# “Sorrow prepares you for joy. It violently sweeps everything out of your house, so that new joy can find space to enter. It shakes the yellow leaves from the bough of your heart, so that fresh, green leaves can grow in their place. It pulls up the rotten roots, so that new roots hidden beneath have room to grow. Whatever sorrow shakes from your heart, far better things will take their place.” ― Jalaluddin Rumi

# *THE* OL’ MAN

# *Memorial Day, 2013*

It’s four o’clock in the afternoon, time for us to visit Joseph John Byk. I climb into the passenger side of my husband Paul’s big boy Tonka truck. My hubster received this 1977 F˗150 industrial yellow pickup from his parents on his fiftieth birthday. Now, at age 58, he’s still a big toddler zooming about with a toy truck in hand. This time, however, he gets to ride inside of his Ford collector series. *Does sex make Paul as happy as his industrial yellow truck?* I wonder. He muscles it around hairpin curves in the mountains. He makes up chores just to drive the junkyard canister around town, and he limps it the three blocks to work and back when his legs are giving him fits. It isn’t that I haven’t enjoyed playing farm girl in his yellow truck, propelling it for construction or landscaping needs, yet it’s *waaaay* down on my list of “best consumer picks,” mostly because the roar of the engine always shocks me, and because the passenger’s side of the long cab seat slopes into Neverland. Of course normally, I am the passenger trying to hold onto my seat.

“We’re taking your dad’s car to dinner.” This, I pronounce as a flat humorless order as I work open the side vent. Even under the friendly puffy clouds, it feels like the heat of summer already; but that’s Colorado for you.

“I know,” my husband returns cheerfully. “He won’t mind. I just wanna unwind on the way over, okay?”

We’ve planned to take Mr. B–Mr. B being the nickname his wife gave him–to dinner at the Garden Club. It’s his favorite restaurant, I surmise, because the cashier honors his senior coupons for all three of us or okay, because, he can top off his salad with as many bowls full of tapioca as he likes. He’s not used to being told “No”. Once, he told me that his marriage consisted of “sixty-seven years of getting my own way”. He is not only the headwaters of the family, but he is what I call a brainiac, or more particularly, a retired aerospace engineer.

At the top of a curved suburban street, full of houses built in the '70s, my own father-in-law’s two-story, reverse-gabled home comes into view. It sports an exterior color of today’s unsure Colorado sky. I sigh. Pulling into the concrete drive, my soul quietly curses the appearance of the outmoded facade decorated with a giant X under both of the front bedroom windows. The X’s appear like a boxer’s puffy face after a match, with two widespread black eyes.

“X marks the spot!” Paul announces. The worn family joke gripes me.

Paul’s father is waiting inside, seated in his favorite blue velvet rocker, arms crossed. Tonight he’s wearing a pink and teal plaid shirt, blanketed with the light blue fleece we gave him last year, decked on top of his navy blue dress pants. I’ve seen Mr. B’s muscles, sinewy thin. He is altogether on the petite size, but we never let on that he should wear less than a large shirt.

When he sees us walk into his domain, he pulls up his pant leg and sticks out his bird ankle so that we can admire his colorful, striped, cotton knee sock. Thus, he continues to affirm my style choices. Nearing Christmas a year and a half ago, I determined to fulfill Mr. B’s meager solicitation for warm knee˗high socks. To my dismay, it became apparent that men’s knee˗highs were out of fashion. Shopping, admittedly, is not my forte, but I had finally located a couple pairs of Pippi Longstocking socks. After buying them, I stumbled upon a tuxedo store selling men’s silk knee-highs for a penny prettier that we could really afford. In the end, I stuffed three pairs of them into his Christmas package with the other two pairs of the riskier, striped, long-stockings. As a back door, if he hated them, I’d planned to tell him that they were a joke. To my relief, Mr. B was delighted with all of the socks, but mostly, he got the Christmas jollies from the colorful striped ones. He wears them fashionably under his blue dress pants or his summer Khakis.

“You still wearing those crazy things?” I tease. “Aren’t you hot?”

“No, ma’am,” Joe shakes his head quickly. “I keep it cool in here.”

I look at his thermostat which says “76” in bold letters.

# *June 20, 2013*

First, I must drag myself away from the ongoing minutia to head over to Joe’s again. Paperwork swaddles my life like cloth on a mummy. I’ve been trying to get our silent and deflective insurance company to pay the damages promised in our umbrella policy. Paul’s been helping in hiccups, but he’s mainly been transplanting bushes to reestablish “curb appeal” at our war- weary hospitality house.

At Joe’s, I lay a card on the dining room table while explaining in a loud voice that we can all write something to his great-granddaughter who is spending her summer far away at camp.

“Oh, no. What do I say to a nine˗year˗old girl?” he asks behind a wrinkled brow. “I don’t think that asking her to write a *letter to* *me* will help her penmanship. I think that she ought to be journaling in a diary all the things she gets to do, like horseback riding and acrobatics, and the dog training that she’s learning.”

“Go ahead. Why don’t you suggest that she begin a diary, Mr. B?”

“I’ll get around to it.” He sighs and pushes the card away from him over his dining room table.

Joe takes the dinner conversation way back to his old workplace, explaining to us the difference between titanium and steel bolts on a project he once analyzed. Pauly and I look at each other impatiently, wondering once again how to respond to a rocket scientist.

He begins by telling us that at one point in his career, his services were loaned out to McDonnell Aircraft for a rocket capsule project. “First, they asked me to figure out what was going wrong because the capsule kept separating from the rocket shaft in simulated flight. Then, they showed me the blueprints, and later they took me to the actual capsule itself.

“Well, I had to assess the drawing specifications to see if they were correctly engineered. Then, I had to compare the L˗brackets they had installed all the way around the shaft to hold the capsule and shaft together.” His finger makes a circle platform in the air. He explains this dilemma as if we need to know such details for work in our world. He explains it visually, folding his table napkin into a two thirds angle like an L, thumping the base of it with his forefinger to show us where the bolt went in.

Though he quit smoking cigarettes cold turkey at age fifty, Joe still yams from the side of his mouth as if his lips are clenching that smoke.

“The L˗bracket was thick, see, as thick as the diameter of the bolt going through it. So, I examined the bolts themselves. They were made of the new titanium material because titanium was lighter weight and strong, and lightweight is what everyone wants of a flying machine, but see the drawing specifications called for steel. Aha! I had the answer!” he exclaims, slapping the tabletop.

“Titanium may save weight on the rocket, but titanium is only strong when stress-tested vertically. In flight, the projection of speed was forcing the L˗bracket to rise and the joint to straighten, making the bolt flex. Steel bolts would have flexed with the L˗bracket’s force, but titanium bolts were popping their heads off rather than flexing.”

“Bolts can flex?” I doubt it.

“Yes, Ma’am. But, substituting titanium for the steel that was called for in the design caused the capsule to break off of the rocket, and that was their problem. McDonnell had to accept a new weight factor by exchanging the titanium bolts for steel bolts if they wanted their rockets to hold together.”

“Um, that’s nice, Dad,” Paul clears his throat and pauses before changing the subject to what happened in his workday at the hospital.

Joe listens with interest, nodding. He seems to drink in anything his son wants to tell him. I’m assuming since Joe has no personal friendships made known to us, that dinner with us is his only meaningful opportunity to use his voice and other social faculties of conversation each week.

In the early '90s, while he still wore large oval glasses, we teased Mr. B that he resembled the grim˗faced cartoon character, Mr. Magoo. He’d shrug with a smile and a leaning of his head, open palm raised as if to imply, “What can ya do?”

When he traveled without eyeglasses in the '90s, people stared at him for a religious reason. Some would approach him to ask if he might be the Pope. When Pope John Paul II visited Colorado, we got Paul’s dad a sweatshirt that proclaimed him, indeed, to be the Pope, so that people didn’t have to embarrass themselves. Joe particularly liked this joke because he had spent an entire childhood of Sunday mornings confused, as an illiterate second-generation Pole, sitting in an American Polish Catholic church. When it burned to the ground, he had an immediate excuse for swearing off religion. There are very few Polish Catholic churches left in America. The notoriety of looking like someone famous, however? He liked that. Occasionally, Joe would even invite the gawker to make his or her confession.



# *June 22, 2013*

Paul surprises his dad by delivering a new pair of fancy wool socks tonight. The souvenir socks are from our visit to an alpaca ranch, managed by a friend of his. They are brown wool, and slipping into them, Joe exclaims, “I finally made it. I feel *rich*! They are so soft!”

“Have you signed the card we brought last time, Mr. B?” I ask.

“No, no. I don’t think a nine-year-old girl wants to hear from an old man like me. I feel silly. Besides, I don’t write cursive anymore. I forgot how! My printing is pretty nondescript, too.”

“That’s all right, Chief,” Paul chimes in. “She’d love to know you are thinking about her. Just write about the journal idea. We all need to sign it and get it in the mail tomorrow.”

Joe sits down. He studies the card like a student forced to write a book report. Finally, he proceeds to print his suggestion using his architectural box styled hand, to his great-granddaughter. His thoughts require a fifteen minute wait time, and almost the whole inside of the card, both sides, are written over. Then Pauly writes a joke, leaving me with less than an inch at the bottom.

“Hey!” I write. “Your grandpa confiscated the whole card. I’ll write more later. Love, Aunt Lynn.” Paul wonders if putting in a stick of gum like his aunt used to do in his birthday cards is still appropriate. Writing letters by snail mail is so outmoded, I’m thinking; it now takes a whole family to safely get one card into a stamped envelope and mailed. We are still wondering if we did it right when Joe digs inside his wallet.

“This is what that card needs!” He shoves into the envelope a folded twenty dollar bill. “If I’m bold enough to suggest she write in a diary, at least she won’t have to cough up for it!”

This summer, the old man has decided to take on a new project. Sewing isn’t exactly new to him, because he’s made slipcovers and has mended pants. He’s sewn together a swimming suit, mended socks, even hemmed his wife’s old skirts, but he no longer has a sewing machine. He leads us outside to the back porch and shows us his aluminum glider. “The cushions are beginning to show their stuffing through these worn holes, here and here,” he points out with his hard and weathered middle finger. “I’ve done the upholstering of these cushions once before you know, so I’m assuming I can do it again.”

I look at Paul carefully to hide a harried expression. I don’t have time to babysit him with this project! I’m wrapping up our lawsuit. I’m talking to realtors and construction guys and a stager for our house.

Paul closes his eyelids against me. Out of the side of his mouth, he quietly sidesteps an argument, “Let’s just see how far he gets on his own.”

“I called Sandy,” Joe begins, “when I started thinking about this project, and she was kind enough to return my old Singer sewing machine to me this week.” Joe’s granddaughter, Sandy, lives north of Denver in the foothills with her husband and with Joe’s nine\_year\_old great˗granddaughter, Christina, and his namesake toddler grandson, Joe˗Joe. He leads us into an upstairs bedroom where we see he has set up a card table, a pincushion, and the old gray Singer. Sandy has indeed already managed to find the time to return Mr. B’s sewing machine to him. He smiles proudly at the setup.

Then, Mr. B scores a look as bashful as an old mountain goat when he asks us to take him fabric shopping. “Look at me, a man wid an agenda!” He tells us, “Things are too expensive, and I can’t remember what kind of material to buy. So, I’m asking for your young folks’ opinion.” Then muttering, “The last place I went, I walked around and around. Couldn’t find one person to talk to me or show me where the sales were.”

Joe’s balance has been pretty bad these past two years. “They probably didn’t want to be liable if you toppled over at their elbow, Mr. B!”

“Well, there’s that.” His head weaves the air between his shoulders considering this possibility. Then again, he refuses to use a walker or a cane because to do so would be to give in to the dictates of old age. He pins us into the corner of his sewing room. “Do you or don’t you have a few minutes to help me find some upholstery on sale?”

We agree, and Mr. B eagerly reminds us that he prides himself on bargain hunting. “My aerospace pension is a case in point. The engineering firm set it up 36 years ago, but I don’t mind bragging on myself. I won the bet they made against my longevity. See, they offered to pay me a pension every month instead of disbursing it in one lump sum!” Joe turned 97 in January. He still smiles every time he reminds us, “Those buzzards still have to cough up a paycheck *every month* for me, yeah, huh!”

Based on his older brother Eddy’s advice in the early '70s, Mr. B once tried to invest in the stock market. It was just after Joe moved the family to Colorado, but after more research, he quietly removed his money and continued his usual course of saving through measly interest rates earned on bank deposits and government bonds. He, rather, chooses carefully what to spend his money on up front. When we asked him why he continues to forfeit the larger stock market returns for the bank’s dwindling interest rates, he shrugged.

“Why would I pay a bunch of industry pricks to manage my hard\_earned money? They don’t have any loyalty to me. We have never looked each other in the eye. They only care about what’s gonna make them a buck. No, I don’t trust 'em. I don’t trust 'em one bit wid my money.”

Mr. B has a softer side to his thriftiness, though. For each summer holiday we’ve ever hosted at our house, Joe would pick, cut, and bring to me his own bundle of flowers to grace our table. He always tended them in his backyard. He typically busied himself through the friendless hours of summer days with his favorite nursery projects, cutting rose stems to cultivate new roses from them, or transplanting the two varieties of lilacs in his yard, forsythia alike, into the boundaries of his three˗quarter acre lawn. After the blooms die, Joe harvests the seeds from his poppies, snapdragons, zinnias, and Johnny jump˗ups, propagating and sharing with namely us, his grandkids, and neighbors.

Finding the fabric store by Joe’s navigation, we all traipse in together and search out material. He growls. The regular upholstery material we show him is too expensive, so he chooses a black and white checked tablecloth material instead.

Paul and I shrug. At least it’ll keep him busy.

Back at home he tears apart the old cushions and begins struggling to sew together the back cover with the enlarged front cover. It is one of those things that is better made by pinning the pattern of the pieces he has ripped apart, to the new material and cutting out the pattern, than by trying to work out the mathematical science of the curve before sewing. I try to help him by pinning the front, carefully gathered, to the back. I tell him that some things cannot be figured out mathematically and must be taken on faith.

“Use the pattern of the old ones, Mr. B.”

He attempts to sew “in faith,” as he says teasing me, but faith is diametrically opposed to his mathematician’s mind, honed by decades spent in the engineering hole at the Department of Defense.

# *June 24, 2013*

I’ve set up a dinner date for Mr. B with Betty, my 78˗year˗old book club partner. Betty’s house is located near Joe’s, so we are taking him to meet her at the garden club for dinner.

“Lynn, you know Dad won’t approve.”

Mr. B is not what most people would call a gregarious person. We have photographs from many celebrations, including his own fiftieth wedding celebration, where he is looking at the camera with a pug Yoda face held in a parenthesis between fanning ears.

I shrug. “So, we simply don’t tell him she’ll be there.” He’s still a good˗looking man, I think, with a full head of straight white hair kept cropped at what his hairdresser calls “a one on top and a two on the sides.”

Joe has made us promise not to let him fall for another woman, but Betty is not that kind of date. They met each other at our Easter dinner, where they discovered that they had both lived in three of the same cities throughout the years. Betty’s late husband was also an engineer. And Betty worked for *Nabisco* when Joe’s late wife was teaching home economics to high schoolers. Yet, Betty is *my* friend, not his.

At Easter, Betty, who majored in the Spanish language, listened with good humor to Joe’s experience of learning Spanish in his sixties. When he and his wife decided their favorite vacation spot was Mexico, they both learned conversational Spanish, enough to read it and use the proper tenses. Joe seemed pleased with Betty’s attention. After she left our Easter gathering, Joe continued to comment, “That gal could sure keep up a conversation! Yeah. I found her to be a very interesting person.”

Now, on the way to the garden club for dinner, Joe dismisses our conversation of Betty. I assume he is only pretending he doesn’t remember her. Nevertheless, we remind him of all the fun they had using Spanish together at Easter, then we remind him about all the other things they have in common. We don’t tell him that Betty has said, “If only he were twenty years younger!”

Tonight, Mr. B's sense of etiquette rises to the occasion when he insists on paying for all of us even though the party now includes Betty’s forty-five- year-old engineer son, his wife, and two children. Though our guests are a complete surprise to him, bigger than Hollywood, Joe waves paper in the air. “I have these coupons that need to be used or they will expire.” He holds them out to the cashier at the end of the buffet.

My eyebrows lift in merriment at Paul because we know Mr. B used to take the *Denver Post* and clip coupons in his sunny dining room till he said he “got fed up with having to pay for it.” Now, he clips coupons from the library’s newspaper copy. The man’s circumspect ways have, of course, kept him situated in his own home throughout the aging process, which he likes.

Mr. B carries Betty’s tray to the table for her, which seems to irritate her son. Betty pats her son’s hand and says encouragingly, “Don’t worry so much, dear.”

# *June 29, 2013*

The next time we visit the old man I ask, “Will you show me the progress on your cushions, Mr. B?”

“Okay. But I’m not too happy.” He mutters from the side of his mouth. The toothpick he gnashes drops trails of splinters beside him on the floor. He pushes himself out of his chair and leads me to the dining room table strewn with old and new fabric pieces. “When we gave the Singer to Sandy, I never expected to use it again. Seems I’ve forgotten how to use it. I did this ten years ago, but…” Joe shakes his head and clears his throat, “things have changed. It was a difficult project then, but now I’ve sewn the thing together and torn it out by hand three times!” Even when it was going together properly, he could not figure out the mathematics of the gathers and the oversized front turning over the edges of the cushion.

To my dismay, I see the new fabric has multiple small holes in it and realize the project is now beyond his ability.

# *July 1, 2013*

My younger sister Kay, a quilter, agrees to spend part of her day with my father˗in˗law bolstering his confidence and memory to use his fantastic old Singer sewing machine to make the new cushion he’s been “thinking over” for six weeks.

He remembers sewing well, and Joe repeatedly tells her how grateful he is for her “patience toward an old guy.” He continues, “The automobile industry was just in the news for trading lives for a fifty-seven cent part. Yeah. Fifty˗seven cents was the difference in cost between a part that worked and a cheaper part that has been causing fatalities on the road these days. I guess I’m worth more than fifty-seven cents, thanks to you gals giving me your time today.” To show his gratefulness, he (Circa. 1942)

treats us to chilled mango and strawberry juice and tells some stories about his life with Maudie. Much of the time, Joe recalls his wife, who has been gone well on four years now, in the present tense like, “If I eat these onions, there’ll be no kissing for me tonight. Maudie hates onion eaters.”

“How did you two meet?” my younger sister asks in her polite voice.

Mr. B’s grin seems enormous, and he worries a sewing needle in his mouth as though it were one of his toothpicks. “She opened the door in her flowing white bathrobe wid red roses covering it. Her sleeves ended in some kind of frill over her hands, and the same frill was on her collar over her neck. She was so classy. Mmm. That was it.” He shrugs. “The short story is,” his voice flows, “I had met a gal who turned out to be her roommate. I had been going over to ask her to go skating wid me. And like I said, Maudie opened the door. Wow! Did she have a figure on her! She was on a college break from, eh, Columbia Teachers College, and was visiting friends in Oklahoma. So, I *ask*ed her on a picnic for the next day, and she made me many of my favorite foods: pickled beets, sliced tomatoes, center cut ham, boiled eggs. I *ask*ed her to marry me.” (Rhode Island’s coastal awe remains in Mr. B’s pronunciation of ‘ask.’)

My sis raises an eyebrow “That was quick”.

“Well, yes, I guess. Anyway, she phoned her mothea back home to ask her if she could put on a wedding in a week. Her mothea said, ‘Give me two.’ And so she took a break from college to help her mothea wid the wedding. I wrote her a letter every day we were apart and she called me at night. So we tied the knot.”

“He wrote letters in shapes and circles. I’ve seen some of them,” I insert.

Joe stares at the wall and then glares hard at me as if to say, “*This is my story, Deary. Butt. Out*.” He looks around. “My proposal letter is sitting right here on the table with us in a stack of photographs.” He shuffles through his card box of precious keepsakes. “Look, here it is!” We all look at the plain white envelope. In the return address section, he had typed in black ink,

“This letter contains a proposal. Do not delay a response on any account!”

Where Maudie’s name and address in the middle was typed, he’d

typed a description of her address after her name:

The Old Maid Quarters

“Okay. I was a bit crazy for her.” He suddenly admits, “She was a Brownlee. Her fathea was the town doctor, oh yeah, very respectable. But way back in Wales, the Brownlees were the upper crust who lived up on the hilltops, and the Greenlees were the ones who lived in the valleys and meadows. Oh, and her mothea was a Carey, from the Carey Salt Mine family. I was moving up!”

He smiles. “The minister was this Kansas bloke named Gardener. After he was done, I asked him, ‘What do I owe ya?’ He was familiar with the family’s notoriety and so he got a bit cheeky, ‘Whatever you think your wife is worth to ya.’ Well, I told him, ‘So far, she isn’t worth much.’ But I gave him half of the twenty bucks in my wallet cuz I told him I had to keep the other ten to get back home for work, and that was a day’s drive away!”

“Ten bucks to get married?!” I can’t help but exclaim.

My sister asks if his parents came out for the ceremony.

“Nope. My folks couldn’t make it to the wedding, but they shipped me a case of my fathea’s dandelion wine. Hey, I remember making that stuff wid him as a kid back in prohibition times, so I knew how good it was. But Maudie’s parents were very religious, and after the honeymoon, that wine was nowhere to be found.” He chuckles.

“Mr. B?”

“Mmm?”

“Will you take that needle out’a your mouth, please? It isn’t a toothpick.”

“I know that. You think I’m gonna swallow it?” He pats my leg and winks. “This one’s always worrying about me.”

# *July 3, 2013*

Let’s see. Go to a fireworks festival or paint walls? The multiple walls needing paint prior to taking multi-list pictures seems urgent, also, a distressing itemization of staging projects, before we can list our house, hounds me. This community house on Pearl Street continues to be our ‘pearl of great price.’ We drop the paintbrushes into a can of water. I’ve arranged that our friends will meet us in the park a block from Mr. B’s place on top of the hill for the fireworks display tonight. The idea is that Paul will manage to get his father to join us for the fireworks in the park.

The yellow truck, loaded with furniture and three canvas lawn chairs, carries us to Mr. B’s two-story house in the foothills. His basement is only meant to be transitional storage. Our main purpose in clearing out our own specially designed home, used as a lodge for seminary students in the last few years, is so that it stages well for quick sale.

With the afternoon wind in my face, I wonder why I feel like I’ve been peddling a bicycle backwards. After six years of trying to make our neighbors and city council be reasonable, we’re finally moving on, but I feel like I’ve peddled into one of those old Frenchy films where the wimpy *fini* climax espouses the meaninglessness of life.

Did I outrun Colorado’s municipal zoning tornado? Nope. The heated litigation spun us around like odd tangibles in the whirlwind and spit us out as pieces of trash into an unknown atmosphere. In the aftermath, we must sell low or lose our shirts completely. Anyway, at this point, moving is probably the only way we can manage to love our neighbors. For our part, we just want to dust the sand off our feet and lock the doors on the memories. We’ve been toying with the idea of building a log cabin near Joe in the foothills with whatever money we can garner from the sale of our house.

The idea of retreating from society entirely sounds like paradise to us, two chastened mice seeking a rat hole, but there’s the little matter of Paul’s elderly father. There’s also that detail of timing. Paul has five years till retirement himself, and he works right here in town.

“We could rent an apartment *near* your dad, Honey, while we build our retirement home. You know, just for a couple of years.”

He agrees. It’s a good option. The buyer’s market prevents us from selling our home at a price that would allow us to transfer the whole ministry into another house. Our hospitality lifestyle has ended.

Paul cajoles his dad into riding with us to the Independence Day celebration by assuring him, “You won’t have to walk far. There is a nearby handicap parking area. There will be hot dogs, Dad, and you’ll enjoy the fireworks. It’s *exciting!*”

Even the idea of hot dogs, his favorite, doesn’t tempt the ol’ man. “I can see that display from the upstairs’ window,” he croaks, waving us off.

“But it will be good for you to get outside and take a break from all that sewing.” I plead. “Plus our best friends want to meet you, Mr. B. They’ve heard so much about you.”

“What if I don’t want to meet *them*?” he counters. “No, I’m not much for social gatherings. You go and have some fun. You need some blankets? Take these…” He swivels in his chair to grab a blanket from the blue velvet couch and throws it to us. We look at each other and reject Joe’s blankets.

“We brought three folding chairs, Dad, one for *you*. Come with us,” Paul’s voice commands.

“Okay, okay! Since you put it that way.” Mr. B growls as he pushes himself up from his swivel rocker. “But seriously, I can see that display from the north bedroom up there.” He shakes his head. He pulls his sky˗blue fleece over his white T-shirt and stands like the wounded Christ, arms before him offering himself to slaughter. “What are we waiting for?”

We pile into the car and park a few blocks away. Then, we join the parade filing up to the bowl on the hilltop with a gathering crowd. Joe greets our friends who convey how much they’ve wanted to meet him. Done with the pleasantries, he tucks himself into a canvas chair and starts enjoying a hot dog to the calls of children playing with expensive Independence Day gadgets, chasing each other across the grown-ups’ carefully laid blankets.

I relax to see he’s enjoying the party when suddenly, clouds begin to plop, plop drops of rain, little gray warnings that freedom celebrations often come with a cost. We pass over a large black garbage bag to Joe. He refuses to touch it until we show him how to make a rain poncho. All of us rip off a corner of our black bags and pull them over our heads.

“I coulda’ watched it wid'out the rain at home,” Joe mutters. “Is there a potty around here?”

Paul leads his dad over to the temporary toilets, but they immediately return. “I gotta walk my dad home.”

“What?”

“He doesn’t want to stay in the drizzle. He doesn’t want to use those toilets, and he has to *go*.”

“But can he walk all the way home? It’s at least a mile!” I’m alarmed at the pickle I’ve put us all in.

“Oh yeah. Probably. He used to walk all over this place. He walked to the Columbine Library all the time. I’ll go with him.” He waves me goodbye with irritation. “See ya.”

It’s true. During the '90s with the rise of the “dot com’s”, Mr. B walked through the park a mile, back and forth, to reach the library and return home when his research was completed. He was interested in learning how a computer works, how the Internet works, how the multimillions were made through “dot-coms”.

Joe doesn’t own a computer. He just likes to understand what’s happening in the world, and the engineer is always curious *how* it happens.

Paul arrives back to the party just in time to see the ten minutes of fireworks we’ve endured hours of wind and drizzle to enjoy. On our way back to the car, we get lost. Sluicing through the crowds, in vast inlets of multiple parking areas, we become blaming grumps accusing each other.

When we arrive back at Mr. B’s house, he opens the door and waves us in to hear our story.

“Like I said, I watched 'em upstairs! You kids shoulda’ stayed here.” The ol’ man’s earnest expression finally makes us chuckle.

# *July 15, 2013*

I’m in denial. It’s uncomfortable that we won’t be transferring our hospitality venture into a new mini-mansion *nearby*, but adding that we may be moving *in* with my father˗in˗law? I find myself, uncomprehending, taking truckload after truckload of furniture, dishes, pictures, artwork, valuables, linens, pots, and pans into his two-story, faded '70s house. This is transitional. *Storage.*

Notified by the roar of the truck, gears shifting to reverse and the clatter of the transmission yearning to drop onto his driveway, Joe opens the door to wait for a sign of our appearance from Neverland. He quickly motions us inside the house with a secretive smile on his face. We follow him through the Hungarian sounds of the Franz Liszt Chamber Orchestra down the hallway, through the den, and out the back door where his finished work is laid on the glider, and under his freshly laundered loincloths hanging on the clothes-line which stretches across his back porch.

Mr. B is grinning as wide as one of the openings in his Fruit of the Loom displays. “What do you see that’s new out here?” he demands.

“Wow, Chief! Good for you!” Paul congratulates his father and rubs his back. The black-and-white checked lounge is plumped and tucked together like a turkey. We sit on the billowing cushions and congratulate him again. Instead of displaying pride, he twiddles the toothpick in his mouth nervously, rolling it between his fingers. Mr. B seems humbled by the task and rather relieved to have finally managed to pull it together.

Surveying Joe’s backyard now, from his newly covered glider, my concern is sparked. “Why are your roses dead, Mr. B?” The brown earth covers his dry flowerbeds as well as his three-quarter acre of grass. “Where are your snapdragons and zinnias?” I ask.

“Oh, those flowers are so old. They don’t last forever, you know.” His aging voice sounds like a swarm of bees.

“But your whole yard is brown, Mr. B!”

“Well, that saves me having to mow.” He nudges me with his elbow as if this is a joke.

Joe has lived pretty much isolated for five years since the death of his wife, Maudie. It occurs to me that the wilted beds he once nursed carefully are reflections of his own lack of desire to live.

During our weekly visits these past years, we began to comprehend the impact of loneliness on a person. At 97, nothing is physically wrong with Joe beyond his hearing loss and dimming vision. Yet he seems forgetful, repetitious, or simply stuck finding words to communicate with us. He has previously explained that he is too cheap to water and that it saves him mowing his grass, but in this moment, I realize that it is so far gone, it may not revive next spring. He may be intentionally killing the things he previously nurtured, signaling his own soul drying up. What he cannot admit to us verbally when asked, he is showing us.

Yet as Joe’s basement has been filling up with our “junk,” as he calls it, I rethink the purpose for moving our things to Joe’s house as more than storage while staging our home for a quick sell.

Alarmed, I pick up the hose and begin squirting water on his flowerbeds that were once brilliant. “Just wait ‘til we move closer,” I tease. “It needs water. That’s all. We’re gonna have you back in tip-top shape real soon.”

“Oh, don’t worry about me,” he says flapping his hands to close the lid on an imaginary box. Though he can’t bring himself to discuss his needs, his tough exterior can no longer hide the fact that his soul is as hard as the cracked, dusty earth of his yard.

Maybe this is why we haven’t been able to sell our home or find another one closer to him. Maybe we are to move in with him!

Recently, Joe has repeated, “The loneliness is what is worst.” Even two visits a week from us have not staved off his gait becoming wobbly and a loss of memory. He is so thrifty that he has frozen himself, almost to death, by turning down his heat on winter nights. We may not receive that desperate phone call from him in the next instance. We cannot risk him living alone another winter. Also, he cannot see to drive in the dark anymore. He has gotten himself lost going to the emergency room in the middle of the night.

A couple of my friends take care of their parents, but up until now, this queen ant has focused on building a colony elsewhere. Inside, I feel the my soul shift in layers like platelets of an earthquake. I love this man. And yes, the alternative could be dire if I leave him to his loneliness.

“Oh God! Help me be worthy of this task.” Our move seems imminent, whether we are able to sell our house or are forced into foreclosure. I am, without explanation, reconciled to help preserve the life of my amazing father-in-law. My lifestyle must be more cohesive, truer than ever. If only my faults don’t get in the way to mess things up!

# *July 20, 2013*

For a couple of years now, I’ve been taking Mr. B to both his eye doctor and his specialist for appointments. He gets shots in one eye for the “mac˗stuff” as he calls it. Since it takes a few hours for the dilation to wear off, we hang out together at home on Pearl Street or we go to lunch and chat.

This morning, the receptionist hands over an updated annual form to sign. I summarize it for my father-in-law and ask him if he wants to sign.

He responds slowly. “Oh, I guess so. I don’t like indemnifying a doctor. If I were younger, I’d feel like I’m signing my life away, but I’m too old to worry about that now.”

“Sometimes I scratch stuff out and initial it when I don’t like it.”

“You do? Do they refuse service to you then?”

“No, haven’t yet.”

“Well, good for you, young’un. We see eye-to-eye on it then. That’s why I don’t go for credit cards. Too many questions!” He reflects leisurely in a flow of consciousness. “There’s nothing private anymore. If you tell a doctor or, say a bank or, even a politician something, you don’t really know who they are beholden to. You think you’ve told them alone, but you don’t know they have agreements of their own with others, and when push comes to shove, they’d cover their own you know what, rather than protecting you. You are only one customer to them.”

He looks at the sheet and wobbles his head over the clipboard, then takes the pen and signs his name with a careful script. “I haven’t got much anyway.”

He smiles down at the receptionist who takes the clipboard and our source of discussion. Then she waves us into the doctor’s office.

His specialist shakes Mr. B’s hand then greets me with her typical fast and firm handshake. Nodding her head Mr. B’s way, she gives him a thumbs up. “He’s quite a guy, eh?”

“What’d she say?”

“She says you’re trouble, but my lips are sealed. Your secret’s safe.”

“This gal’s a good partner in crime!” He points at me and ogles with his watery eyes.

Mister B’s doctor treats me, not as an encumbrance to her job, but with recognition of our relationship and the value my presence brings to communication and the safety of my father-in-law. She banters with Joe like his other doctors do, and I interpret. When she leaves the room, I tell Mr. B that our lawsuit ended against the City because we refused to be questioned in a marital deposition by the City attorneys. It was an expensive lesson for us to learn as plaintiffs. “The intrusion into our sanctity of marriage aside, my father once told me that the smartest way to keep the government from interfering is to tell them as little as possible to begin with.”

“That’s a good one!” he agrees. “People think they can trust someone else to keep a secret for 'em, but they’re mistaken. The best gate is your own sealed lips. Once it’s out, it’s out.”

# *July 23, 2013*

“Noise has the strength of vibrations to break things apart,” Joe declares, agreeing with my sister’s complaint. She has come to dinner with us because the fire alarm in her apartment building is driving her and her little dog crazy. “I don’t know why they can’t seem to get it regulated there! It should turn off as soon as the fire department shows up, but it doesn’t, and for hours afterwards, you think it’s done, but it keeps cycling through with sharp beeping noises!”

Agreeably Joe maintains, “A human ear has a flimsy membrane that can only take so much noise. It’s like the shell of an aircraft with engine noise. We learned about noise dynamics and propellers and gearboxes at work. You know the bombers?” He pronounces the second b in bombers hard, not silent.

“They were not considered fast planes, and the MiGs could catch up with them in no time because they flew faster, at higher altitudes, and after the bombers dropped their bombs, they would drop lower and kinda be sitting ducks. So, we gave them a couple of high-powered engines, counter rotators, and they would kick in and drive the bomber out of range of the MiGs. But we learned something about the faster engines with the counter rotating propellers when we did that. You see, one propeller would go one way and the other would turn the opposite direction, and the gear box would control them on two shafts.” Joe moves his forefingers in two separate circular directions and continues. “But the decibels of noise from them operating next to the flimsy skin of the airplane would eventually break the body and shred it like rags.”

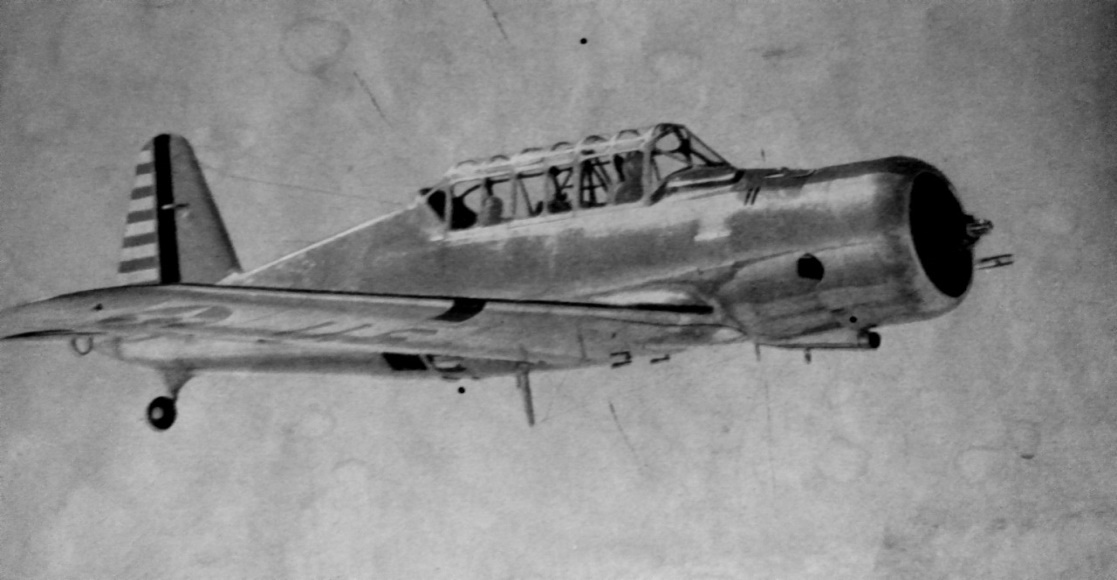
Joe chews his toothpick, pulls it out of his mouth and spits out a sliver of wood. “They crashed. See, at 450 miles an hour, the gearbox couldn’t keep up with the vibration, compression, and speed. Now, they set these things electronically, but in the beginning, the mechanics had to try to make them work like a Swiss watch under those conditions, and it was nearly impossible.”

“What did you do?”

“Me? Well, we decided to turn the front of both the engines to point away from the body at an angle and measure the decibels.” He points two fingers on each hand

Vultee Attack Bomber, which Joe helped design in 1938-39

Downey, California



in a ‘V’ formation, away from an imaginary plane. “We put a shell around them too, to muffle the rumbling. That worked.”

My sister quips, "That’s what I need! Earmuffs! My head was about to explode."

"You already have a turtle shell," I say. “You are my sister who is most likely to hide in your shell before anyone even sees you!

"Yup." She nods. "I’m going to have to tell my apartment managers that my nerve endings are too sensitive to live with their fire alarms. I’m out ’a there as soon as possible. Ever see a flying turtle?"

# *July 25, 2013*

Being survivors of a six-year zoning litigation with a city is a feat in humility. Emotions are worn like old, holey work shoes. We’ve exhausted our resources. In short, we feel like Mr. B’s favorite Braunschweiger, a sausage stuffed into its natural casings, nearly always smoked.

Mr. B’s more vulnerable situation, however, turns our attention in grinding fashion to someone’s need other than our own. We were looking at smaller homes to buy closer to Joe’s home, enabling us to take care of him on a daily basis as he ages. Of course, we want to maintain our autonomy.

When Maudie broke her hip and was laid up in the rehab center, Joe looked around and got spooked. He made us promise never to put him in a nursing home. “I don’t like old people!” he hissed. “I like *young* people.”

Since then, we’d assumed that he’d eventually move in with us. After all, he has planned for years to “kick the bucket” and for that reason, he and Maudie cleaned out their home of valuables and a lot of furniture. I don’t know how many times I’ve heard, “When I kick the bucket” as a tagline to some advice or gift. Thus, in our youth, we built a main floor master in our lodge specially for a surviving parent. That plan is not looking up.

# *July 29, 2013*

The last time I took Joe to his eye doctor, she recommended some pills for his macular degeneration. They turned out to be the size of horse pills, but Mr. B gave his doctor’s recommendation a gallant try.

Tonight, we visit him, and he seems shaken. His voice is raspy.

“Are you sick, Mr. B?” I ask, handing him a glass of water. “It sounds like you are dehydrated.”

Joe waves the water away then thinks twice and takes a sip. “No, actually. It was those hell-bent horse pills my doctor recommended!” Joe lifts up the remainder of the bottle into his son’s view.

“What happened, Dad?” Paul takes back Joe’s water glass.

“Well, it was funny. I tried to take one this morning, and it got caught in my throat. I thought about calling 911, but I didn’t think they’d get here in time. So, I got into my car and drove myself over to the E.R. I was just about there, and I coughed it out the window. But it must have scratched my throat or something.”

Paul and I exchange worried glances.

“Oh, don’t bother your heads about it. It was nothing. As you can see, everything turned out all right.”

But we do bother our heads about it. The last time we got Joe a cell phone, he received obscene phone calls and texts repeatedly, and he only used it twice. I was always having to remind him how it worked. We have since started talking about getting him a medical alert bracelet, but it’s beginning to be clear that the best move of all is to move in with him.