the manager of the apartment building where Mr. and Mrs. Halverson live. You are listed as a reference on their lease.

I see. Is there a problem?

Mr. and Mrs. Halverson were taken to the hospital by ambulance last night and I have no other information, but the EMT's left me this message. It seems that the EMT's had no other contacts so I thought I would try to give this information to family – are you family, and are you the right person I should be talking to?

Yes, I am Mrs. Halverson's daughter. Why were they taken to the hospital!

I don't know why, but it must have been sudden. I can give you the EMT's number and that's really all I have.

This is distressing, but thank you for letting me know.

Please call me with whatever you find out.

Thank you. I will.

Joseph called Phyllis back and related his conversation.

OK, Joseph. I guess we won't know much more today. Then remembering why Joey was with her she said, I'll look in on their cats with Joey.

Thanks, Phyllis, I know Joey would like that.

~ ~ ~

Jennifer had slept in and had enjoyed the extra hour of sleep. When she came into the kitchen she saw Joseph still at the table.

Joseph looked up and said,
two residents were taken to the hospital last night and I have tried to connect with their family. Whatever happened must have been sudden because it seems they didn't even have time or the presence of mind to do that for themselves.

That's all you know?

Yes.

It could be COVID, Joseph. You may have to quarantine that apartment.

Jenn, Phyllis and Joey may be in that apartment right now. Joey wanted to visit their cat.

How could you let that happen! Get them out of that apartment, Joseph!

Joseph thinking, he may have made a serious mistake but not knowing how it happened, called Phyllis' mobile number. Phyllis answered.

Hi, Joseph. What do we know about this couple? Are they going to be OK?

Jennifer snatched the phone from Joseph. Phyllis get Joey out of that apartment right now. Wash his hands, and going into her doctor mode, and wash your hands and leave that room and don't let anyone else in.

Phyllis knew what panic sounded like and responded in her Army pilot calm voice, yes, Jennifer, I'll do what you say. Can you tell me why?

We don't know for sure, but if they have COVID, that room could be a contagious place. You and Joey must leave.

We will leave here now and not let anyone in.

Phyllis put her phone in her pocket and took Joey to the sink to wash their hands.

We have to leave, Joey, and no one will be able to come into this apartment.

But what about Socks and the other cat? We can't just leave them.

OK, Joey, they go with us, but we need to leave now.

~ ~ ~

The daughter secured HEPPA rights and was able to determine that her mother and step-father both had COVID, but she could not talk to them or get in to see them. She expressed her distress to Joseph when she called to tell him what she had found out. They may be dying all by themselves!

Joseph had a sudden knot in his stomach remembering his separation from Jennifer. He also remembered that he had never really told Jennifer how he felt when he could not be with her and decided he really must tell her, but when? This quiet day with Jennifer had gone up in a cloud of COVID confusion. So neither he nor Jennifer were in a good place when Phyllis came to the door with Joey and the two cat carriers. Phyllis realized that she had to explain that she

and Joey could not leave the cats in a closed apartment, but somehow her explanation didn't sound convincing.

Jennifer almost didn't let the cats in, but quickly remembered Joey's attachment to one of them so she said, well, bring them in, and in doctor mode said, give me your clothes and I will put them in the washer, and the two of you need to take showers. Phyllis, I'll find something for you to wear while your clothes are being washed.

Joseph, wipe down the cat carriers with Clorox wipes.

While clothes were being taken off, temporary clothes found and showers taken, privacy was of little concern and also not convenient. Joey, now very curious, couldn't help but see Phyllis' scar again. He saw that it went all the way up to her hip with raised red branches at the top. He also saw what looked to him like a patch of black fur. Joey thought of "his" cats. Maybe they were not really his, but he claimed them in his mind and knew they needed food and water. Joey had a growing list of questions unasked, for now.

Joey came down in his clown pajamas – and he opened the cat carriers. The kitten ran under the couch and Socks stuck to Joey.

Mom, Socks is hungry. What do we have for cats?

Seeing how attached the cat was to Joey, Jennifer softened and said, I can open a can of tuna but tomorrow we will need to get cat food until we know what their own family wants us to do with them.

Phyllis came in wearing slacks and a top that almost fit and said, I'll go to the pet store and get food and a litter box. She was taking some responsibility for making the decision to bring the cats with them.

Joey spoke up, that's great, Phyllis. Mom, can we give them some tuna now? I know they're hungry.

OK, Joey.

When Jennifer sat down two dishes of tuna, the kitten couldn't resist, but went back under the couch after its tuna snack. Joey sat down on the couch and Socks curled up beside him.

Phyllis left for the pet store and Jennifer looked at Joseph. Her eyes said, we don't need cats, but she said, we can care for them until we know where they belong.

~ ~ ~

Families begin in a variety of ways, some intentional and some accidental, and the manner of their formation does not predict their success. There were no adoption papers, but when it was learned that the cats did not have a home to return to, they became family. What may be more surprising was the same thing was happening for Phyllis. There was no formal collective decision around a conference table. No contract signed. But on the day Phyllis brought Joey and the

cats home, she became family. There were many decisions to be made and now a new family prepared to make them, while outside their door a pandemic raged.

The TV reported daily death toll went from 100's to 1,000's then to tens of thousands. Their world was now locked down with no vaccine to protect people and treatment often meant dying by yourself unable to breathe or even talk. Tents to isolate COVID cases sprung up in front of hospitals, and parking lots in back of hospitals filled up with refrigeration trucks to store the bodies of the dead. Joey wanted to know about the tents and the rows of big white trucks on TV, and he couldn't hold in those questions.

~ ~ ~

The pandemic was bringing out the worst and the best in people. Doctors and nurses were being stretched to the point of exhaustion while becoming the new heroes. The hospitality world collapsed. Business closed, which meant no jobs and no income for many who were already working paycheck to paycheck. Some people were buying guns to protect their hoard of food while others were making surgical style masks and giving them away while teaching others how to make them and wear them.

Joseph decided that someone needed to be at the apartment building full time. He and Phyllis would alternate days. Jennifer asked him to stop riding the bus to his office and he leased a car. They discussed food and decided that they would shop once a month, early in the day when few people were in the store while many of the apartment residents opted for delivery. Joseph insisted that all deliveries be to the lobby of the apartment building and people would be called to come to the lobby to get their order.

Nursing homes were originally created as safe places for the elderly. Those safe havens now became death traps. Once the virus got into a nursing home, no one could get out and many died alone, with their families frustrated and angry. Some stood outside looking into the windows at family members who were dying.

Jennifer and Joseph tried to shield Joey from the videos of ambulances lined up outside nursing homes and the lines of big white refrigeration trucks behind the hospitals, but it was impossible. As the deadly reality of the world outside his locked down house set in, Joey withdrew into a shell. The required remote learning wasn't happening. The encouragement Jennifer tried to give him made him stare blankly at his computer screen, with Socks curled up on the desk next to the key board. This was the way Phyllis found him when she stopped in on her way home to rest after her shift was over and Joseph had gone to his office.

How's it going, Joey? No answer.

Phyllis looked at Jennifer, who motioned to Phyllis to go with her.

He has gone into a shell, Phyllis, and I don't know how to draw him out. Schoolwork has essentially stopped.

Phyllis sat and thought for a minute then said,
what if I take him with me for the day?

Don't you need the day to sleep?

It was a quiet night and I was able to get a little sleep on the office cot. I can manage on that sleep.

I don't want him near other people.

OK, what about some time in the woods with just me? If anyone else shows up we will leave. I know a little stream with some big chubs that he may have fun catching.

OK, but no people.

They went back to Joey's room and Phyllis asked,
how would you like to come with me for the day, for a walk in the woods and maybe a little fishing?

Can Socks come too?

No, he wouldn't like that. He may be afraid out in the world by himself.

I would be there.

Yes, but when cats are afraid, they run and hide and that would not be good for him.

Can cats catch COVID?

We don't think so. But it would be better for Socks if he stayed safely in the house.

~ ~ ~

Then I want to stay here too. He might be afraid by himself.

He has your Mom and kitten to keep him company. The two of us could even do a little fishing. I know a little stream that has chubs in it that would be fun for you to catch.

Joey remained quiet, then bursting out – it's not fair that some people die and Socks is afraid!

No, it's not fair, is it, but we can still do things that we like to do, Phyllis paused – and we can be safe. If we stay away from other people, we will be safe. What if we put the top down on the Jeep? It's a nice day. We could do that and take a nice ride with the top down.

Could we go fishing too?

Yes, Joey, we can do both, put the top down and go fishing, and leave Socks safely at home.

OK, when can we go?

Whenever your Mom says it's OK.

Jennifer had been listening and said,
it would be nice for you to take a vacation day with Phyllis, so you can go now if you like. I'll
make sure Socks gets his dinner.

Phyllis put down the top, and she and Joey went to a nearby park with a little stream to fish.

Jennifer called Joseph. Phyllis took Joey out for a while, so it's quiet here, but Joey's cat is just
sitting by the door.

Maybe Joey will feel more like schoolwork when he gets back

Let's hope so. This has not been a good school day.

Try to make it fun for him.

I try, Joseph, but it hasn't been working.

Then get some rest yourself today.

OK, Joseph. Stay safe; we need you. Then to Socks – come sit with me. The cat continued
sitting at the closed door and didn't move.

~ ~ ~

Riding with the top down was OK and the chubs were easy to catch, but Joey had no
enthusiasm for warm wind or small, easy to catch fish. Phyllis had run out of ways to distract
and engage him so she said, let's take a little walk and see what we find.

Joey spoke up. Uncle Nick told me it would always be OK for me to visit him and have a
vacation day. Can we go see Uncle Nick?

I'll call your Mom and see if it's OK. Come sit with me on this old log while I call her.

Jennifer, Joey and I have run out of things to do and he would like to visit his Uncle Nick. I told
him I wanted to get your approval. I'll put the phone on speaker.

Wait, Phyllis, don't do that, but it was too late and Joey heard someone crying as the phone
switched to speaker.

Mom is that you?

Phyllis had quietly switched the phone off of speaker but Joey yelled into the phone,
Mom is that you? Are you crying?

Yes, Joey, and I need for you to come home now.

Right now?

Yes, Joey. Please come home now. Then – Phyllis, please bring Joey home.

Yes, Jennifer, we will come now. It's not far. We should be there in about 30 minutes. Is there anything I should know now?

No, not over the phone. Just please come home.

Come on, Joey, let's go back to the Jeep. Your Mom needs you to be home with her.

She was crying, wasn't she? Why was she crying?

I don't know, Joey. Let's go home.

~ ~ ~

When Phyllis and Joey got to the house, Jennifer met them at the door. Socks is on the couch, Joey. He was lying at the door and when I wanted to check for mail, he couldn't get up. He can't walk, Joey, so I picked him up and put him on the couch.

Joey rushed to Socks and put his face and hand on him.

Jennifer motioned Phyllis into the kitchen. There had been two more cases of COVID at the apartment and Joseph had been in close contact with one of them. He will stay quarantined at the apartment for at least ten days. Can you stay here with Joey?

Yes, I could do that.

Thanks, Phyllis, because this has been a very bad day for me. My father may have had a heart attack and waited too long before going to the ER because the ER is full of COVID patients. My mother was not allowed in the ambulance, and no one can get in to see him and it's killing my mother.

Jennifer, I will help in any way I can. Has Joseph shown any signs of being sick?

He says no, but even though he had it once, he could get it again or give it to Joey if he came home. It's better that he stays where he is, and then he can manage the apartment building.

What about your mother?

I want to go and be with her. I have been inside for days and so has she. We will be OK together. I need to do this, Phyllis.

I'll need to go to my place and bring some things over here. It won't take me long. Joey and I will be fine together. Just then Joey came into the kitchen with Socks following him.

Jennifer shook her head not really believing that the cat was walking. Then she said,

your Dad needs to stay at his apartment building, and I need to go visit Grandma. Phyllis will stay here with you. Are you hungry? Phyllis noticed that Jennifer had not said anything about Joey's Grandpa and wondered if keeping it a secret that his grandfather was seriously ill was best for Joey, but Joey himself needed answers.

Why does my Dad need to stay away from us, and why do you have to go to Grandma's house? I don't want Dad to stay away and you to go away too.

Taking care of the apartment building has become more difficult so he needs to stay there for a while, and Grandma needs my company for a few days.

Is my Dad sick?

No, Joey, your Dad isn't sick.

Then why can't he come home?

It's because other people are sick and that means he can't come home now.

Why can't I go with you to Grandma and Grandpa's house? Then remembering Socks, he said, OK, I need to be with Socks. He was afraid when I went away.

Jennifer took a breath of relief that Joey's questions had stopped and again asked, are you hungry? Joey shrugged, but Jennifer got out some bread and Joey's favorite peanut butter and jelly, and sat Joey down at the table. Then Jennifer followed Phyllis to the front door.

Phyllis, I used to be able to handle almost anything but first the cat, then Joseph, and now my Dad – this is just too much. I sat and cried when the cat couldn't get up and walk. That's not like me, Phyllis. If I broke a fingernail, it would be the straw that broke the camel's back – the last straw – it would put me over the edge – send me into an anxiety attack – I would just come apart.

Jennifer, this is too much for any person. I'll go get a few things from my apartment. It should not take me long.

Thank you for being so willing to help. I'll make a list of Joey's schoolwork and explain it when you come back, but he doesn't want to do it.

OK, I'll be back soon – and Phyllis went out the door.

Jennifer turned her back to the kitchen and held in a shoulder-shaking sob.

~ ~ ~

It was early but Joseph was sure Jennifer would be up so he called.

How is your mother holding up?

Not good, Joseph. She has her worry volume turned way up and I can't get her to calm down. They have never been apart for more than a day their whole married life, and the separation is killing her. How are things at the apartments?

Most people are cooperating, but there are a few I want to throw out but the best that I can do is not renew their lease.

What are they doing?

They refuse to wear surgical masks, and go in and out like there are no restrictions. It's as if the pandemic has not penetrated their brain. I put up signs everywhere but it does no good.

How are you sleeping?

Better now that I have moved into an apartment with a real bed. The office cot was becoming a problem to my back, and the apartment has an east-facing window. Remember how we use to watch the sun come up together?

Of course, Joseph. Maybe I could sneak down some morning and we could do that again.

I would love that Jenn.

Is Starbucks open? If so, you could bring coffee and bagels.

I can check.

What about tomorrow?

Yes, I would like that

I'll be in apartment 650 right across from the elevator. See you tomorrow?

Yes!

~ ~ ~

While Joseph and Jennifer had figured out how to beat the pandemic, at least for one sunrise, Joey couldn't get focused to sit at his lap top and do lessons. All he could think of was vacation days.

Can I go see Uncle Nick for a vacation day?

Your Mom doesn't think that is a good idea. What if we get your Uncle Nick on the phone.

OK.

Nick was still in his robe and slippers. Why get dressed up, he thought. I can't go anyplace. Then his phone rang. He didn't know the number, but judged that talking to anyone was better than TV news. So he answered.

Hi, this is Nick. How can I help you? Nick had never stopped being a psychologist counselor.

Nick, my name is Phyllis and I'm watching your good friend, Joey, while his parents are busy. He wanted to take a vacation day with you, but his Mom thought it was not a good idea. Here, I'll put the phone on speaker and you can talk to Joey.

Hi, Joey.

Hi, Uncle Nick.

Counselor Nick waited. Finally, Phyllis wanted to make sure they connected.

Nick, are you still on?

Yes, Phyllis, and I'm still in my robe and slippers. An old man in robe and fuzzy slippers. What do you think of that, Joey?

You're funny, Uncle Nick.

Phyllis makes me get dressed even though we can't go anyplace. (The dam was broken.)

Well, Joey, maybe tomorrow you can take an at-home vacation day like me and stay in your pajamas and slippers all day.

Could I do that, Phyllis?

Yes, Joey, I don't see why not.

Can I wear my clown pajamas?

Sure. But you would still need to wash your face and brush your teeth.

Joey, do you have bunny slippers?

You mean slippers that look like little rabbits?

Yes.

No, Uncle Nick. My slippers are just plain brown.

What if I order a pair of bunny slippers for you and have them delivered?

That would be great, Uncle Nick!

I'll do that today, Joey, but it may take a couple of days for them to be delivered.

Phyllis sensing a shift said,

Nick, Joey doesn't like doing his school lessons on his lap top.

Oh, we remember what that was like at my house, didn't we, Joey?

I could watch the fish, Uncle Nick. I don't have any fish.

Joey doesn't have any fish, Nick, but he has a cat.

Oh, you have a cat, Joey. What's it like?

His name is Socks because he has four white feet and he is really old and he gets afraid when I am not with him. He couldn't walk when Phyllis and I went to the park but we caught little fish called chubs and Phyllis put the top down on her Jeep. That was fun, Uncle Nick.

Nick was used to processing a flood of information looking for that, sometimes very small, important piece.

So, Socks is really old like me. I know what it's like to have trouble walking, but it seems that Socks really likes you.

I love him, Uncle Nick. He's my favorite of all things.

Oh, that's special, Joey. When Aunt Megan tells me she loves me and that I am her favorite of all things, I want to get up and dance.

Phyllis saw another opening. Sometimes Socks curls up on the table when Joey is doing his school lessons. Doesn't he, Joey?

Yes, he likes to be near me.

Nick pushes. What if you did schoolwork in your pajamas and bunny slippers with Socks to help? You couldn't do that at school, could you, Joey?

You're funny, Uncle Nick. They wouldn't let me in school with clown pajamas and a cat.

And so the phone vacation day with Uncle Nick continued for about an hour with Nick telling Phyllis that Joey liked pancakes with ears and dippy eggs. Phyllis said they can have those for lunch today.

Can we! Can we have breakfast for lunch? And so they did, and Joey would watch for his bunny slippers to arrive. Nick and Joey had found a way to beat the pandemic at least for a day. Tomorrow Joey would try doing his lessons in his clown pajamas.

~ ~ ~

Nick, who loved his peaceful life and his well-schooled ability to provide comfort to others, felt an almost naked vulnerability, and he didn't like it. The feeling came on him when he realized that he could no longer count on a health system of doctors, nurses and hospital that had

always, it seemed at least, to be on standby-ready to assist him in any health emergency. That protection bubble burst when he learned that Allen Baxter, Jennifer's father, had died, almost certainly because he did not receive standard treatment for a heart condition in a COVID clogged hospital. Nick was much older than his friend, Allen, and now what would happen to him if he, old Nick, needed help?

He had sat with this new feeling of vulnerability for a couple of days, then pulled up his socks so to speak, and called Sue Baxter, the new widow.

Hi, Sue, this is your old friend, Nick. I am so sorry about Allen. Do you have anyone with you?

Hello, Nick. Thanks for calling. Yes, Jennifer is with me. She has been a great help. Her brother, Billy, wanted to come but I told him not to fly with COVID on the planes, and that Jennifer and I were doing OK. Anyway, Nick, there will not be a funeral Mass until COVID is over. How are you doing?

Nick was not capable of telling a lie so he had to say, a little disconnected. The health world we always counted on just isn't there for us now, and it's hard to realize that.

It wasn't there for Allen, Nick. The hardest part was not being able to be with him.

Counselor Nick asked,
Do you have a PCP that could prescribe something to help?

Yes, and Jennifer, my doctor daughter, has seen to it for me.

Then Nick, switching to an old friend said,
do you remember when you told me that I saved your life?

Oh, I do remember. You counseled me to get a full health check-up and they found that I had an STD that I didn't know I had, and it changed my life, Nick. I will never forget that.

Sue, do you know that you completely changed my life?

No, Nick, I had no idea I did any such thing. Are you sure you are talking about the right person. It's been a long time.

It was you, Sue, no doubt about that. I had always been afraid of women, even though they were sort of dangerous, and you taught me that women could be wonderful friends and additions to my life. Later that gave me the courage to ask Megan to marry me. You changed my life, Sue.

Oh, Nick, that's so nice of you to say that but today I feel old and useless. I have nothing left to give anyone. I know I'm not going to change anyone's life like you say I did for you. My life is over, Nick.

Seems I remember you saying the same thing to me those many years ago, that was not true then and it's not true today.

Yes, Nick, I remember wanting a new beginning after a failed marriage, and I didn't believe it could happen.

But it did, Sue. It did.

I was young then, Nick. Now I'm an old, tired woman with nothing to give.

How many children do you have?

Two.

How many grandchildren?

Three.

Where are they?

Joey is here. Thea is in Germany and Bea is in Nebraska.

Perhaps this would be a good time to visit one of them – get some good one-on-one time.

Nick, I haven't told Joey that Allen has died. He seems so young and he isn't doing well with remote school, Jennifer says. I don't know how to tell him.

You need to find a way. It won't get any easier for you or for Joey. He may be stronger than you think. We spent a month together. He's a good boy, Sue. What about Thea? Wasn't she the calm level-headed one of the twins?

Yes, she's like that but I won't get on a plane to Germany and risk catching COVID.

Then what about the other twin, Bea?

Same thing, Nick.

But you could drive to Nebraska, Sue.

I would be afraid to drive that far by myself. What if the car broke down or I got lost?

You could get someone to go with you. I think you should seriously consider it, Sue. It would give you a break from sitting at home and time with a grandchild. Wouldn't Jennifer go with you?

I'm sure she would if I asked, but she has already given up a lot of time to be with me.

I suggest you ask her anyway, and Joey could go too.

OK, Nick, I'll talk with Jenn about a trip. And thanks for remembering me so fondly.

It was more than fondly, Sue. I was a little in love with you all those years ago, and had to learn what to do with that feeling. You will always be special to me. You helped me become who I am.

Thanks, Nick, you always make everyone feel good about themselves. I'll get back to you.

Nick put the phone down feeling good about Sue, but not about what may happen to him, if, as an old man he would need medical help, and the news kept saying that COVID was killing old people. Just then Megan walked in.

Who was on the phone? Seems you were on a long time.

An old friend. Then not quite sure about confidentiality said, we told stories about each other. Sit down and have some coffee with me, and I'll tell you about Sue Baxter and feeling naked.

I hope that's too different stories, Nick.

It is, and they will be just between you and me, Megan.

Always, Nick, always.

~ ~ ~

When Sue told Jennifer about Nick's suggestion of a Nebraska trip and vacation, Jennifer thought it was a really good idea.

Would you drive, Jenn? I have never driven that far, and it scares me to think about it.

Mom, I can drive, but I haven't driven a car in years. I even have my own favorite Uber driver. I would scare myself and you if I were to try to drive you such a long distance.

Well, then Nick's idea is just not going to work, Jenn, but the more I thought about it, the better it sounded.

Mom, what if you hired someone to drive you?

With COVID out there, who could I trust?

Mom, Joseph is stuck at his apartment and his assistant has been staying with Joey. Maybe she would drive you. Is it OK if I ask her/

And so it was agreed.

~ ~ ~

The next day Jennifer went home to find Phyllis comfortable and Joey in his new “The Hulk” pajamas with muscles and bunny slippers.

They look like fun, Joey, but rabbits and muscles don’t go together very well.

It was Uncle Nick’s idea, Mom. Phyllis had to explain.

Dressing up for lessons was Uncle Nick’s idea, but I added some new pajamas so Joey has a “Super Man” suit too. Now get back and finish those lessons and we will have pancakes with ears and eyes and noses for lunch. And Joey scoots off to his lap top.

Phyllis, this is amazing. Joey is really enjoying his lessons; is that what I see?

Yes, and he enjoys getting deliveries. He opens boxes like it’s his birthday. Tomorrow will be the “Spider Man” pajamas I ordered, at least, I hope. Joey’s Uncle Nick has been really wonderful with him. Doing lessons in his pajamas and bunny slippers was his idea. They have little phone conversations every day. How is your mother doing? It has to be tough.

Jennifer held her finger to her lips and Phyllis needed no other signal. Some things were not going to be talked about today.

Phyllis, Nick has suggested, strongly I think, that my mother take a vacation to visit one of her grandchildren in Nebraska.

Is she going to go? It would do her good to get away and be with family. Nick always seems to have good ideas. Where does this grandchild live?

On a big farm in Nebraska.

Joey stuck his head around the corner of the kitchen door, and yells, is Grandma really going to a big farm with horses and cows and tractors? Is she really? Can I go too. I want to go too!

Jennifer called back, you were there once when you were real little, but you were too little to remember, but there is a problem, Joey. Grandma needs someone to drive her there.

Mom, Phyllis can drive and she has a Jeep. She can even put the top down, can’t you Phyllis? Can she, Mom? Phyllis, you would drive us, wouldn’t you?

Phyllis, giving up on trying to talk quietly, said if that would help your grandmother, I would be happy to drive her.

Me too, Mom! Is Grandpa going too?

~ ~ ~

Jennifer knew the time would come, but Joey's question said, now. So, she took a deep breath and said, Joey come sit down with me. They made their way to the big couch. Joey climbed up and Socks climbed onto his lap. Jennifer, the ER doctor, had the experience of telling a family that a member didn't make it, but this seemed entirely different. Her father had been a huge part of her life and Joey's life, and now she had to say the words.

Joey, your Grandpa has died of a heart attack.

Joey didn't speak.

Jennifer continued. That is why I had to go to Grandma's house and Phyllis had to be here with you.

Joey looked down at Socks, and said, but Mom we were going to the firehouse and ride the fire trucks again.

I know. He loved doing that with you.

Joey wanted to get up and go someplace, any place, but Socks didn't move.

Joey, your Grandpa wanted you to be everything the best.

That's what he used to say, Mom, "This is the best ever!"

I know, Joey, and Jennifer could feel tears. He would have loved to go to the farm with you, so you could have more "best-day-ever's" on the farm.

They sat quietly for a minute or two. Then Joey said, he told me his grill was the best ever, and he said his porch swing was too. He had many best-ever things, Joey, including you.

You can sit with Socks. I need to go talk to your father.

I can go to the farm? Yes, and Socks too if you want him to go.

OK, Mom.

~ ~ ~

Jennifer later walked outside with her phone where she told Joseph about her mother's conversation with Nick, and I talked with Joey about his Grandpa. Oh, how did he take it?

Quiet, but his going to the farm with the cat helped.

You want the cat to go too?

Oh, he has to go, and when I talked with Phyllis, she said that she would be happy to drive.

I can keep Phyllis on the payroll if it works for her to drive your mother. You can work out the expenses.

That means you think this is a good idea.

Yes, I do. Would you go along?

Nick and Phyllis have solved the problem of Joey and his lessons. I'll tell you all about The Hulk and bunny slippers.

Whatever works, Jenn, but you didn't answer my question.

We really liked our recent sunrise together, didn't we?

It was awesome. Like old times, Jenn.

What if I came and stayed with you while they go on their little vacation?

You know I would like that. Has anyone called your family in Nebraska?

They're family, Joseph. Visiting them will not be a problem.

OK, but there's COVID. What if they are quarantined, or even have the virus?

OK, I'll call, Joseph. So, it's OK if Joey goes too?

I think he would love it.

So it was agreed. Phyllis, Joey and Grandma Sue will go on a vacation to Nebraska if there is no COVID on the farm. Jennifer and her kitten would spend those few days together while Joseph watched over his apartment building. Yes, it seemed like the kitten was now her kitten.

*"Act and God will act."
St. Joan of Arc*



THE FARM

When Phyllis and Sue got together to plan their trip to Nebraska, two challenges stood out. Sue did not want a brutal long day's drive. They would need to stop over one night and if Joey was going along, he needed to finish his school year, which they discovered had about two more weeks to go. Phyllis said, this is a great motivation for Joey to finish his lessons, but about the stop-over, Sue had a problem. I don't want to stay in any motel.

Well, Phyllis replied, we could camp out, get a tent. We wouldn't need to be near anyone else. I've never done that, have you?

Yes, I have. It can be more work than a motel, but I bet Joey would like it.

The rest was easy. Summer clothes. Some gifts. That's when they counted the people at the farm – there were two brothers, Jack and Josh, Josh's wife, Maryam, and Jack's wife and Sue's granddaughter, Bea. Then there was the matriarch, Mary, and little Mary, Maryam and Josh's daughter, who they thought must be about 10 years old – a playmate for Joey, they thought. That made six gifts. That's not so bad, Sue said. We can do that. I'll call now and say we want to come.

The older Mary answered the phone. Hello, this is Mary. Who is this?

This is Sue, Bea's grandmother. How are you and everyone on the farm doing?

We are all fine. Nice to hear from you. We heard about Grandpa Baxter. He was way too young. In his 60's, I would guess.

Almost 70, Mary, but yes, too young.

I would like to visit with all of you, especially Bea. Sort of a vacation, Mary. It was suggested to me as a way to help me cope.

This is really something, Sue. Bea was talking about the fact that there would be no funeral for her Grandpa, and wondered if she should visit. She will be delighted that you are coming to see her. Oh, she hasn't told everyone yet, but she is three months pregnant. Things were a little difficult at first, but now it looks like everything will be OK so she was about to share the news.

This is wonderful, Mary. I'll be a great-grandmother. Oh, Mary, that sounds old.

It won't cause you to be a day older. When are you coming?

In about two weeks. I'm bringing Jennifer's boy, Joey, with me and that's when his school is over for the summer.

He's been in school? We are shut down here.

No, he has been doing classes at home, but how is COVID there?

We haven't had it, and we decided that only one person at a time would go to town for supplies. We are trying to stay safe.

That's good. Is Bea there?

She is out at the barn. Why don't I have her call you?

That would be nice. And there will be one more person. Her name is Phyllis and she has agreed to drive us. I don't drive on long trips.

I never liked long drives either, but with the boys I never had to worry about it.

You have been a widow for some years, haven't you?

Yes, but it's not fresh painful, if you know what I mean.
I know exactly what you mean. I'm going to enjoy spending time with you.

Likewise. I'll have Bea call.

Thank you, Mary. I'll look for her call. Tell her to use this number; it's my mobile phone.

OK, Sue. Bye.

When Bea called, she wanted to talk about her Grandpa, but Sue gently pushed that conversation promising to tell group stories when they had time together soon. And there wasn't much to know about Bea's condition except that she had been sick and lost weight. Their call was loving, pleasant, but rather short. That evening Sue thought about the times when she and Allen could have visited Bea, but somehow it didn't happen very often. But Bea hadn't come to see them any more often than their visits. Sue made the decision that as a new great-grandmother, she would just have to find ways to spend time with Bea and Bea's new child.

~ ~ ~

The day finally came...

They were on the road early – Phyllis driving and Sue next to her, and with Joey in the back with Socks in his carrier. Joey had insisted that Socks go along. Joey insisted, so Socks went along.

In the afternoon they found a campground with an open space off by itself and a fire ring with wood provided by the campground. The tent was a challenge although the directions were clear, but what to do with Socks? Joey piped up, he needs to be in the tent with us, and he can be in there while we have a camp fire. There's a window he can see out. With the cat problem solved, Phyllis got out the hot dogs, baked beans and marshmallows. She even remembered Joey's favorite root beer. Oh, and to everyone's delight, everything for S'mores.

When it was time for bed, Joey wanted to know if they could camp again tomorrow, but Sue said, we will be at the farm and there will be a bed for you. After looking at her air mattress and sleeping bag, Sue thought, and there had better be one for me too, because my old bones will need it. Sue had to admit the next day that her night had been OK, not great, but OK. Camping had been a success. Even Socks liked the many choices of soft places to sleep.

~ ~ ~

Joey was all eyes and questions. The men looked like tree trunks and Little Mary, although only a little older, was a whole head taller than he was. All the hugs seemed to last forever, but as the adults renewed their family friendship, the men had chores to attend to before supper. Little Mary took Joey under her wing and led him to the barn.

What are these big green machines?

Those are our tractors.

Oh, I didn't know they were so big.

When they reached the far end of the barn, just outside the big door, Joey saw a much smaller tractor. Little Mary pointed to it and said, I can drive that one.

You, can drive a tractor? Can you teach me? I want to be able to drive a tractor.

You're too small to reach the peddles. I only got big enough this year, but I can show you. Climb up here with me.

The tractor may have been smaller than the big ones, but Joey needed some help with the first big step.

This is the clutch. The other foot peddle is the brake, and this is how you change gears. Want to take a ride with me?

That was like Joey being asked if you want ice cream every day for the rest of his life.

Yes, can you take me for a ride?

Sure. Climb up on this fender seat.

Little Mary was very careful to do everything the way her Dad had taught her except she didn't look behind the tractor and see that the tractor was hitched to the farm wagon. She thought the wagon was just sitting where it usually sat. She pushed the starter and the tractor puffed exhaust smoke then settled into a low rumble. As she eased out the clutch the tractor moved smoothly, slowly ahead toward a big open gate. She still hadn't seen that the wagon was moving with them. Joey was in heaven.

As they moved through the gate she turned right, planning to make a circle and come back to the barn, but the tractor seemed to grunt and then began to shake and then bounce a little at first then the bouncing became bigger and Little Mary couldn't keep her feet on the peddles. Not knowing what to do she began calling "Dad" – then "DAD"! Then the bouncing stopped. At first, she thought, good, that's good, but engine note dropped to a low growl. The tractor was doing exactly what its maker designed it to do, digging in with big cleated tires and pulling hard – only it couldn't move because the wagon had caught a wheel on the gate post and was not going to move. The tractor did the only thing it knew how to do, which was pull harder, and as it did, the front reared up like a wild horse, dumped the kids behind it and crashed down on top of them.

Josh had heard Little Mary's "DAD"! and was walking toward the end of the barn when he heard the tractor growl and crash. For maybe the first time in his life, Josh was afraid. He rushed to the tractor and killed the engine, and looking under it saw Joey and pulled him out. Can you stand, Joey? Joey nodded yes, but was looking at the blood coming from his nose. Go get Uncle Jack, Joey. He's in the barn. Joey was still looking at the blood dripping from his nose but then he ran toward the barn. Josh could see Little Mary but she was pinned on her right side. Jack came running up and together they moved the tractor enough to pull her out and lay her on the ground.

Josh could see immediately what had happened. Old tractors without three-point hitches were notorious for pulling against an immovable object then pitching up and over and killing their drivers. But he never saw it as a hazard because the only pulling the old tractor ever did was the easy-to-pull farm wagon. His heart sank as he realized the mistake he had made. He turned to Jack and said, go get the truck. I'll pick her up. We need to get her to the hospital.

Then he saw Joey standing there, nose dripping blood, and concluded that Joey had escaped serious injury so he said, go to the house and tell them we are taking Little Mary to the hospital and that I will call on the phone. Joey ran off as Jack pulled up with the truck.

~ ~ ~

The hospital had seen its share of farm injuries, and Little Mary was tested for blood clots on the brain, internal bleeding and broken bones – she had two, her right upper arm and her right wrist. She had a concussion but no bleeding. She woke up with a cast on her arm and splint on her wrist with her Dad standing there next to her. What happened, Dad?

The wagon caught the gate post.

Oh, I didn't know the wagon was hitched. Is Joey OK? My head hurts, and I can't move my arm.

~ ~ ~

When Joey ran into the house with blood all over his shirt, Sue almost fainted. Mary grabbed a rag and pinched Joey's nose and said, hold this there. Then Joey mumbled through the rag, They're taking Little Mary to the hospital. Uncle Josh said he would call on the phone. Mary was not going to wait for any phone call so she grabbed Maryam and they ran out yelling to Bea, take care of supper for our guests, got in her car and headed for the hospital. When they got there, they were not allowed in. Mary was fuming, but they told her that Josh was with Little Mary and only one person was allowed and that they should leave the ER. As they went and stood outside the door, Mary's phone rang.

Only broken bones, Mom.

You waited long enough to call, Josh.

Sorry, Mom. Is Maryam with you?

Yes, she is here. Put her on.

She's going to be OK, Maryam. She's going to be OK, only a broken arm and wrist.

What happened, Josh?

The tractor flipped over on them, but she's going to be OK. They are going to keep her overnight to be sure. I'll stay with her.

Can she talk?

Yes.

Can you put her on the phone?

Josh handed Little Mary the phone in her good hand.

I'm sorry, Mom. I'm really sorry.

It's OK, Mary, your Dad will stay with you and you can come home tomorrow. No more tractor driving.

OK, Mom.

~ ~ ~

Phyllis and Sue saw to Joey's bloody nose. Joey was being more than brave. He had survived a tractor accident, been a runner of news, and had a war wound to prove it. There is no better feeling than being both brave and helpful. Joey thought this may be his best day ever, but he didn't think he should say it.

~ ~ ~

Phyllis scrolled up Jennifer's number, touched "call" and handed the phone to Joey. Hi, Mom, it's Joey.

Hi, Joey. How do you like the farm?

The tractor fell on me, Mom.

You mean you fell off the tractor; did it hurt?

No, Mom, Little Mary was giving me a ride and the tractor fell on us. She's in the hospital but supposed to come home tomorrow.

That something serious happened clicked in and she repeated, are you hurt? Are you OK?

I got a bloody nose. Mary pinched it with a rag.

Oh, I see. But doctor Mom thought, well she did the right thing, then, it's not bleeding anymore, is it?

No, and everything here is very big, really big. Uncle Josh said there are fish in the pond, but he stayed at the hospital so we haven't gone fishing yet.

Please be careful, Joey. Put Phyllis on.

OK, and he handed the phone to Phyllis.

Phyllis, is Joey OK?

Yes, he is fine and I think feeling a little brave that he had an adventure with Little Mary. He went out of the house following her like a puppy, Jennifer. That friendship is going to be good for Joey.

Joey said she is in the hospital.

A broken arm. It could have been worse. I'm not sure exactly what happened, but the tractor she was driving turned over on them.

Sounds like it could have been much worse.

Yes, but I'm not sure Joey knows that. They manage emergencies very well in this family.

Keep me posted, Phyllis, and keep him safe.

I'll try and I'll have him call tomorrow. Is everything OK at the apartments?

Things are not normal at the apartments, but Joseph is dealing with it. It's good for us to be together, Phyllis. Thanks for everything. Bye.

~ ~ ~

That night Bea crawled into bed with Jack and said, not all accidents have a bad outcome, as she moved closer to Jack. Remember it was a car accident when I met Maryam and eventually met you, and she moved even closer to Jack. Jack put his hand on her baby bump and said, in a perfect world I would have found you some way. Bea moved even closer and Jack got the message. Not all accidents end badly.

~ ~ ~

Mary had been told that the visit would include an old arthritic indoor cat so she had taken an old blanket and made a cat nest by the stove where it was always warm. When Socks was let out of his carrier, she picked him up and looked him over. Oh, she said, he may be old but he has had a good tom cat life. I see scars on his nose and a little piece of one ear is missing. Your Socks may be old now, but he was once a warrior cat. Joey had to see what Mary saw and she pointed out the little scars by his nose and the ear with the missing piece. That night Joey forgot about being under the tractor, and had a new image of Socks. In his boyhood fantasy he put Socks among the pantheon of super heroes that populated his pajamas. Socks was his warrior hero cat, and he felt both brave and safe. Joey would have fantasy dreams that night about a pretty girl and a hero cat. He would have his best dreams ever. Not all accidents end badly.

~ ~ ~

This was planned as a vacation for Sue, but so far the quiet time with stories shared had not happened. She was content, however, seeing that everyone was doing exactly what her firefighter, Army competent husband, Allen, would have wanted them to do. He was not here with her, or was he? She did feel his always competent presence in the people around her. So that night of the accident, their first night on the farm, she looked forward to the next day. A day of sharing and getting to know her granddaughter, Bea, she thought, and today? Well, no one died. Those thoughts deserved a prayer of thanksgiving, and Sue slept peacefully. It helped that the night before was a just OK toss and turn night, wondering who ever thought skinny air mattresses would work for old people – but she didn't complain, and tonight her bed was just the way she liked – not too soft and not too hard. Staring in the night she whispered, Allen, are you there? All she heard were soft night sounds through the open window. She closed her eyes and went back to sleep, thankful for today and hopeful for tomorrow.

~ ~ ~

Mary was a farm accident widow, who raised two boys carefully, how to be safe around big animals and even bigger equipment. She was rightly proud of the fact that they had taken safety seriously, knowing how their father had died probably helped, but she seldom mentioned it. Now she had almost lost her first grandchild and it stung her to think what might have happened. She resolved to tell Josh to put the old tractor in the bone yard where it should have been long ago, and today's accident would not have happened. She also knew that Josh would be hard on himself for not seeing what might happen, so she softened her plan and would say, don't you think it's time to put the old tractor in the bone yard? Knowing that he would agree. She was also not one to stay awake worried about something that didn't happen. Tomorrow she would nurse the granddaughter named after herself back to health. She would see that she recovered the full use of her arm and hand. Tomorrow she would get up early and fix a big breakfast, a farm hands' breakfast, and wait for Josh to bring Little Mary home.

~ ~ ~

Maryam lay awake. The night long ago when she first felt Josh next to her was the first time in her life that she had ever felt safe. She had escaped from a cruel father and violent brothers, who tried to kill her to save the family honor. How strange that had sounded to her mother-in-law-to-be, Mary, and she had to tell Mary that there had been other, generous men in her life. She almost cried remembering that Mary didn't push her away but welcomed her into her family. Josh had been her body guard. He had fallen in love with her, and took her home to his family farm – a Muslim woman on a Nebraska farm. She had truly felt safe, and completely welcomed. This farm was home and nothing bad was ever going to happen – until today. She would have to tell Josh that she was afraid for Little Mary on this farm; that had made her feel vulnerable and afraid. But what could she do? There was no other place for her. She desperately needed Josh back in her bed. It was only one night, she told herself. Only one night. Then she felt something move next to her, and in the dim light she saw the old cat that had come with their new visitors. Why, she spoke to the cat, are you on my bed! She almost pushed Socks off, but when she put her hand on him he just stretched out. He was prepared to stay. The cat wasn't Josh, but feeling the cat next to her, Maryam thought back to when a cat came to her in the barn ten years ago. That was the moment she decided to make the farm her permanent home. The new cat can stay, she thought. Josh will be back tomorrow. Josh will be back tomorrow she repeated to herself as she fell asleep. She would tell him that she had become afraid for their daughter. She had trusted Josh to keep her safe, and that included their child. She needed assurance that this kind of accident would never happen again.

~ ~ ~

Phyllis liked to drive. Driving was not like flying, but there was still the sense of control and the need to stay focused. Keeping the passengers safe was always on her mind. As she was getting under the covers she remembered the time when she failed her first and most important responsibility – to keep her passenger safe. She usually didn't dwell on her accident, which had been called pilot error, but today's accident brought it to the front of her mind. She didn't know that a tractor could rear up and fall back on its driver, but she knew now and it sounded to her like a terrible way to die. She would try to find out from Josh or Jack how those kids managed to survive, but they did. Joey seemed fine, even braver for the experience. But thinking about her own long mental recovery, she felt a concern for Little Mary. Maybe her own experience could be helpful. She would need to think about how much to say about herself, but

she may need to say a lot if it meant helping Little Mary. She would be ready to help if she could. That's who she was, and she was able to sleep on that thought.

~ ~ ~

You would think that a hospital in Grand Island, Nebraska would have bedside chairs big enough for men like Josh, but they didn't. At least not in the room they had put Little Mary in. Pain medicine for her broken arm was helping her to sleep so he really had nothing to occupy his mind. It only took a minute for him to figure out the figures on the monitor, oxygen, pulse, blood pressure, blink, beep, hum. He willed himself, try to sleep. She's going to be OK, he kept thinking, but his mind kept working on why he hadn't made sure the wagon hitch was released? He had no answer. Why had he let her learn to drive when she was so young? He had done it. Jack had done it. Josh had even been smaller than Little Mary, and had needed blocks on the peddles. He had even shown Maryam how to drive it. Was that another mistake? Should he call her? No, she would be asleep by now. He would be home in the morning. He hoped they would release Little Mary early. There was a lot of work to do. Their regular Mexican summer help couldn't get there – COVID. He walked out to the nurse's desk. She was in a patient's room. Well, why not? There were alarms. He was always hearing this beep or that buzz. The old tractor needs to go to the bone yard. Should have done that a long time ago. Maybe a new four-wheeler to pull the wagon. He would talk with his mother about it tomorrow. He would sit and watch for the sun to come up. There was just too much Josh and not enough chair.

~ ~ ~

It was mid-morning before they released Little Mary. Jack had left the truck for Josh and gone back to the farm in the car with his mother and Maryam. Josh had a list of instructions and had suffered through the standard dismissal lecture, except that he and Little Mary were to stay away from other people for ten days – no exceptions. How are we going to do that, he wondered? He had put the just in case pain pills in his pocket and they were finally on the way home.

I'm sorry, Dad.

No need to keep saying that. You are going to be OK. Joey is OK. The old tractor will go the bone yard and I'll get us a new four-wheeler to pull the trailer. Just sit back and relax. There's a whole house full of people waiting to see you.

I think Joey tried to save me, Dad. He jumped on top of me.

He fell on top of you, that's all.

He's small, Dad, but he's really quick. You'll see what I mean.

You mean he learns fast.

That too, but I mean he moves fast.

OK, but what saved you from being crushed was the front of the wagon. The tractor came down on the wagon and that kept it off of you both.

My arm hurts, Dad, and I keep seeing the tractor falling on me all night.

They gave me pills for that. I'll give them to you when we get home, and the tractor only fell on your arm. You're going to be OK.

You will like Joey, Dad. I know you will.

Seems like you do.

I really do, Dad. I think he tried to save me.

Maybe so. Now sit back. We will be home soon and everyone will want to hear all about your arm.

OK, Dad. I love you.

Josh acted like there was a fly on his nose, but it was really a tear.

~ ~ ~

When they pulled up in front of the house, he told Little Mary to stay in the truck and went in to talk with his mother. Mary came out on the porch.

Josh, why is she still in the truck? Bring her in.

We have to stay away from people for ten days, Mom.

Oh, for heaven's sake. Bring her in.

The nurse was very firm about this, Mom. Stay away from people, she told us. I'll sleep in the tack room in the barn, but what about Little Mary?

Ok, Ok, Josh. Can't we put her in her own room?

I guess so. Nurse didn't say she couldn't be in the house.

OK, that's what we'll do. Bring her in. I'll tell the others.

It was killing Mary and the others not to be able to hug Little Mary, but Mary was as firm as the nurse at the hospital and ushered Little Mary to her room. Everyone stayed at Little Mary's door wanting to know all about it except Socks. He snuck through legs and climbed up on the bed and stretched out obviously intending to stay.

Josh went to Miriam and held her at arm's length.

Can you help me set up a bed in the tack room. I'll need to sleep there for ten days.

No, Josh. I don't want you to do that.

It's orders from the hospital, Maryam. We've been hearing how very bad this COVID is. Old people die from it, so I guess the stories are true. The nurse said we must stay away from people.

I'm not an old person, Josh. I want you in bed with me. I need you in bed with me.

Maryam, get me some blankets and a pillow while I find the Army cot. Can you do that? Then we can have lunch together.

If we can have lunch together, why can't we sleep together, Josh?

We will have lunch at opposite ends of the table on the porch? That should be OK.

Josh, I'm afraid for our daughter and I need you near me.

We will do the best we can, Maryam. Help me make up a bed, then get us some lunch on the porch.

Maryam just stood there. Finally, Josh couldn't take it any longer and picked her up and held her close. Then he let her go and said, ten days, Maryam, just ten days. Then he walked to the barn.

~ ~ ~

It only took a day for the house to settle into a routine. Little Mary would get a tray sent to her at each meal and a chair was placed in the hall by her door so people could see and talk to her. There were no assigned visit times but the chair was seldom empty. At first everyone had the same questions – how do you feel? – what was it like? – were they nice at the hospital? – but soon conversations became more personal.

Joey called into the sick room. Socks seems to like you.

Yes, he spends a lot of time with me. He's good company. Is he really old? He seems OK.

There are times when it's hard for him to walk. How is your hand? Do you think you will be able to write?

And so it went.

Maryam just wanted to be near. Sometimes she would bring up a second chair, not so much to talk but just to be near.

Sue's vacation finally began to feel like a vacation, but not in the way she had imagined. Instead of relaxing in the sun, she was drawn into the everyday of a working farm. People needed to be

fed so she helped Mary in her big kitchen. Clothes and bedding needed to be washed and hung out. They still hung clothes out on a line, she discovered, so she helped Bea with laundry. Grass around the house needed to be cut and Maryam showed her how to use the riding mower, and she was surprised that she actually enjoyed mowing grass.

Mixed in with the daily life that Sue had been drawn into was the personal connections she had wanted to make. Mary told her how she had to learn many things that her husband had done, and Sue wondered if she could take over the care of house, yard and car the way Allen had always done. Mary gave her the confidence that maybe she could.

Sue knew that Bea was a little different. Would she ever really know her red-headed, risk-taking, half-German granddaughter, who started their first real conversation by asking Sue if she planned to find a new husband? Well, not right away, Bea. Why not? You look good for a sixty-something woman. Many men would be interested. But Sue was all about baby, and how Bea had had a few difficult days. She needed to warn Bea about pre-eclampsia, which almost caused her to lose Billy, Bea's father, down to asking, are you worried about raising a child on a farm? That farms could be dangerous had made an impression on Sue, who was naturally a worrier. But hanging clothes with barn swallows swooping to catch insects just overhead, in the sun and breeze, closed the gap between them, and yes, Bea would be sure to bring the baby to Chicago to see Sue when he or she could travel. And as soon as Bea knew if the baby was a boy or girl, she would call and let Sue know. They were developing a new comfort level together, and Sue had a new thought, Bea's "new husband" question had never occurred to her before.

~ ~ ~

Phyllis had gone to the barn to see what it was like and to be helpful if she could. After one day at helping around the barn, Jack and Josh were both thinking about how they could get Phyllis to stay longer, or who knew, they thought, maybe she could come back for the rest of the summer.

When she had asked if she could help, Jack said, the equipment all needs to be greased and he showed her what a Zerk fitting looked like and how to use the grease gun. Phyllis took her instruction patiently, but she already had a basic knowledge of what a grease fitting looked like. What she didn't know was all the places to look for them on the massive machines. So she accepted the challenge and set out to find them all. This impressed Jack, and he said so.

I saw you crawling all over the equipment. You did a good job and I really appreciate it. Do you think you could drive this machine? We need to start a spraying program.

I could drive it if you showed me how, but I don't know anything about spraying equipment.

I can do that part. What did you do before? They said you worked in an office. You don't look like an office worker, and you don't work like one.

Phyllis thought for a moment, then made her decision that she needed to trust these two men. Jack can Josh come in here? I don't want to tell this story more than once.

She told the brothers about being an Army pilot, about running her own flying business, about the accident that was called pilot error, and how she found a new start as Joseph's administrative assistant.

Josh spoke up. Who knows this story?

Only you two.

Do you want it to stay that way?

It's not a secret, but I would always want to tell my story myself rather than have other people tell it, even you two, who I trust would tell it right.

The brothers looked at each other then, Jack said, it will be between us then.

So you still want me to start a spraying program tomorrow?

Yes, we do, don't we, Josh?

Finally, Josh had to say what had been on both their minds. How long can you stay? We are short two men this summer.

I'll be here the two weeks I agreed to, then we can talk about it. You may not like how I run a sprayer.

Josh had to say it. If you can fly a plane, you can run this equipment.

Just then Joey came around the corner and ran into the barn. Phyllis, can you fly a plane?

No, Joey, I can't, not any more.

Oh, he replied. They asked me to come get you for supper.

The three adults looked at each other wondering what and how much Joey heard. It was no secret, Phyllis had said, but this didn't seem the best way for her story to go public.

But Joey didn't ask any more questions, and they made a last check around the barn and then they all headed for the house.

~ ~ ~

Bea sat bolt upright on their bed.

Jack, I thought I heard a scream.

Jack mumbled. Barn cats. Go back to sleep.

While the rest of the house was trying to clear their heads and make sense out of what had wakened them, Phyllis knew exactly what she had heard. It was a scream she had heard before. It was the scream of violent death. Phyllis knew it could only come from one place and rushed to Little Mary's room. She found her sitting up sobbing and shaking, and sitting down beside her, she put her arms around her and held her tight.

Slowly the shaking quieted, but the sobbing got louder drawing everyone in the house to Little Mary's door. Maryam pushed through and dropped to her knees beside the bed. Phyllis put her hand on Maryam and said, she has had a bad dream. Then Little Mary realizing that her mother was there reached out and grabbed her as Phyllis let her go.

Mom, I thought I was going to die, she sobbed.

Phyllis looked for the tissue box and put it where Maryam and Little Mary could see it. Finally the sobbing stopped, and Phyllis said to the assembled household, she had a nightmare, and it may happen again in a day, a week, or a year. I was in an accident and I know what it is like.

Joey looking between legs piped up, I saw her scar. It goes all the way down her leg.

Phyllis responded, Joey's right, but it's OK now, isn't it, Joey?
I'll tell you about it in the morning. Now I think Maryam needs to help Little Mary get back to sleep. And Phyllis went back to her own bed.

Gradually the rest of the household drifted back to bed except Jack, who never got up. When Bea heard other people moving quickly, she had gotten up too. Now as she got back in bed, she poked Jack and said, it was Little Mary. Oh, he said, that's not good. Is she OK now? I think so, but you sleep through anything. Bea, I know what cats sound like in the night. Is someone with Little Mary? Yes, her Mom, but I think Phyllis got there first. Jack said, Umm, I'm not surprised. Go to sleep, Bea.

~ ~ ~

After breakfast and after Jack and Josh had gone to the barn, Phyllis told the story of her accident, including the nightmares she hadn't told the brothers about. This is going to happen to Little Mary, and we all need to be there for her when it happens. Joey was paying close attention to every detail. Then Mary said, I think I heard Joey say you have a big scar. Has it healed properly? Yes, but of course, it will never go away. Neither will the inside scars, but you learn to live with them. I need to go learn how to drive the big tractor and pull the sprayer. Jack wants me to help with the spraying program.

Sue spoke up, you don't have to do that, Phyllis. I asked you to drive me for a vacation, not to put you to work.

It's good for me to be useful, Sue, and I will enjoy learning to drive that huge piece of equipment.

Joey didn't want to be left out. Can I come, Phyllis? I want to ride with you.

Sue couldn't believe what she was hearing and said,
Joey, I don't want you on any more tractors.

Phyllis said, not today, Joey, but to herself she made a point to talk to Sue about Joey. Then directly to Joey, maybe Uncle Josh could find time to take you fishing. He told me there were fish in the pond.

Mary spoke up. Joey, you tell Josh if he helps you to catch some fish, I'll fry them up for dinner.

Joey forgot riding on tractors and ran toward the barn.

~ ~ ~

Nick called Sue to see how she was enjoying vacation.

It wasn't what I thought it would be, Nick. Then she told him about Mary the widow, Bea, the pregnant granddaughter, Joey and the tractor, Little Mary's nightmare. She left out Phyllis' story. I'm 68 years old and still learning about life and Bea thinks I should get a new husband. Those were her words, Nick – new husband. Is this what you had in mind for me?

Not specifically, Sue, but I hope you are glad you are there.

I am, Nick, and thanks for everything.

As Nick was putting down the phone he did a little dance, which had been his custom when things went well for a person he counseled. He was being light on his feet for an old man when Megan came in with bags of food.

Help me bring the food in, Nick, and line the bags up along the wall. I need to take everything out of the bags and wipe them off with a soapy cloth, and what was the little dance all about?

You are going to wipe off everything?

Yes, and take off my clothes and put them in the wash.

Right down to the skin?

No, but close, and why the dance?

It was Sue Baxter. Her granddaughter told her she should get a new husband.

Really? And you think that's a good idea?

Well, not right away, Megan, but the idea will point her toward thinking about her future, and she has a lot of good years left.

Would you want me to marry again if you died, Nick? Megan said this as she was stripping down.

You got someone in mind?

No, I don't. Help me with the groceries, and you didn't answer my question.

I would want you to be happy and if that meant you getting a new husband then yes, I would want you to do that. Do you need any help getting those germy clothes off?

No, I don't. Now get out the can goods and a soapy rag. Nick, there were direction arrows in the aisles at the store and you have to walk single file following the arrows, keeping six feet apart – and wear a mask.

You're kidding me!

No, that's the way it is.

Nick had to change the subject or risk a new sense of vulnerability.

Do you have any dry skin that needs Cerave?

No again, Nick, but maybe at bedtime; now get to work on those cans, Nick, or I'll make you dance for your supper.

COVID or not, arrows in the aisles or not, Nick was not going to let his lightness of being slip away. He went to the car and got the last two bags of groceries and danced back into the house, a bag in each hand, thinking this COVID is not going to get me today, and a little less positive, or any other day.

~ ~ ~

At breakfast Phyllis noticed Joey eating his eggs but something looked different. Then it clicked, Joey was eating with his left hand, and doing a pretty good job of it.

Joey, why are you eating with your left hand?

That's how Little Mary eats.

But she has to eat that way; you don't.

I want to eat like Little Mary.

Seeing that he was actually feeding himself with no obvious problems, Phyllis let it go.

Then Maryam asked Joey, I think you spent a lot of time sitting in the hall and talking to Little Mary. What were you talking about for so long?

We play a game.

What game is that?

The “I’m thinking game”. You know, I say, I’m thinking, and you have to ask questions and guess what I’m thinking.

Do you always tell the truth about what you are thinking?

Oh, you have to. If you didn’t tell the truth, it wouldn’t be any fun.

So Maryam said, I’m thinking.

Joey asks, is it a thing?

Yes. Is it big? No. Is it little? Yes. Is it round? Yes. Is it red? Yes. Is it a tomato, Joey asks, because there was a basket of tomatoes on the end of the table. Yes, it’s a tomato. You’re pretty good, Joey.

That was too easy. Little Mary thinks hard things.

Maryam decided not to push, but she wondered what things her daughter chose to think to make the game difficult.

Would you like to go get her empty breakfast tray and see if she needs anything else?

Sure, Maryam, and off Joey went to fetch Little Mary’s tray.

Jack and Bea left carrying breakfast to Josh in the barn, and Maryam addressed the other women.

What do you think of Joey’s and Little Mary’s game and his eating with his left hand?

Sue responds, I think it’s all cute.

Phyllis said, he really likes her.

Mary shakes her head, even children can be in love.

This was a new idea to the others and they said so. Maybe Mary was right they thought. They would pay more attention to Joey and Little Mary’s friendship.

Later Phyllis was working in the barn when Joey came in with his right arm in a loop of cloth like a sling. Phyllis dropped the tool she was using and rushed to Joey. Joey, what happened to your arm? Are you OK?

I wanted to see what it was like not to be able to use my right arm.

Phyllis took a deep breath and said, really Joey, you don't need to imitate Little Mary's broken arm.

Yes, I do, Phyllis. I wanted to know if it hurt and what it feels like.

Phyllis put her arm around Joey and said, you really like her, don't you?

I don't want to go home. I want to stay here with Little Mary.

~ ~ ~

Finally, the ten days of quarantine were over. Josh was able to sleep with Maryam in his own bed, and Little Mary was free. She began show and tells for Joey. She showed him how to collect eggs and to watch out for the rooster.

If he comes after you, grab a shovel or a broom and put it between you and him.

Joey looked at the big chicken and said, is he mean?

He can be. You have to keep an eye on him.

Joey saw his breakfast eggs in an entirely new way.

Then there was the old horse with a soft nose. I want a horse of my own but my Dad hasn't gotten one for me yet.

Would you ride it? Can you ride this big one?

Yes, but not with one arm, and she doesn't go very far or very fast. That's why I want my own horse someday.

Joey had a new thought – maybe he could have his own horse someday.

You have a cat and you have to give him food and water and clean his litter box.

And I have to brush him too

Well, you have to do the same thing for a horse. Here, help me clean old Nell's stall and fill her water bucket. She has to have new shoes once in a while too.

Horses wear shoes?

She leaned against the horse and picked up a front hoof with her good hand. See her shoe?

Joey was amazed that a horse wore shoes.

Then there was the old four-wheeler. It fascinated Joey. It smoked and clanked, but the best part was splashing through a stream almost as deep as the top of the wheels. Joey wanted to drive it, but Little Mary said, my Dad said no driving for you yet.

Suddenly the two weeks were over and Phyllis called for a consultation with Sue, and with Jennifer on the phone. Phyllis began, they need to cut hay, dry and bale it, then load it on customers' trucks. They have contracts for their hay and not enough help. They asked me if I could stay another week to help. Joey had been sitting off to the side but jumped up and yelled into the phone, Mom, can we stay another week, can we! Sue had to add, I don't have a problem staying another week. So it was decided they would stay another week.

~ ~ ~

The next day Bea came to Sue and said, I have a scheduled doctor's visit this morning and it would be nice to have some company. Would you go with me? Yes, Bea, I would like that. Let me know when you are ready to go. I really need to go now. Sue took a breath and thought – it would have been nice to have a little notice, I could have freshened up a little, but she said, OK, I'll get my sweater. They always keep offices too cold.

The office was too cold, but simple, clean and pleasantly furnished. The nurse took Bea's vitals and smiled, then Dr. Miller came in with an even bigger smile. Hi, Bea. You look good and your numbers are good. How do you feel? And who is this young woman you brought with you? Sue sensed that she too was being observed with a keen experienced eye and thought again that she would have looked better if she had had some notice, but with "masks required" the sign said, what difference would lipstick make?

This is my grandmother, Sue Baxter, from Chicago. Grandpa Baxter died recently and she has come to spend time with me. She even brought my little cousin, Joey, with her and an ex-Army pilot to drive them. Grandma is learning what it's like to live on a farm.

She had never been introduced in a way that made her feel uncovered, but she braced up and said, Bea says what she thinks as soon as she thinks it, and we love her for it. This got a hearty laugh. Well, we kind of know that about Bea, Grandma Sue, don't we, Bea, and we all love her. For Sue this seemed like undocor-like talk, but it fit the doctor, who looked like a farmer in a white coat.

Bea spoke up again, Doctor Miller's wife died two years ago. He's the best doctor in town. He delivered Little Mary, didn't you, Doctor?

Yes, to the fact that I know your family well, Bea. Now I'm going to call the nurse back in and Grandma Sue, you may want to wait in the outer room while I finish Bea's check-up. Sue smiled, patted Bea on the hand, and went out as the nurse came in. Sue was no stranger to pre-natal doctor visits, but she now was suspicious as to why Bea asked her to come along. Was Bea playing matchmaker? She only thought a moment, then concluded that yes, of course, that was exactly what Bea was doing and that maybe Doctor Miller was smart enough to catch on to Bea's game.

As Bea came out of the examining room, Dr. Miller stuck his head out and asked, Sue, do you really have an ex-Army pilot as your personal driver?

Yes, I do.

There must be a story there, but I have a patient waiting so maybe another time.

On the way home Sue says, I like your doctor, Bea.

I knew you would. Everyone does. He has a farm of his own, but his grown children have all moved away.

Sue decided to meet Bea's direct approach to life.

I don't want a new husband, Bea.

OK, Grandma, but Doctor Miller has a big empty house.

~ ~ ~

On the evening before Phyllis, Sue and Joey were to head home, Mary celebrated their time together with cake and ice cream. Jack and Josh had good things to say about Phyllis. Sue thanked Mary for all her encouragement, and if possible, Joey sat even closer to Little Mary. Joey hated to see everyone say "Good Night", and one by one, people went to their room. He didn't want the evening to end, but what could he do? What he could do was go to his own bed and lay awake. Maybe an hour went by until the house was completely quiet, then he got up and tip-toed into Little Mary's room and sat down on the floor. She heard his small footsteps and whispered,
Is that you, Joey?

Yes, and I don't want to leave tomorrow.

I'm thinking, Joey. Is it going to be hard? Maybe.

Is it a thing? No. Is it a person? Well, sort of. Is it me? Well, sort of.

Am I supposed to do something? Yes, but two things.

Two things? Yes. Right now? One of them, yes.

I give. I don't know what to do.

Give me a big hug, Joey. So he did.

Joey had hugged big people before, but never Little Mary.

When he finally released this hug, he was in a new world.

Finally he said, you said two things.

Yes, but you have to guess.

Is it something you want me to do now?

Yes.

I'll do anything, what is it?

You have to guess.

Oh, this is hard.

No, it isn't. What do you want to do more than anything else?

I want to stay here with you.

Well, you can't, so what's next best?

Yes.

I want to come back.

Yes, that's it. That wasn't so hard, was it?

No.

But there's more to it.

What more could there be?

Make a promise, Joey. Make a promise that you'll come back.

I promise, cross my heart and hope to die.

That means that you have to keep your promise, doesn't it?

Yes, I'll keep my promise.

Good. Now you need to go back to your room before you get into trouble.

Joey went back to his bed thinking he wouldn't sleep, and he couldn't. So, he picked up his favorite thing and went back to Little Mary and gave it to her.

Oh, it's your Teddy she said.

If you keep him, maybe you won't have bad dreams.

Thanks, Joey. I'll keep him with me always.

Joey went to back to his bed and dreamed his best dream ever.

In the morning he told Phyllis, I told Little Mary I would come back. Will you bring me back?

Phyllis thought for a minute. She had her own thoughts about coming back. Then she said, Yes, Joey, I'll bring you back. Promise? Yes, Joey, I promise.

**There are many things
that can only be seen
through eyes
that have cried.**

BACK ON THE SOUTH SIDE

The mind of a boy is a marvelous thing. Boys like Joey thrive on fantasy. They have this wonderful ability to transport themselves to exciting places and to even become exciting people themselves. When a boy discovers how to collect eggs, touches the soft nose of a horse, or rushes through fields in a four-wheeler, survives a tractor accident, and connects emotionally with a pretty girl near his age, life beats fantasy every time. When Joey came home to loving parents in a comfortable safe home he had known all his life, he was a different Joey. His room still had all his favorite toys, a drawer full of hero pajamas, everything he had wanted – until now. He sat on the end of his very own bed in a complete funk, and not knowing what to do, so for the next week at least, he had to tell Mom and Dad, and Uncle Nick on the phone, all about the farm in Nebraska. Joey relived every minute of all three weeks on the farm, repeating over and over that he had made a promise to Little Mary that he would come back. That promise energized his life. He knew it would actually happen. Life was good for Joey in a way he never expected. He was going back. He had promised Little Mary, and that made all the difference. Life beats fantasy and Joey had to tell everyone how wonderful it was.

~ ~ ~

Jennifer and Joseph wanted to get Phyllis by herself to fill in some of the blank spaces in Joey's stories and to plan the continued supervision of the apartment building. Phyllis had suggested a short vacation with Uncle Nick, dropped Joey off and went to see Jennifer and her boss at their sparsely furnished apartment on the 6th floor. Jennifer met her at the door.

Joey has gained some weight and if I didn't know that it was less than a month I would say he's taller.

Jennifer, he ate like a farmhand and was constantly on the move, so you may be right that he is a bigger boy than the last time you saw him.

We were really worried when the visit started off with an accident. We almost asked you to bring him home.

Oh, I'm glad you didn't. Surely you can tell what a great time he had.

Joseph had to ask, were you really able to help with the farm work? Wasn't it difficult? And did we hear Joey say that you once flew airplanes? Did he misunderstand what was said?

No, Joseph, he heard correctly, and I did do farm work most days. I actually enjoyed it. Yes, I was an Army pilot, then had my own flying business, but an accident put an end to it. Coming to Chicago and working for you was my new start.

That's quite a story, now I need to know. Do you want to keep working for me? It would be a big help to me if you could stay.

I have no immediate plans to leave, Joseph.

We also heard Joey say that you promised to take him back to the farm. We really wish you hadn't promised him that without talking to us.

Of course, you are right. I should have spoken to you before making a promise. It was a powerful moment, and I just had to say, yes.

Jennifer tried to salvage the tension, he's just a boy so maybe the idea of you promising to take him back to the farm will fade with time.

Perhaps, but what Joey would want more than anything else would be for you both to experience what he did. I also think that would be good for you after having been shut up in this apartment for a month. When I got back, I could see that COVID has almost everything shut down and many people are isolated like you, but on the farm everything continued. COVID hasn't got them and maybe it won't.

Phyllis, Joseph spent part of each day in his office and I went out for groceries, and what may not be obvious is that we enjoyed our time together. In a way it was like a vacation for us. Can you understand that?

Yes, and that's much better than the grim picture I had painted in my own mind. But I was serious that Joey would love to share his experience with you, and I'm willing to keep things running here. It's a one-day trip, a long day but you can be there in one day.

Jennifer looked at Joseph with her what do you think look. He responded, what about your mother? I think we should talk it over with her. She was there. OK, I'll go see her tomorrow. Thanks for everything, Phyllis. Joseph added, I need you to spend tomorrow with me here to get you up to date on what's been happening. I can do that, Joseph. Jennifer, do you want me to pick Joey up from Nick's? Yes, that would let me go home to be there for Joey. Can you come here to be with Joseph tomorrow? Yes, I'll see you in the morning.

At Nick's house Joey brought out a picture of Little Mary that was taken the day they left the farm to come home. She's taller than you, isn't she Joey? Yes, but that's OK. And what does she have in her good arm? That looks like your Teddy. I gave Teddy to her because she was having bad dreams. That was really nice of you, Joey. Phyllis makes me breakfast for lunch. That sounds like a good idea, what would you like? I like pancakes and eggs, Uncle Nick.

Back at the Cohens' apartment, Jennifer turned to Joseph and said, she is not going to be happy sitting behind a desk. I think you're right, but she will pick up Joey and be here tomorrow. She is dependable, Jenn. She will always do what she says she will do. I agree, Joseph. What about the promise she made to Joey? I don't see how she can keep it. I don't either, Jenn. I'll go home and be there for Joey then go to my mother's house with Joey in the morning. Watch the sun come up for us in the morning, and she kissed Joseph on the lips. It had been a good three weeks together. The COVID pandemic was still raging, but they had found a way to beat it.

~ ~ ~

I never realized all the details, and more piled up while I was gone. I even missed paying the utility bills. Mom, I can help. I planned to spend the day with you, and Joey can help too. Right, Joey? Sure, Grandma, what can I do?

It became a work day at Sue's house, but between chores Jennifer got to ask about her mother's experience on the farm, and concluded that it was all positive. When Joey was working in the yard, Sue even told the Bea and Doctor Miller story. Jenn, Bea thinks I need a new husband.

Finally, Jennifer got to her first point. Mom, would you go back? Yes, but not right away. I need to get this house and all the medical paperwork under control, but I would consider going back next summer. Joey stuck his head in the door and said, can I go too?

~ ~ ~

As Joey was going to sleep that night, he was absolutely certain that he would be able to keep his "cross my heart and hope to die" promise to Little Mary that he would come back. Phyllis promised, and now his Grandma said she wanted to go back and that he could go too. Next summer seemed way in the future, but it also sounded like it was really going to happen. In Joey's mind he had two sure promises. Maybe he would get to go twice. His now warrior cat, curled up at the end of his bed, made Joey's life as perfect as he could imagine it. Well, almost. Tomorrow he would call his Uncle Nick and ask if his friend, Pat, could take him fishing.

~ ~ ~

In her own rental home and finally alone with her thoughts, Phyllis knew she had some decisions to make. She thought Joseph was the nicest man she had ever met. Always courteous and even in their small, almost intimate, office space he had never suggested or even hinted at anything personal. She had come to trust Joseph completely. Then there was Jack. Jack trusted her. That was different. She trusted Joseph but Jack trusted her. He had asked her to do things she had never done before. Important things. Jack was her confidence-builder, and

she loved the way he seemed to enjoy his wife's, and even Bea's, boldness. Jack was not afraid of bold women and trusted women with difficult work. Then there was Josh. Josh stood like a huge tree in a windstorm, and not just because he was big, Josh was unflappable. Josh was for Phyllis the perfect example of a man you always wanted in your corner. She remembered the story Maryam told about when he was her body guard, and the story fit the Josh she knew. When there was trouble, Maryam and Phyllis too, wanted Josh to be close.

Phyllis played a little game in her mind. If she had the choice among men like Joseph, Jack or Josh, who would she choose. Of course, she didn't have that kind of choice and maybe never would, but she found it fun to think about. Then the answer seemed so obvious that she wondered why she had ever asked herself the question. She wanted a man like Jack. She wanted a man who had complete trust in her. She wanted a man who would never say, no you can't do that. Now where was she going to find a man like that? She knew it was not going to happen sitting behind a desk taking complaints from apartment dwellers. She fell asleep knowing what she wanted. She knew what she wanted, but with no sure answer for how to find her new imagined life. And how and when could she keep her promise to Joey.

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Sue was crying. Nick told her that crying was OK, and she even remembered the huge man on TV singing, "It's all right to cry, it might make you feel better", but she wasn't feeling better, not tonight, alone in her bed that she had shared with her husband, Allen, for close to 50 years. Tomorrow she would make herself busy, but the thought of going through all of Allen's things was daunting, his clothes, his tools, and special medals and award letters. Jennifer was wonderful, but suddenly she wanted Billy. She didn't care what time it was in Germany or COVID hazards, she picked up her phone and called. Billy answered, seeing his mother's number he said, Hi Mom, and then he waited. Billy didn't know how to talk about his father's death, and knew there was only one reason his mother would call him in the middle of her night. Billy, I need you to help me go through your father's things. There may be things you would want.

Mom, I can do that. When would you like me to come? Whenever you can manage it, Billy. Sure, Mom, let me check on flights and I'll call you back. Do you have someone with you? Jenn was here most of the day. I'll be OK, Billy, but I need your help. What if I let you get back to sleep and call you in the morning? I wasn't sleeping, Billy. Call me when you know your travel plans. OK, Mom. I'll come as soon as I can schedule a flight.

~ ~ ~

That morning at the Cohen house, Mom said she would like to go to the farm again next summer. What do you think? I have never been near a farm, but I can see the positive influence it has had on Joey. Next summer is a long time from now and a lot can happen. So you think it's a bad idea? No, it's just, what would I do? It wouldn't be for us, Joseph, it would be for Joey and my mother. OK then let's pencil it in. I love you, Joseph, for being willing to try new things. I'm not getting on a horse or driving a tractor, Jenn. It was agreed.

The next day Jennifer called her mother and Joey listened in. They would need to plan a family vacation at the farm next summer. Joey clapped his hands. That's when Sue broke down and started to cry. Jennifer held the phone to her ear not sure what to say. Then Sue said, Billy

can't come because of COVID official restrictions. All your father's things will have to stay where they are and I so hoped that Billy would help me sort through everything. There's a lot, Jenn, and I don't know what to do with it. I'll come over. Maybe there are some things we can take care of. Joey spoke up. Can I go to Grandma's too?

Even after years of marriage, there were drawers that Sue had never pulled out and boxes she had never opened. She knew, or thought she knew, that Allen had no secrets. There had been a mutual trust that carried with it an implicit privacy. Not only had there been a bodily privacy, but also drawers and boxes that now needed to be opened, and Sue didn't want to do it. She wanted Billy to do it, and he couldn't come. Today she would see Allen's private world with Jenn trying to help. Sue suspected that in some homes there were doors and drawers and boxes that were never opened even after many years. Jenn would make it easier, but maybe it was too soon. So when Jennifer and Joey arrived, Sue was of two minds. Give them lunch and send them home, or begin, but where? Clothes, she thought. We can box them up and send them to Billy. She knew Billy and Allen were about the same size. So she sat her little family down to lunch to talk about it.

What if we lay your Dad's clothes out and sort the best to send to Billy and take the rest to Goodwill? Mom, I think that's a good idea. As they began sorting, Joey lost interest and went out on the front porch to sit on his favorite swing. He had gotten into trouble more than once by making it swing so high that it banged into the wall of the house, but today he sat quietly. This wasn't working so he went back inside and down to the basement game room. No fun playing foosball by yourself so he wandered into Allen's workshop and began looking at tools he didn't know how to use. Then he saw a little box and it drew him like a magnet. A closed little box had to have interesting things inside, so he opened it. He had never seen one before but he had seen enough TV to know what it was. When he picked it up, he was surprised how heavy it was. What Joey had discovered was Allen's model 1911 45 caliber service pistol. He didn't know exactly that's what it was, but he knew it was a gun and he was fascinated by how heavy and cold and shiny it was.

The sound was so loud that Jennifer dropped the shoes she had been holding, then fear exploded in her brain and she screamed, Joey! Joey, where are you? There was no answer. Sue said, he must be in the basement. Jennifer stumbled down the steps to find Joey standing there with a huge pistol in his hands and blood on his leg. Her ER doctor training overcame her mother fear. She took the gun and laid it on the floor, then stop bleeding, prevent shock. She repeated to herself stop bleeding, prevent shock. Sue finally caught up, and yelled, my God, what happened? Jennifer knew Sue's outburst was going to frighten Joey even more. So to quiet her mother and calm Joey she said, it's OK, Mom. It's OK. Go call 911 for me; he may need stitches. Sue didn't move. Mom, go call 911. Finally, Sue went back up the steps and Jennifer sat Joey down and removed his pants. No bone showing, good. She found a towel and put pressure on the wound and carried Joey up the steps. Calming her voice as best as she could she said, we are going to get a ride in an ambulance. With lights and sirens? Yes, Joey, I'm sure they will put on the lights and sirens just for us. I didn't know, Mom. I know, but it's going to be OK.

Joey got his ride in an ambulance with lights and sirens and an EMT, who told him what a brave boy he was. There were questions. Always questions with gunshot wounds, and especially when there was a child involved. But quickly Joey had a numbing shot and stitches, and was on

his way home. Someone would come by the house to make sure the gun was safe and properly secured. Sue was a nervous wreck.

He used to keep that gun in our bedroom. I never liked it, but it was what he said he needed. Then one day he put it away and I never saw it again. I completely forgot that he ever had it. Joey heard this and wondered why his grandpa had a gun in his bedroom, but didn't ask. Sue thought Joey too young to understand post-traumatic stress so she didn't try to explain it so a gun in a bedroom remained an unexplained mystery to Joey. Together the women decided that sorting clothes could wait for another day and they put Allen's clothes away.

Joey wanted to know, will I have a scar like Phyllis? Not that big, Joey. Phyllis said it hurt for a while. Yes, it may hurt for a while. Can I still go fishing with Pat? Yes, maybe I'll go too. Jennifer was not going to let Joey out of her sight even to go fishing. That would be great, Mom. When can we go? I'll see if I can find out. Joey had another adventure to tell. Now Jennifer had to explain to Joseph. Sue would call Billy and be surprised that he would want his father's service pistol. She realized once again that there were some things she would not understand.

~ ~ ~

Billy got two boxes of clothes. He loved the old Cubs jacket that his mother almost threw away thinking it was not good enough even for Goodwill, but there was room in the box so she sent it. Allen's tools and workshop would stay as it was until Billy came to say what to keep, and the pistol was locked away. Life settled back to as normal in the Cohen house, as normal as it gets with a growing boy in the house. Sue was still feeling her loss and needed to talk to her old friend, Nick.

~ ~ ~

Sue touched Nick's number in her phone. Nick picked up. Nick, it's this COVID virus. I'm afraid. Allen couldn't get the treatment he needed. What if I need health care? Billy can't come to go through Allen's things. Joey could have been badly hurt. I feel all cooped up. I can't even go out for food. It's all delivered. How long is this going to go on? If you or I catch it, we might die. The produce isn't fresh. Now they talk about shortages of this and that. Finally Sue stopped. Nick knew that mixing thoughts of dying with complaints about fresh produce came from a highly stressed state so he said, what if I come over and we can have some ice tea and cookies on your favorite front porch? What about COVID, Nick? We can social-distance in the open air. OK, when could you come? How about now? Come on over. Thank you.

An hour later Nick pulled up and found Sue sitting on her porch with a tray of ice tea and cookies. Thanks for coming, Nick, that seems more than counseling requires. This is a visit with an old friend, Sue. Is Joey going to be OK? Yes, but it scared me to death, Nick. I didn't know that gun was even in the house. That's taken care of, right? The gun's locked away, Nick. Would you believe Billy wants it? It's a transitional object for Billy. I'm sure he has no use for it, but the gun is a piece of his father's life. I'll never understand that, Nick.

Nick knew that his healthy and financially secure friend had options, but that this was not a time for discussing options. This was just a time for sitting together on the porch so he said, I

always liked your porch and swing. New houses don't have porches. That opened a conversation away from produce, dying and COVID, and Sue began talking about porches. Nick thought that it was a big mistake when they stopped building houses with porches. When Nick left, he said, call me tomorrow and we can set another tea and cookies time. Sue kissed him on the cheek. They had found a way to beat COVID for at least one day.

~ ~ ~

Much time had passed...

It seemed like just a normal day. Joey was at school and Joseph was at work so Jennifer was alone in her perfect home. She looked around for a little project to keep her busy before she began her routine of keeping her home perfect. She needed a little project and she opened a seldom opened drawer intending to clean it out as her extra project for the day. She found mending that never got done and decided it never would and began a pile to toss out. Under the never to be mended shirts, she discovered the log she had kept after her night of confusion when she had been diagnosed as having long haul COVID. It was a nicely bound little diary in brown leather. She recognized what it was and was about to put it on the toss out pile, but she opened it and began reading.

Today I forgot to turn off the tea kettle until I smelled it burning. Could have burned the house down. Well, she thought, I haven't done that in awhile. That's not anything I have to worry about. Further on she read, *Afraid for Joey. No vaccines yet. Didn't sleep well.* Well, again she thought, Joey was now fully vaccinated against COVID and so was her mother. No need to worry. No need to be afraid. She turned to the last page with writing on it and sat down on the edge of the bed. There was one word scratched across the page in large letters, *NUMB*

She closed the pretty leather diary with her long haul COVID log and placed it on the bed beside her. Then she fell back on the bed and put her arm across her eyes. A tight feeling crept across her chest.

Was this why she turned her back on Joseph? Not all the time but often enough that she knew he felt disappointment. More thoughts raced through her mind.

Was this why she had stopped having lunch with friends or rarely called her mother? Didn't she keep a perfect house and wasn't Joey doing well in school? Millions of women would love to have house, son, mother, husband, then why I am lying here with eyes covered? She had a name for it. She was *NUMB*. The feeling in her chest tightened and she froze, thinking, I can't feel the bed against my back! She grabbed a fist of bed covers with each hand. Her mind flashed back to the ICU and the ventilator. She tried to cry out but there was no sound. Then with a scream, she sat upright and felt stinging sweat in her eyes. She felt the stinging sweat. She felt it. She was alive sitting on her own bed.

After a moment she went to her bathroom intending to put a warm cloth on her face but stopped, stripped everything off and got into the shower. She dialed the water too hot, then too cold, then too hot again. Finally, she stood in a warm stinging spray and began to cry.

~ ~ ~

In the quiet of that evening she took Joseph by the hand and led him outside saying, take a walk with me, Joseph.

The evening cool was refreshing, and Joseph thought – this walk was a good idea. We should do it more often, he thought, but he said, the spaghetti was good. You make the best sauce, Jenn, and the crusty bread was good too.

We need to talk, Joseph. I had a bad experience today and it scared me. Joseph gripped her hand. He knew when to be quiet. After a long silence he had to say, were you worried? Is there a problem with Joey? He couldn't bring himself to say, or me?

It's me, Joseph. I have begun to lose interest in this, then that. I was shrinking up inside, Joseph, but I didn't know what it was until I opened my old COVID long haul diary and saw the last entry. It said, *NUMB*. I was becoming *NUMB*. I wasn't worried, or afraid. I just didn't feel anything, Joseph. I couldn't feel anything. Can you understand. I lay down on the bed and couldn't even feel the bed. Today I remembered what the ICU was like and I remembered why I stopped keeping the log. I had nothing to write.

That was some time ago, Jenn. Don't interrupt me, Joseph. Sorry. Today I realized that some of that numbness had never completely gone away. I have only been partly alive, and it may have been COVID then, but I don't think it's COVID now.

Finally, Joseph had the courage to ask, is it me? No, it's me. It's not what I have. I have a perfect life. It's what I don't have. Joseph struggled to understand but stayed quiet. I was an ER doctor. Every day there were demands on my skills and my endurance. I love you, our son, our home, but it's not enough. Numbness has crept in and when that happened today, I felt frozen in our bed. I couldn't move. I couldn't even speak. I have to make changes, Joseph. I can't let that happen again.

Are you OK? You seem OK now. What are you thinking, Jenn? Will you go back to the ER? I really don't want you to do that. Then he had to say it. Isn't being in a safe home with me and Joey enough? You are right, Joseph. What I have may make many women happy, but I need to be a doctor. I need to be what I was trained to be, a doctor, maybe in the ER or maybe someplace else.

What are you thinking, Jenn? He didn't know what else to say. Then, you could open your own practice, but if you do I know what that would mean for our home life – there wouldn't be any, Jenn. Perhaps I could open a practice with a partner. Here on the South Side?

Do you remember meeting Dr. Miller in Grand Island? Yes. He once asked me if I would consider being his assistant. I am at least 20 years younger than he is, and he is looking for a younger doctor to take over his practice.

You've been thinking about this? Only seriously today. Would you move to Nebraska? Only if you went with me, Joseph. What would I do, Jenn? You could be the husband of a small-town doctor. And be a building manager? I'm sure they have buildings in Grand Island, Joseph.

There are options, but Jennifer needs to be who she is, a doctor.

~ ~ ~

Nick visits his Franciscan Brothers...

Nick's former Franciscan Brothers were still his brothers. He didn't visit them often so when he did, they always had stories to tell, nurse stories, teacher stories, and Brother Andrew had started going to the homeless shelter like Nick use to do before being in a wheelchair made it more difficult for him. Nick has stories too, but the best stories were the personal ones between himself and Megan that he didn't share. But then there was Joey.

He had often told them little stories about him and Joey that had brought smiles of understanding. The Brothers didn't have children, but they had all been boys. Now it looked like Joey and his family may move, and he may not see them very often or never see them again. Not because they would never visit, but because he may not be there when they did.

Nick began, remember when Joey spent a month with me when COVID began and Pat took us fishing? They all remembered that story. And that Joey caught all the fish? That got a laugh then and another laugh today. Brother Ed asked, did he really catch them all? Well, maybe. Pat caught one or two, but I didn't catch any! Nick was a good story teller when he told about his own short comings. Nick would always be a Franciscan.

Remember when I told you about how Joey and I waved to his mother in the hospital? There were sad nods of remembering that piece of the early COVID nightmare. Did I tell you that his mother was taken off the ventilator the very next day, and that she would progress so quickly surprised the doctors?

No, they didn't remember Nick telling that part of the story. Ed the nurse asked, did it really happen that way? Yes, Ed, it did. I didn't connect the dots until later, but that's what happened. Ed had seen other people get better when the doctors thought they wouldn't, and he said so. The others agreed with Ed, but still, Nick's story was a good story to remember.

Then he retold the stories about the old arthritic cat that flourished in Joey's care, and the tractor accident that could have killed Joey and Little Mary but didn't, and how he found his grandfather's pistol and it went off, but only grazed his leg. They all agreed these were wonderful stories. Then Brother Andrew said, we, Brothers, often hear stories about good things happening or bad things not happening, Nick. Life is like that. I agree, Andrew, but there is a special Angel that seems to follow Joey and I will really miss him not being around so much.

You say his family may move? Yes, Ed, and I will miss him all the time. And Andrew, you are right that many of us can look back and see wonderful things that happened to us, surprising things, often little things that in the end made all the difference. Breaking his promise to himself and to Megan that he wouldn't tell their very personal stories, but only a little, he said, I

remember the day that Megan and I realized that we loved one another. Megan and I laugh when we think about our Frosty experience. We both loved Frosties. Can you believe how such little things can change your life? We had a Frosty together and discovered that we loved each other. The Brothers were not surprised. Little things were important, but still it was a good story.

Ed said, what if I send out for pizza instead of making spaghetti? That got whoop and a laugh. Life was full of surprises. Andrew had to add, maybe Joey's Guardian Angel came by and saved us from Ed's infamous spaghetti sauce. Nick laughed, but thought, I'm going to miss him.





Easter Sunday 2023