

The Little Yellow Feather

The little girl sat on the top step of the stairs leading up to the porch. In one hand she held a match box; the one for those wooden matches. Her Gramma used the matches all the time to light up little cones that smoked and made the house smell nice. Her other hand supported her bowed head, tears traveling down her cheek and halfway down, dropped silently to the step beneath her feet.

Willy, the boy from next door approached.

“Is your brother home?” he asked. She looked up and Willie noticed that she was crying.

“Whatsa matter?” her asked.

“T died,” she sniffed.

“T? Your canary?”

Her answer was stuck in her throat, but she managed a light sob and a nod of her head. Saying nothing, she slid the outer sleeve of the box back. Willie let out a little whistle. Tucked neatly into the box, resting peacefully on a lace-trimmed handkerchief was T, a beautiful little, bright yellow canary.

“How’d it die?” Willie asked.

Suddenly, the screen door opened and the girl’s brother stepped out.

It seems I should introduce everyone here, because certain information could be important to some readers. Now, the little girl is named Angie and she is six years old. Willie, the boy next door is eight years old. The brother, Artie,

is important here because he is eleven and a half ... the senior, wiser member of the group.

“Where’s T? I can’t find ...” Artie stopped and looked at the matchbox. “Oh, you put him in there?”

Angie nodded.

“We gotta bury him, y’know?” Artie said.

“Where?” Angie asked, fresh tears cascading down her cheeks.

Willie said, “Birds like to live in trees. Maybe we should bury him under a tree.”

“She ain’t a him,” Angie said, almost shouting. “He’s a her!”

“OK, wait a sec,” Artie hurried back into the house and soon reappeared. In his hand he held a little plastic envelope that had contained a spare button for his new jeans. “I’ll pluck a feather for you and you can keep it in this and it will be like T is still with you.”

Angie broke into a sad little smile and nodded. When Artie grasped a feather to pull out, she shouted, “Don’t hurt her!”

Willie, showing deep concern, placed a comforting hand on her shoulder saying, “She’s dead, Angie.”

Artie smiled, nodded and said, “I would never hurt T.” He quickly jerked on the feather and removed it. “See? She didn’t even feel it.”

We gotta have a funeral,” Willie said. “When my grampa died and we put him in the ground, we all stood around and some guy said something ... from the Bible, I think.”

“Can we do that, Artie. Please? Let’s have a funeral.” Angie closed the matchbox and for the first time that day, she smiled. She had feared since first finding T dead that someone might just throw her in the trash.

“Why’d you call her T?” Willie asked as they walked purposefully around the house to the backyard where a stately Maple stood, strong and proud.

Artie answered, “She wanted to call her Tweety Bird, but we told her that was just a cartoon. We told her she could just call it T and she would know it stood for Tweety Bird. You liked that, didn’t you Angie?”

“Uh huh,” she answered.

“At a funeral there’s supposed to be a cross on the box,” Willie said.

“Don’t have a cross,” Artie said. “But we can make one and lay it in the box. We can use a couple of twigs.”

Angie was smiling again. She was so pleased that her brother and his friend cared so much about her T. The boys fashioned a cross and laid it gently over T’s remains. They dug a hole between the roots and placed the box in it. Following Willie’s idea, they took turns replacing the dirt over the matchbox.

Artie turned real serious and said, “We should pray something. I heard a prayer in a movie they said over a grave, but I don’t remember the words. I didn’t understand the words, either, but I think it meant that “when I walk in the shadows, I ain’t scared of nothin’ ‘cause I’m dead. Amen.”

I don't know what you think of my little tale, but the outcome was, that little girl Angie, kept that little yellow feather pressed within the pages of her very first diary. It was discovered after her funeral when her granddaughter found it. On the page beneath the feather were the words, "When I walk in the shadows, I ain't scared of nothin' 'cause I'm dead. Amen" ... exactly how her brother had offered up his viersion of a prayer.

Amen.

Audrey's Cave

It was her secret place. It was where she could interact with them. Here there was no hint of the autism that plagued her everyday existence. Unfortunately, they could not leave the cave to be with her at home or at play. Of course, her idea of “play” involved only sitting on the floor, rocking and going over the conversations she was able to enjoy with them.

Unlike some autistic children, Audrey was able to go outdoors and enjoyed long walks with her close friend Jeff. He was the only one who didn't make fun of her and tease ... no, taunt her.

Her parents were devastated when Audrey was first diagnosed, but now that she was nine years old and she required little more than normal care. Doctors had told them that she was “mildly autistic” and would likely lead a “near normal” life. That's where Audrey was now: near normal. She suffered from some learning disabilities and found it difficult to converse with others. When she found it difficult to respond, she merely remained silent. Many of the neighborhood children had labeled her “dummy” as a result. At these times, she would merely sit and rock, listening and learning from the voices in her head.

She had not told anyone about the voices. After all, they were stuck in the cave. They couldn't come out to meet anyone. Besides, who would believe her? Maybe Jeff?

Like a normal nine year old, Audrey wanted to tell someone and the more she thought about it, the more likely it seemed that Jeff would be the one to understand.

On a warm, spring morning, Jeff approached Audrey as she sat on her porch glider, legs tucked beneath her, rocking, eyes closed, listening and learning.

“Hey, Aud. Wanna walk for a while?” he asked.

Saying nothing, she got up and accepted Jeff’s extended hand. They walked along quietly.

“Nice,” Audrey murmured.

“Yeah. Nice day,” Jeff responded. “Where do you want to go? We could go to the park, if you want.”

“Cave,” Audrey answered.

“Cave? What cave?”

“My place. Cave. Secret.”

“Where is it?”

She pointed at the craggy mound of rocks that the neighborhood children referred to as “the cliff.” It was only about two hundred feet high and as far as the children knew, there was only one way up or down. Scattered along the front of the rocks were a number of scrubby growths with an abundance of prickles and burrs that discouraged further exploration.

“Ain’t no caves up there,” Jeff said with a smile.

Audrey merely smiled and nodded, took Jeff’s hand in hers and led him to the cliff.

“Have you climbed this before?” Jeff asked with a worried tone.

Audrey merely started climbing, and then looked down at an astonished Jeff.

“You been holdin’ out on me,” he said.

Audrey nodded and proceeded upward. Jeff quickly followed. At a small ledge the children referred to as the halfway point, Audrey went left where the continued path upward veered sharply right.

“That’s the wrong way,” Jeff cautioned.

Audrey looked down at him, smiled and shook her head from side to side. As she approached a nasty looking, scrubby outgrowth, she paused and waited for Jeff to join her.

“I told you it was the wrong way. That bush is full of burrs, prickles, thorns and who knows what all. Follow me back down to the ledge and we can keep going up.”

Audrey shook her head and pointed at the bush saying, “Cave there.”

“You can’t get through that bush, Aud. We’ll get all scratched up.”

She smiled, bent down and picked up a board lying at her feet, extending well into the bush. She lifted the end closest to her and placed it into a crevice in the rock and she did so, a small opening appeared under the bush.

Smiling, she said, “Cave . . . my cave.” She pointed proudly.

They scurried under the bush and into the cave on their hands and knees. The bush didn’t allow much light to enter the cave, but their eyes quickly adjusted to the dim around them.

“Well, I’ll be,” Jeff muttered as they stood.

“Just wait and see how truly awesome this cave is, Jeff.”

Jeff was astounded. He had never heard Audrey speak so clearly, express her thoughts so lucidly.

He turned to her and said, “Audrey. You can talk normal.”

“Only here. This place is magical. I found it two or three weeks ago and it was like I discovered a whole new world.”

Jeff was astonished. He stared intently at Audrey. He had heard every word that she had said, but *her lips never moved!*

“What the . . . I heard you, but your lips didn’t even move. Are you a ventriloquist?”

“Not really,” another voice said.

Jeff spun around looking to see who was speaking.

“You can’t see them, Jeff, unless they know for sure that you’re a friend.”

“We assume he is a friend, Audrey, because you brought him,” yet another voice said.

Jeff turned back to the entrance of the cave, but Audrey took him firmly by the arm.

“Stay, Jeff. They have been wonderful to me.” *Her lips still didn’t move!*

“Aud, this is spookin’ me out!” Jeff shouted.

“Please don’t shout, Jeff. That is what she calls you, isn’t it?” one of the voices said.

“In fact, Jeff, you don’t have to say anything. If you think it, we can hear it,” Audrey said, “and even if we all talk at once, our minds sort everything out for us.”

This has to be some kind of trick. However, he couldn’t even imagine that Audrey was capable of putting together this level of practical joke.

“It’s not a joke,” one of the voices intoned.

He heard that. How could he hear that? I didn’t *say* anything.

Jeff’s mind was in a whirl.

“I heard it because you thought it,” the voice answered with a chuckle.

“It looks like we have to train Jeff like you did me,” Audrey said.

“I think Jeff will be a little harder,” the other voice said. “After all, you accepted the idea of thoughtful communication pretty readily.”

“Probably like my dad says. I’m off in another world.”

Jeff began to speak, and then caught himself. He thought silently, “Who are you?”

“We try to be what you need us to be,” a voice responded.

Jeff was further stunned when he realized that he had not heard the voice through his ears. The voice was just there, in his consciousness sure enough, but audibly silent.

“If you let them train you, too, Jeff, we can talk to each other like this all the time.”

“I don’t know, Aud. So we can talk like this, but just here, in the cave?”

“Once you are trained and can handle your gift responsibly, you’ll be able to use it anywhere, but only those trained to use it will have the ability,” a voice said.

“What’s this cave? A mind-readers school?” Jeff asked aloud.

“You may call it that, if you wish. The fact that you continue to speak aloud shows that you don’t fully understand the concept of thought projection,” the voice said.

“Understand it? I don’t even know what it is. And don’t ask me to spell it. Me and Aud here, are just kids.”

“And at a most teachable age,” the voice responded.

“The important thing is if you want to learn as Audrey has. If you choose not to, we’ll erase all this from your memory and you can go on just as you were.”

“Just do it, Jeff,” Audrey pleaded. “Just think, we’ll be able to talk like regular people to each other, not like you talk to me now, or how I mostly just mumble.”

“Like regular people?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Why don’t you guys show yourselves?” Jeff asked of the voices.

“We can only do that if you agree to study with us.”

“Study? Like with homework and stuff?”

“No, silly,” Audrey said. “We just sit there quietly and think about what we learn here.”

“And you’ll learn more in one of your months with us, than in two or three years of school. Your friends will think you are a genius,” a voice responded.

“Please do it, Jeff. We can have more fun together than we do now because we will understand each other, just like normal.”

“Ain’t nothin’ normal here. It’s scary.”

“Listen to us,” Audrey said. “Have you ever been able to exchange ideas like this with me before? Have we ever had a normal discussion before? And look, that last thing you said, you never moved your lips!”

“And you’re using awful big words you never used before,” Jeff observed.

“And she’s right. You are no longer using your vocal capabilities to communicate with her. You would make a fine student. Go home and think about it. Come back if and when you are ready.”

“But you said you would erase my memory of this, so how can I think about it?”

“We’ll provide a few prompts that will help you make a decision.”

“No. Audrey wants me to do this, so I will.”

Audrey wrapped her arms around Jeff’s neck and squeezed.

“This is going to be so wonderful! I feel like I’m free from that autism stuff!”

“That you are, Audrey,” the voice said warmly. “We are so pleased you found someone with whom you can share your gift.”

“So, when do we start?” Jeff asked.

“We begin now.”

Jeff felt a warm sensation on the back of his neck and a thought sprang to mind. *I must never reveal this gift unless the voices direct me so.* A flurry of numbers seemed to be whizzing through his mind; images flicked on and off so rapidly he wasn't sure what each image was; he felt suddenly drowsy. He sat down and drifted off into sleep.

“Are you rested?” a voice aroused him.

He noticed that Audrey was also awakening.

What happened?” Jeff asked

“We just had a lesson,” Audrey answered sleepily.

“Yes, it is true,” a voice responded. “It is a tiring process. We have inserted some basic knowledge into your conscious minds. You and Audrey will be able to ponder over that before we next meet.”

“When's that?”

“Audrey will be your guide. When she comes, you should also come.”

“How long did we sleep?” Jeff asked.

“In your time system, roughly, fifteen minutes.”

“That's like a whole day of school, or what?” Jeff asked with a grin.

“More like six months of school,” the voice replied. “In later lessons, we will give you a year of schooling at a time.”

“Wow! That means we can quit school, right?”

“No. You must use your knowledge wisely. You will excel in all your studies, but you should try to be as normal a student as possible. The more knowledge we impart, the greater your quest for more knowledge will become. You must work hard to avoid becoming a spectacle or an oddity among your peers.”

“What about me? When can I speak like others?” Audrey asked.

“You can do that now,” the voice answered. “We rerouted some of your brain functions. You are no longer dyslexic and the functions of speech and thought have been synchronized to work with each other, as they should. You must be cautious, however. Your improvement should come gradually during your speech therapy, not all at once.”

“How long should that take?”

“Give it a month. Try not to laugh at your therapist when he tries to explain how effective his treatments have been.”

Audrey and Jeff chuckled.

“I can hardly believe this is happening. Like now, I’m talking, but not making a sound.”

“You sound fine to me, Jeff.” *Audrey had spoken out loud!*

“This is so neat!” Jeff exclaimed. “Can I hear others when they think stuff, too?”

“No. They would have to be trained in thought projection, just as you have been.”

“Why don’t you show yourselves? Are you like us?”

“We are not of a form you would recognize, but we can simulate one that you will.”

“I don’t understand,” Jeff said.

“Just watch,” Audrey prompted.

As they stood, two circles of light, approximately two inches in diameter, appeared in a near corner of the cave. One was a pale blue, the other, a brilliant red.

“That’s them,” Audrey said.

“Wow. Can we touch them?”

“No,” Audrey said. “If approached, they will fade out.”

“You must go now,” the red voice said. “Remember that you are to tell no one of the abilities we have implanted in your brains. Come again, if you want to attain higher levels of intelligence and awareness. Now, go.”

Without a word, Audrey turned to go and took Jeff by the hand. She tugged him forcefully toward the cave entrance. Mentally he resisted, but physically, followed along.

“Stop resisting,” Audrey warned. “We can come back, but when they say it’s time to go, we go.”

“But there’s so much more I want to know,” Jeff insisted. *I wasn’t resisting! I just wanted to but didn’t hold back . . . or did I? How did she know?*

As if pushed along, they were quickly at the cave entrance, scurrying under the brush. They made their way down the cliff and began the walk home. They did not speak to each other, but their thoughts exchanged at a rapid rate.

“Don’t get mad at me,” Jeff was thinking. “I didn’t know what to expect. You just dragged me in there. How could I not be curious?”

“I’m not mad at you. Just impatient. Maybe my brain took longer for all of it to register. This was my second time and now I’m curious, too. I thought nothing of it the first time.”

“I still don’t know if I should be happy or scared.”

“I’m a little of both,” Audrey’s thoughts reached him.

“We have to be careful. Just like they said,” Jeff thought back.

“Just think how much fun we’re gonna have, but that we can’t share with anyone but between us.”

“That should make it even more fun.”

To the casual observer, they were just two youngsters walking along, holding hands. They just happened to look at each other, broke into broad smiles, followed by open laughter. What could be so funny, one would wonder. Neither had said a word to each other.

As the weeks went by, Audrey and Jeff had returned to the cave twice more. As they returned on this day, something seemed amiss. By now, they had reached a superior intellectual level, yet craved more from their eerie mentors. The closer they got to the cave, the more ominous things seemed to evolve. At

the cliff, they understood these misgivings as they noticed that the shrub protecting the cave was gone!

“Oh, no,” Audrey shrieked aloud, “the cave is exposed!”

They scurried upward with reckless abandon. What could be wrong? Who could have removed the protective shrub? They entered the cave cautiously.

“Are you here?” Jeff shouted aloud.

“You don’t have to shout, Jeff. Don’t panic. Just project your thoughts.”

“But they didn’t answer,” Jeff answered her with a thought.

“Teachers? Are you here?” Audrey asked quietly.

There was no answer. Jeff and Audrey stood in the cave for over an hour, trying to reach their teachers. It became obvious that they were gone.

“This must be the end of the education program,” Audrey said.

“They could have told us. What do we do now?”

“Let’s get married,” Audrey said with a giggle.

“We’re just kids. We couldn’t do that,” Jeff said.

“Wouldn’t you want to? Like when we get older?” Audrey asked.

After a slight pause, Jeff responded, “I didn’t think you thought of me like that, but yes, yes I would.”

“Come on, let’s kiss and seal the deal. Then we can go figure out how we’re going to go on from here.”

The kiss was warm and gentle. As they separated, each of them smiled, took each other's hands and walked out of the cave for the last time.

They spent the next month laying the groundwork for the gradual exposure of their newfound intelligence about all things. Audrey found considerable amusement in her therapist's explanation of the efficacy of his session with her. Her improvement in speech astounded the therapist who would rather not believe that any other force might be at play. Audrey's parents now viewed their investment in her therapy as a wise one, indeed. No one, however, could understand the level of improvement in her grades that seemed to keep pace with improvement in her speech.

"I think I might have been a little dyslexic," she opined one day to her parents' amusement. "The brain can rewire itself in some cases, you know."

Audrey's intellect had reached such a level that she wasn't sure her parents would understand. At least, they would consider the explanation a satisfactory one, she thought.

After two years, Audrey and Jeff had absorbed even more knowledge and had become almost one in thought. Often, they would merely sit across from each other and establish an open flow of thought. Fortunately, they had also learned to suppress some thoughts so that they did not project to the other. Still novices at the practice, there were many instances that proved embarrassing and humorous.

Sitting in a diner, enjoying a milk shake one day, they were thought-exchanging when a voice suddenly interrupted: "Who are you?"

In unison, three voices said, "*Oh my God! We're not alone!*"

High in a dark corner of the diner, a light blue sphere of light hovered,
unseen ... giggling softly.

Bosco

The little brown puppy stood at the top of the deep pit looking down. One had to wonder if the pup was trying to figure just what this deep hole could be. It suddenly noticed movement down at the bottom. A black snake slithered along the floor of the pit and the puppy began to bark loudly. The snake seemed to pay no heed to this clamorous intrusion. Along the bottom edge was the hole the snake called home.

In its excitement, the puppy ran back and forth along the edge until, suddenly, rocks and dirt gave way and with a yelp of surprise, it cascaded downward with the dislodged debris and landed on its back at the bottom. The snake, operating in panic mode, was quickly and safely in his hole. The puppy, though dazed, quickly righted itself and looked around for the snake. It didn't realize that there was no easy way out of the pit as the snake was its only quest for the moment.

After a few minutes, the puppy realized that the snake was gone, nowhere to be seen. It darted around the floor of the pit, sniffing in an attempt to pick up a telltale odor that would take it to its prey. There was nothing strong enough for its tender young nose and its sense of smell, not fully developed, offered up no clues.

As it realized this, the pup looked up at the sheer walls and could see no way out. It barked. It yelped. Soon it was whining, and then howling. It was communicating its distress, but there seemed to be no one to hear. As the sun went lower in the sky, the pit darkened and with the loss of light, the pup

became more fretful. It grew darker and darker and soon, the pup, nearly exhausted, curled up and went to sleep.

* * * * *

Meghan Burke was a spunky eleven-year-old who enjoyed walking in the woods alone. Daily, she walked past the pit, as the neighborhood children referred to it. Today was no exception and as she walked, she began to sing a jingle from her favorite television cartoon show. After a few brief lines, she heard the puppy's barking and whimpering. She stopped and listened, then realized the sound was coming from the pit. She approached it and carefully leaned over to edge. The puppy, seeing her, started yelping and jumping joyfully.

“My goodness! What are you doing down there?”

The puppy barked in response, its little tail wagging so frantically that its hind paws couldn't stay grounded.

“I guess you want me to get you out, huh?”

The pup knew no other way to respond, so the barking continued.

“OK, OK. Just be quiet and I'll find a way to...”

She didn't finish the sentence. The place she had chosen to stand was the same place where the puppy had stood the day before. The weakness that had caused the pup to fall wasn't capable of holding Meghan's weight and as the earth crumbled under her feet, she stared wild-eyed as she realized that she was falling into the pit. She landed heavily and had the wind knocked out of her. She lay on the ground, gasping for breath. The puppy was jumping all over her, licking her face and making little whimpering sounds. Dazed, she

pushed the pup away and tried to catch her breath, sucking in air as hard as she could.

This activity was bewildering to the pup, so it merely sat by Meghan, tail wagging as it looked excitedly at her, ears pricked, its little tongue sticking out of the side of its mouth.

Once composed, Meghan sat up and motioned the dog to come to her. With a single bound, it leaped onto her lap and resumed licking her face and whimpering with joy. It was then that she felt the sharp pains in the area of her hip. When she tried to move, the pain grew more intense, causing her to wince and whimper. The pup, in sympathy, whimpered along with her. She sat still and the pain subsided.

“Well,” Meghan said to the pup, “aren’t you a pretty little thing.”

She cuddled the puppy and looked around her. There seemed to be no way out. It smelled of puppy-waste, compounded by the musty odor of dankness that permeated the walls of the pit. She looked the puppy over to be sure it wasn’t hurt.

“Well, you’re a little boy dog, aren’t you? I wonder who you belong to. And what are you doin’ down here in the hole?”

The puppy only responded with an occasional cock of the head ... perking of the ears ... and Meghan thought that she even could tell the pup was smiling.

“You probably already have a name, but I don’t know what it is. So, I’m gonna call you Bosco. That’s the brown stuff mom uses to make chocolate

milk. You're not that dark, but you're brown enough, so for now, you're Bosco."

Bosco barked.

"I'm glad you like it. But if we don't get out of here, a name's not worth nothing, is it?"

Bosco looked upward at the daylight above them, and then fixed his gaze on Meghan as if to ask how they were going to get out of there. Meghan tested the walls of the hole to see if she could somehow make footholds and handholds in order to climb out. The walls were damp and slippery and every time she thought she had a firm foothold, the pain around her hip became more severe but she knew that she had to try again. After several hours of that, Meghan tired and in pain, sat down to rest. As Bosco snuggled into her lap, Meghan relaxed and soon dozed off.

When she awoke, she could see nothing. Night had fallen. Bosco was seated beside her, no longer excited.

"Boy, I musta got pretty tired. My mom and dad are gonna give it to me good. Bet I'll be grounded for a week!" She looked upward and began to shout for help. Bosco seemed to catch on and soon began barking every time Meghan shouted. It was fruitless and as the hours passed, Meghan and Bosco slept once again.

* * * * *

"Have you called around to all her friends?" the young police officer asked Meghan's parents.

“Of course we did,” her mother answered. “This so unlike Meghan. I’m sure something’s happened to her.”

“Is there anyplace special that she liked to walk or just visit?”

“She enjoyed walking in the woods,” her father answered. “I’ve cautioned her and she assured me she was very careful.”

“With all the whackos out there, it’s not a good idea that a young girl go anywhere alone, let alone for a walk in the woods.”

“Oh, there’s no one out there and those woods have been perfectly safe for years,” her mother responded.

“Every place was safe at one time or another,” the policeman offered.

“Don’t try to frighten my wife, officer. We need to start searching for Meghan.”

“I agree. Now that we know she enjoyed walking in the woods, we’ll concentrate there. Is there a particular path or someplace special she may have frequented?”

“In the woods? Who knows?” her father said.

“She just loved the wildness of it. I’m sure she had no special place over any others,” her mother said. “In fact, I venture that she probably knows every inch of that place. That’s why I’m so convinced that she’s out there someplace, hurt.” She choked back a sob and began fingering a tissue she had been holding.

“Did any of her friends go out there with her?”

“Yes,” her mother said. “But we’ve already checked and all her friends are accounted for.”

“Being accounted for doesn’t mean that they don’t know anything.”

“What are you implying?” Meghan’s father asked.

“I’m not implying anything, sir. I just want to be sure we launch a successful search based on the best information available.”

“You have all the information that we have,” the mother said. “Now, please go find our daughter ... and we want to help. We’ll go out there with you.”

“One of you should stay here in case she’s able to reach out and make contact.”

“What do you mean ‘in case she’s able’?” Meghan’s father queried.

“With kids, that could mean anything. She could even call on the phone to tell you she spent the night with a friend and forgot to tell you.”

“We told you we talked with her friends. She’s not with any of them,” Meghan’s mother said irritably.

“OK, bad example. We’ll get started as soon as I radio all this in.”

“We could have covered a half mile of trails already, so let’s quit here and get searching,” the father said.

* * * * *

It would not have been possible to set a point to begin the search any farther from the pit than the point selected. Meghan’s father, meanwhile, had

set out in the opposite direction from that of the search team. Darkness would soon approach and postpone the search until the following day. As darkness fell and enveloped the woods, Meghan's father stood on the rim of the pit, looking downward. It was too dark to see the bottom, so he couldn't see Meghan and Bosco, cuddled closely together against the wall, asleep. He called out, but all he heard was the startled response of a wild creature. Probably a feral dog or a coyote, he thought, never thinking that Meghan would be with a dog. He shrugged, turned and walked back toward home in the darkness.

Bosco sat, rigid, looking skyward, listening for that voice. His first awareness of the sound came in his sleep and his ears perked up sharply listening for some further recognizable sound. There was a faint rustling of footsteps from up above, but they quickly faded away. A slight puppy growl rumbled in his throat. Obviously confused, he listened for several more minutes, then lowered his head onto Meghan's lap.

Meghan, not fully awake, stroked Bosco gently and whispered, "Good puppy ... go to sleep." He did.

The next morning, two sheriff's deputies called at the home of Meghan's parents. In their SUV, two bloodhounds looked solemnly out of the window. Their sad, droopy eyes gave them a somber expression that touched the heart of Meghan's mother.

"Oh, they look so sad," she said.

One of the deputies smiled. "They're everything but sad, ma'am. They get excited about going out on a search, but it's all inside. On the outside, they just look sad and they droop all over... but they're happy, trust me."

“Do you have an article of clothing that belongs to Meghan?” the other deputy asked.

As Meghan’s mom went into the house for something of Meghan’s, her father told the deputies about his experience the night before at the pit.

“It was black as pitch,” he said. “I thought I heard something like a coyote, maybe. I only called out once but no one answered. Because it was so dark, I thought maybe we could check there first off.”

“Let’s see where the dogs lead us first. They have a great track record.”

Indeed, they had a good track record. They picked up a scent almost immediately and started baying, pulling on their leashes. Meghan had walked into those woods in so many directions; the searchers hoped that the scent the dogs had picked up was the freshest. It wasn’t.

Meghan’s father exploded. “I told them to check at the pit first, but the dogs are taking them in the opposite direction!”

“Calm down,” his wife responded. “Let’s go check in that direction ourselves. We may not have the noses of a bloodhound, but if she’s out there, we’ll find her.”

They went off into the woods together, along the same path Meghan had taken two days before. The brush was heavy and the density of the trees allowed for a subdued light level at best, but the path they had chosen was easy to follow.

Still deep in the pit, Meghan and Bosco sat in much the same position they had held since Meghan fell into that wretched hole. She had little interest in moving because of sharp pain in the area around her hips and she had fouled

herself because of her inability to move. She had reached the point where her level of misery overcame any sense of logic. She began to scream, much to Bosco's surprise and with each of her screams, Bosco would let out a bark, followed by a howling that was sure to be heard. Heard it was. Meghan's parents heard the screams, the barking, and the howling.

"Oh, my God!" her mother exclaimed. "She's being attacked by wild animals!"

"Don't panic! Follow me. The pit's this way. That sound sounds more like a little dog, but I guarantee you, if there's an animal near her, I'll blow it apart."

With that, he withdrew a revolver from his belt and together, they sped toward the pit.

At the edge, they peered down and called Meghan's name. They heard a weak response. They walked around to the other side of the pit where they were able to see Meghan and Bosco. Meghan's dad pointed the pistol at Bosco when his wife shouted.

"Stop! It's just a puppy!"

Meghan's father pointed the revolver skyward and fired three shots.

"What's that for?" his wife asked.

"It's the universal signal hunters use when they need help."

It was only ten minutes, but it seemed much longer, as Meghan's parents looked for some way to get down into the pit to their daughter. During that time, Meghan was whimpering almost as much as was Bosco.

The arrival of help was preceded by the barking, howling and baying of the bloodhounds and to Bosco, it must have been some sort of symphony. He barked, pranced, and wiggled his little behind almost as fast as his tail could manage.

It was nearly another half hour before rescue personnel arrived with the proper equipment to extract Meghan from the pit. An emergency medical technician came to administer to her.

When they hauled Meghan out of the pit, she held tightly to Bosco and she refused to release him when they transported her to the hospital. Once at the hospital, however, Bosco was taken from her and turned over to the local animal shelter.

Meghan suffered a fractured pelvis. She was admitted to the hospital for further care and observation.

“Fortunately,” the doctor explained to Meghan’s parents, “her fracture is a stable one. That is, there are no serious fractures that will require surgery. We will keep her under observation for a few days with complete bed rest. We’ll also do neurological tests to be sure we didn’t miss anything. After that, you’ll meet with her orthopedist and therapist who will go over all the rehabilitation programs she’ll have to undergo. She’s very fortunate. Usually pelvic fractures are far more complicated. She should make a full recovery in a month or two.”

“When can we see her?” Meghan’s mother asked.

“Right away,” the doctor answered. “She’s all cleaned up and ready to eat her first meal since falling into that pit.”

“Eating has always been a good sign with Meghan,” her dad said with a smile.

The doctor returned his smile and said, “Well for the first day or so it will be a soft diet with plenty of liquids. We want to be sure all her parts are working.”

“I guess she was pretty lucky,” her mom said.

“Very lucky, indeed,” the doctor said. “She’ll receive some morphine tonight to assure she gets a good night’s rest. He nodded his respects and left the room.

“Let’s go see her,” her mother said.

As they approached Meghan’s room, an orderly approached carrying a tray of food. The three of them entered together and a half-asleep Meghan stirred and smiled when she saw the food tray. She winced in pain but turned her attention quickly to her parents.

“Where’s Bosco?” Meghan asked.

“He was taken to an animal shelter where a vet could look him over,” her father said.

“Oh, no,” Meghan moaned. “What if someone adopts him?”

“Well, that’s what the shelters are for, dear,” her mother said. “They’ll make sure he’s healthy and then find him a good home.”

“But we have a good home and Bosco is mine, now. We helped each other down in that pit. We’re closer than anything. We love each other.”

“Listen, honey,” her father began. “You have a lot of recovering to do, followed by rehabilitation and you won’t be able to take care of a little dog during all that.”

Meghan’s mother told the orderly to leave the food and she moved herself into a position that would allow her to feed Meghan. She looked at the small bowl of chicken broth, a packet holding two crackers and a half glass of some kind of fruit punch.

“Doesn’t look like much of a meal,” she murmured.

To Meghan, it was meal enough. She was so hungry that everything tasted wonderful. She remained sad, however, as she worried over the plight of her beloved new friend, **Bosco**.

Meghan’s recovery was routine. Her bed rest proved to be therapeutic and her diet had returned to normal. No other complications surfaced during this time. On a number of therapist’s reports were notes about bouts of melancholy Meghan experienced whenever she discussed **Bosco** and how attached they had become down in that pit. She had completed her first week of therapy when her doctors decided she could continue her recovery as an outpatient.

* * * * *

Bosco, although malnourished and dehydrated, suffered no other misfortunes because of his adventure in the pit. When he arrived at the animal shelter, he was cleaned up and taken to the veterinarian for a health check-up. The most exciting moment for **Bosco**, however, was the puppy food they presented him with when he first arrived. He was so content with

his full belly that he did not even mind the needles they jabbed into him ... well, not a great deal, anyway.

Once back at the shelter, he was placed in a fenced in cubicle. There were many such cubicles, occupied by dogs who barked a welcome to Bosco. Of course, he did not realize that this was a step in the quarantine process that lasted for several weeks. During his stay, he would be evaluated, treated for any health problems found by earlier testing, neutered, then certified for adoption.

The second day of his stay, the excitement and wonder of the place dulled and he began to feel lonely. He was surrounded by other dogs that did the same things Bosco did. They ate, they slept and they paced back and forth or around in circles. Once a day they were released into a play area where all of the dogs raced around, sniffing, barking, running and puppy wrestling. When placed back in their pens, they became silent, just looking at their surroundings. When one of the attendants came into the caged area, they set up a frenzied barking, begging for attention, a kind word, a pat on the head. When that didn't come, they merely sat still and stared, and slept.

Bosco began to wonder where the little girl was. They had been together in the pit. Of course, he didn't know what a little girl was, but with her, he had felt warmth and caring that pleased him very much. When she caressed him and scratched him behind the ears, he felt no fear or anxiety in the pit. He didn't understand why she didn't get them out of the pit, but puppies do not dwell of such mysteries.

Every time an attendant came into the area, Bosco leaped up onto the fencing containing him, looking for his little friend, but she did not come. Of

course, the attendant that brought the food and water always elicited a level of excitement with Bosco and all the other dogs. Where could his little friend be?

* * * * *

Meghan's parents were concerned because of Meghan's slow response to her therapy and her state of depression. Her therapist suggested that the loss of Bosco was hindering Meghan's progress. She suggested they get her a puppy to fill the void. When they broached the subject to Meghan, she was adamant about finding Bosco. No other puppy would do, she insisted.

Without revealing his plan to Meghan, her father went to the shelter to find Bosco. When he got there, the senior attendant told him that the puppy wasn't there. He might have been, but no longer.

"We have to find him," Meghan's father said.

"Look," the attendant told him. "These dogs come through here and they have no names, no tags, and no way to identify them. Puppies stand a chance for adoption, but only a small percentage of mature dogs are lucky enough to be adopted. Too many of them have to be euthanized."

"Good Lord, not that. Bosco is the name my daughter gave him. He was just a puppy. They were trapped in a pit together and..."

"Wait a minute. Your daughter was the little girl in the pit with him?"

"Yes. I guess I didn't make that clear right off. Sorry."

The attendant picked up the phone and dialed a number. He held up his index finger, signaling Meghan's father to hold on a minute. Then he spoke into the phone.

"Candy, honey, this is Barry. Remember that brown puppy we sent over there about a week ago? He's the one that was in the pit..." a pause. "Yes, that's the one. Do you still have him?"

He smiled broadly and looked at Meghan's father. "Do you want to adopt him?"

He was answered with an emphatic nod.

"Candy, the father of the little girl who was in the pit with the pup is here and wants to adopt it. He's already got his checkbook out," he fibbed.

"OK. I'll tell him to go over there to pick it up. Better stick a SOLD sign on him or something. Seems the little girl bonded with it."

He muttered a word of thanks and hung up the phone, saying, "He's yours."

"Thanks, so much," Meghan's father said as he accepted a card with the address of the shelter now holding Bosco. "I'm not going to tell my daughter until I get her there that it's Bosco we've found."

"Wish I could be there to see that," the attendant said.

* * * * *

The following morning, Meghan was at the breakfast table in a state of lethargy. Her father looked at her and smiled. This would be quite a morning for her, he thought.

“Why so mopey, Honey?” he asked.

Meghan looked up. She had been swirling her spoon around in some breakfast cereal. She produced a half smile, half grimace. “Just thinkin’,” she said

“About Bosco?”

“Yeah. We became best buddies down there.”

“Well, let’s go to the pound this morning. If Bosco is gone, at least you can probably find another pup to bond with. Would you like that?”

“I guess, but I really would like to find Bosco,” she said sadly.

“Maybe we will. They have a lot of dogs there and lots of them are puppies. They probably couldn’t tell us if Bosco’s there, but we can go look for ourselves.”

At that hopeful note, Meghan perked up and managed a more realistic smile.

“When can we leave?” she asked.

“Well, it’s Saturday and there won’t be anyone there to help us after noon, so we can go as soon as you finish breakfast.”

With breakfast finished at a record pace, Meghan and her father left. Although her mother had not participated in the conversation, she had listened with a little smile on her lips. Had Meghan noticed, she might well have suspected something was afoot.

The drive to the pound was a short one and Meghan's spirits were high. She had dismissed in her mind the thought of adopting any pup but **Bosco** and resisted whenever the thought that he might be gone forever tried to break into her optimism.

When they arrived, the director of the pound and two attendants were waiting for them. One of the attendants had a camera and the local newspaper sent a reporter to cover the story.

"I'm looking for a dog... my dog... **Bosco**," Meghan told the director.

"Well, we have a lot of dogs and most don't have names, but you can look to see if he's here."

Meghan followed one of the attendants into the area where the dogs were caged. The others followed behind Meghan.

"Goodness," Meghan observed. "What a racket! There are so many dogs!"

All of the dogs had set up a cacophony of yips, yelps and barks. Two Beagles set off a howling and Meghan placed her hands over her ears.

She looked up at the attendant and asked, "When do they stop?"

"Not until we leave," he responded.

She looked at each dog as she walked down between the long rows of cages. Then she heard it. It was just another puppy's yelping, but there was a familiarity about it. She rushed past three cages and there he was! It was **Bosco**!

It was difficult to measure which of them was the most excited. Bosco barked at Meghan, trying to be louder than all the other dogs. Meghan just squealed with delight.

“So that’s Bosco,” her father shouted over the noise. “You didn’t tell me how ugly he was.”

“He ain’t ugly, daddy... he’s beautiful! Can we take him home?”

Her father smiled and nodded as he choked up with the emotion of the moment. They took care of all the paper work, paid the adoption fee and returned to their car with Bosco in tow. When they got to the car, Meghan wanted to sit in the rear seat with Bosco and as they drove home, Meghan’s father looked at them in the rear view mirror. Meghan was holding Bosco close to her chest. Bosco’s little puppy head was burrowed up against Meghan’s neck. She was scratching him gently behind the ears.

She noticed her father stealing glances in the rear view mirror. She smiled at him.

“Ain’t he beautiful, daddy?”

“Well, the way his fur pokes out, I would guess that his mother was probably a bottle brush.”

“Daddy! He doesn’t look anything like a bottle brush.”

At the sound of conversation, Bosco perked up his ears and moved to the seat next to Meghan. He looked intently at her, a quizzical look in his eyes.

“Looks like he knows we’re talking about him,” her father said.

“See? He’s beautiful *and* smart.”

“Do you suppose he’s house broken yet?”

“Daddy, he’s just a puppy. We’ll have to use newspapers for a while.”

“And you’re going to clean up after him, right?”

“Of course, daddy. After all, he’s mine now. We survived together.”

Over time, **Bosco** grew to be a little less ugly in the eyes of **Meghan’s** father. As he grew, his fur became less “frizzly” and under **Meghan’s** tutelage, he became a well-mannered dog, indeed. The misadventure in the pit was well in the past and it had left no permanent impressions on either **Bosco** or **Meghan**.

Bosco lived to the ripe old age of 18 years and passed away during **Meghan’s** final year of medical internship at the very hospital that treated her years before. **Meghan** never got another dog for the obvious reason: none could ever replace **Bosco** in her heart.

Moonshot

David sat in his wheelchair looking out his window at some boys playing in the neighboring park. They were shooting off little rockets, probably made from a kit, he thought. The boys watched as the rockets shot skyward to over 200 feet, fizzled, then fell back to earth. There were six boys, each with his own rocket. All of the rockets were painted red, but they were of different sizes. David smiled as he looked at the few sparks that shot out from the rockets' tails. He remembered his first experience with a rocket launch.

* * * * *

Nurse Buxom entered the room cheerily. He knew her name was Buxley, or something like that, but Buxom seemed to be a more descriptive appellation of her attributes. God, he thought, words can be so much fun!

"Hi, David," she beamed. "You have another two hours to sit up in your chair. Are we doing OK?"

"Don't know how you're doing, but I'm just fine," he grumbled.

"I was afraid you might have dozed off there."

"Nope. Just watching those boys out there contribute to the salvation of mankind."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just watching them launch their toy rockets and it reminded me of something when I was very young."

Come on, now, you're still a young man," she said as she adjusted his pillows supporting his back."

"I heard all those platitudinous statements that 91 ain't old. Trust me, young lady, 91 is older than dirt. Parts I didn't even know I had, don't work anymore, and the parts that still work can come up with a surprise now and then."

"Well, would you like me to move you away from the window so you don't have to watch the rockets?"

"No, no. I find the reminiscing quite pleasant, oddly enough."

Miss Buxley, or Buxom, placed two fingertips against her lips and imparted a small kiss. Then she touched the fingers to David's wrinkled brow.

"If you were any younger, I'd run away with you in a minute."

"If I were any younger you wouldn't have to. I would have conquered you by now."

"David! Oh, my. You have my heart all aflutter."

"Glad to hear it," David shot her a half-leer, half grin. "Do I look lecherous?"

"I'm leaving now, David, before I swoon. I'll let you know when the launch landing comes on TV."

He chortled with an inner glee as she left the room. Then his thoughts returned to the rocketry display still going on in the park. Suddenly, he was sitting on the grass on a hill not far from the launch. His dad had assured him they would have a great view of the rocket as it struggled to escape the bounds of earth. Many others had the same thought about the location and it was soon crowded with people who came to watch history in the making. Their

presence only added to the excitement stirring within him. He remembered the rumbling, the roar of the rocket engines, the eerie light that seemed to encompass the entire scene; the hill, the people; even the sky took on a different color.

"Someday, the earth will be no more," the old man standing next to him said.

The young boy watched the fiery tail of the rocket carrying astronauts on the first journey to the moon.

"What will happen to us?" the boy asked.

"Oh, we don't have to worry. It ain't gonna happen for a long, long time. But this generation ain't gonna be at fault when someday we find we coulda escaped the earth if we had only tried. And this is it. We're trying. We're starting the process and taking the first steps in the survival of mankind," the old man opined.

"Baloney!" the boy's father interjected. "This is a stupid space race. We want to get to the moon before those Ruskies do. It's just another childish contest."

"Easy for you to take that attitude, young fella. You know darn well none of us will be around to say 'I told you so.' Believe me, this is the start of something great. Next year we'll likely go to Mars, our next stepping stone.

Turning to the younger man the boy said, "Dad, maybe when I grow up I can go to Mars to help build new cities." Looking to the old man he added, "We're gonna need new cities, aren't we?"

"You bet we are, sonny. You bet we are."

"Stop filling my son's head full of silly dreams that can't be realized," the father said.

"It's not silly, dad, look," the boy said as he pointed skyward at the waning fiery rocket tail.

"You'll soon learn, David," the father addressed his son, "that we're going to need many new cities right here on earth. You can dream about building those. Our population is about to explode and the earth will seem too small to handle us all."

* * * * *

Nurse Buxley or Buxom, whatever her name was, came bounding into the room.

"David! Oh, David! It's wonderful! Your grandson called and it's already on the TV! C'mon, I'll take you to the dayroom so you can watch!

"Is he safe. Is he alright?" David asked.

"Oh, yes, David. You're great-grandson has made it! He's the first man on Mars!

A tear trickled from David's eye.

"I know," he said, "I know."

Tears began to flow more freely as nurse Buxom, or Buxley, wheeled him to the dayroom.

The Alien and the Lumberjacks

The alien had been in the deep forests of Oregon going about his mission undetected by the inhabitants of the planet. There were very few of them, whatever they were, but soon he would need many of them to further his mission goals. The inhabitants were of so many varieties that Onnution had spent his first three months here just cataloging them, trying to understand the roles of so many species.

Unlike the inhabitants, Onnution could see all the life forms here, which required special instrumentation for the inhabitants to see. He didn't realize this, of course, because the sight organs of his species were unique. He could easily identify the amoebae, the bacteria and the virus. He also learned early in his visit here that the virus was the one to avoid, for it affected his sense of smell and hearing and created a general lethargy. The inhabitants that fascinated him most were the so-called humans. Early scientific explorations had yielded a wealth of information about their unusual chemical composition. The tests conducted by the "grays" provided just the information they needed. These so-called humans possessed the exact chemical makeup to foster the growth of the eternity plant, so vital to his species. It was, after all, a vital ingredient for the species to enter into a nirvana-like place called eternity. His problem seemed to be how to transport the inhabitants to this remote location.

He approached the eternity plant that he had been nurturing for over two months and he noticed as he approached that a series of twinkling lights began to sparkle in the cloud-like cluster atop its spindly stem. He smiled. The plant was ready to accept its first real nourishment. The time had come to acquire

some inhabitants. Manipulating his tripod, he scurried back to his shelter to ponder his next step.

* * * * *

Matt Carlson had dispatched a team of lumberjacks deeper into the Oregon woods to “spec” out a new location. Leading a four-man crew was Jerry Laboeuf, a Canadian woodsman who had spent his entire adult life in the deep woods. They were crammed into a pick-up truck with four-wheel drive and a crew cab. In the back were their chain saws, axes and a variety of scientific devices that would conduct tests required by law before they were able to fell their first tree.

“Matt, we have reached the spot on the map,” Jerry spoke into his walkie-talkie. “We’re gonna look around and do the tests you wanted. We brought the camera in case we spot any owls or other critters the tree-huggers are worried about.”

“OK,” Matt responded. “Don’t spend more than an hour at it. Take a few cuttings and bark samples, check for diseases that might be a bother ... and don’t worry about those damned owls. If we don’t tell ‘em they’re there, what’s the worry?”

“Gotcha,” Jerry replied. “We’ll check in with you in about 60... ten four?”

“Ten four.”

Onnuton watched, stunned by his good luck. They were here. The inhabitants had come, almost as if they were answering a summons. He watched as the inhabitants scurried about making strange noises. He was certain that the noises were some form of communication but to Onnuton, they were meaningless grunts and groans signifying nothing.

* * * * *

Jerry was busy with the usual routines such a “spec” operation required.

“Hey, Jerry,” one of his men called out. “There’s something eerie over here. Better take some pictures for Matt.”

Jerry approached his co-worker and noticed that beyond him was a strange plant. It was like nothing he had ever seen before. It had a spindly stalk with a fluffy, cloudlike something at the top. As they approached it, little sparkling lights seemed to come to life. They looked at each other and smiled.

“What is that?” Jerry asked.

“Beats me,” the other answered still smiling. “But I feel like getting up there and just hugging it.”

Jerry nodded. Without any further discussion, the men laid down their tools and equipment, slowly undressed, and folded their clothes neatly. Then they turned to the strange plant and approached it. As they did so, the lights increased in intensity. They placed their hands on the stalk of the plant and the lights began a pulsating dance, varying in brightness. A slight sound emitted from the plant. Jerry and his co-worker began to giggle, then to laugh aloud, and then shouted with joy, as their bodies were slowly absorbed by the plant.

The alien rocked back and forth with glee. How fortunate that these inhabitants came along. He didn’t even want to hope that others would come along and join in the nurturing process. He watched as the stalk of the eternity plant thickened and the cloud-like, puffy formation at the top began to expand. He almost fell off his tripod when he heard the first faint sounds the

plant began to emit. The hypnotic musical notes announced its pleasure at the nurturing. The alien closed his sight organisms and mentally began recording his observations.

From somewhere in his archival mechanism, the alien calculated that it would require twelve inhabitants to mature the eternity plant to a point that he could harvest enough genetic material to grow more seedlings. He shut down all his other senses and the transmission of his findings were off in an instant, traveling thousands of light years to the master information accumulator.

Noise interrupted his gleeful respite as the other workmen approached, calling out for their companions. As they neared the plant in wonder, they noted the clothes and tools piled neatly a short distance away. Then they heard the tinkling musical sounds coming from the puffy top of the plant... they noticed the twinkling lights of many colors... and they smiled. Without a word, they repeated the actions of their predecessors and were happily absorbed into the plant.

Onnuton couldn't believe this good fortune. The stalk of the plant thickened as he watched... the lights increased in number... the musical notes took on a completely new dimension. He realized why the "grays" couldn't perform this mission. They had done the preliminary research in a place called New Mexico, but at this point, they could not have resisted the call of the eternity plant. Fortunately, Onnuton was already eternal and in some respect, part of the plant itself. Yes, the "grays" had done well. Except for that dumb mishap in Roswell, it seemed that everything was back on schedule.

* * * * *

Matt Carlson angrily punched the talk button on his walkie-talkie. Jerry was not responding and that was not like him. After nearly an hour, Matt

decided to go after him. He got into his Jeep and attacked the accelerator, commanding the Jeep to leap forward along the rutted trail Jerry had taken. “He had better have a good excuse,” he grumbled inwardly.

When Matt entered the small clearing where Jerry had parked, he looked at amazement at the sight of the eternity plant. He didn’t realize that just a few short hours before, the plant had been a mere seedling. Now, nourished by absorption of his lumber crew, the plant was over ten feet in height. Its fluffy top was now aglitter with hundreds of twinkling lights, like distant stars. Soft musical sounds emanating from the plant had an allure that Matt found hard to ignore.

Then he noticed the neatly folded and stacked clothes of his crewmembers and the tools laid neatly beside them. He scratched his head in wonderment. The eternity plant was not a tree so Matt couldn’t understand his state of awe over it. Gruffly, he told himself that the best thing to do was to take some samples from its stalk and send them in for analysis and identification. He took an axe from the back of the Jeep. As he neared the plant, a feeling of euphoria came over him. He smiled broadly, laid down his axe and began to disrobe.

Dorky's Christmas

It just didn't seem like Christmas. American advertisers had for years created this image of Christmas that took much of the spiritual out of it and inserted snow scenes with people all bundled up, noses red from the cold, eyes gleaming... especially those of the children. In fact, Christmas was running a close second to Halloween for the greed factor that the holiday seemed to generate. That greed seemed to permeate every holiday message.

Willy Coombs groaned in disgust as another snowy scene came on with a group of children singing and playing around a Christmas tree. He punched the mute button and said to his wife, "Them commercials is gonna gimme a headache, I swear."

"Why fret so? Ain't no darned thing you can do 'bout it."

"Maybe so, but if I can't complain a little about it I'm gonna explode."

"Now where's your Christmas spirit, Willy?"

Willy looked at his wife, Maude, pondering a response. She was standing on the other side of the room ironing clothes. After a pause he continued, "Well, the first Christmas didn't happen around no dad-burned snow-covered Christmas tree now, did it? I mean it happened over in that there Middle East or somewhere like that... you know, with camels and donkeys. And there wasn't no stupid sales in all the stores."

He wiped sweat from his brow with a dirty handkerchief, got up, crossed the small living area in their house trailer to the "ice box", and got himself another can of beer. He mumbled incoherently as he did so, then stopped and said to Maude, "You'd think a guy could sit and watch a football game without all them silly commercials, for Pete's sake."

"I heard you downright laugh at some of those commercials," Maude said with a slight smile.

“Them’s the beer commercials... they’re different. They’re funny, mostly.”

“And some have pretty girls in them, showing whatever they can and still get on the TV.”

“Now, Maude,” Willy said, himself smiling slightly, “You know darned well I don’t pay no ‘tention to them girls. Hell, at my age, I’m not even sure what they’re showing.”

“Oh, you know what they’re showin’ all right. Couldn’t do nothin’ about it, but you sure as daylight remember what all that’s about. Some Christmas spirit, sittin’ there drinkin’ beer and ogling the girls in tight skirts and short shorts.”

“What kinda Christmas spirit can you have with nothing but a few cards and some garland hangin’ on the wall?”

“It’s what we got and that’s it. We got each other; we got our health and still can afford beer and cigarettes. We got a lot more than some folks got. Some folks have to sleep in boxes on the sidewalk. At least we have a home and a warm bed at night.”

“Maybe you should start watchin’ some of these commercials. Christmas is about money. Look at how some of them folks dress ... the grand houses they live in ... them fancy fireplaces where they can hang stockings and ... oh, the game’s back on.”

He returned to the couch, pulled the tab on his can of beer, took a sip and fell silent, deleting the mute as he watched the football game. He never finished his comment to Maude. He became completely immersed in the game once again.

* * * * *

The Palm Island Trailer Park, a sparsely populated community located “30 miles from nowhere,” as the residents described its location, was where Willy and Maude had lived for over 21 years. Their trailer home showed its age. Rust was the predominant color and it looked like it had been poured in rivers down the metal sides of the structure. Mounted on

cinder blocks about two feet off the ground, it appeared that little effort would be needed to knock it off its foundation. The cleanest and most colorful object on the home was the registration sticker from the State of Florida.

Willy was a handyman and mechanic, but most who knew him admitted he was most handy when sober. He only drank beer, but he consumed at least two six-packs at a time, when he could afford it. He smoked two packs of cigarettes a day and had done so for the last 15 years, since he gave up chewing tobacco. The chewing distorted the taste of his beer so he switched to cigarettes. He didn't shave every day, but both he and Maude showered daily and they kept a neat trailer on the inside.

Although time and economics had not treated them well, Willy and Maude were usually of good nature, kind and helpful toward others. They went to church every Sunday, but took little part in the daily activities of the church. The week before Christmas, however, Willy approached Maude one morning with a proposal.

“Whyn't we go the church pancake breakfast? They have one ever' Wednesday and I hear tell it's good. Ain't no cost, neither... they just pass the plate and I got two bucks. So, let me take you on a eatin' date, OK?”

“Why, you romantic old fool,” Maude said smiling. “Are you suggestin' we go on an actual date?”

“Exactly. What d'ya say?”

“Now, you have to promise not to try anythin' funny, y'hear?”

Willy chuckled. “I hope to eat so much all I'll be up to is dozin' off!”

They looked warmly at each other. Then, Maude said, “We should spruce up a bit, don't you think?”

“Yeah,” Willy said, “I been sweatin’ like a hog all night ... must smell like it, too.”

“Well, I didn’t want to say nothin’ but ...”

“Stop right there, woman. I’m gonna jus’ drag you into the shower with me ... see how you like that.”

“My word, Willy, we ain’t done that in near 10 or 11 years.”

“Bout time we got to it, then.”

“You *are* a romantic old fool ... and I love it,” Maude said with a laugh.

After showering, they put on their “Sunday clothes” and set out on foot for the church. They had no car, but the church was only four miles away and they were leaving early enough to make it in time for the breakfast that was served until noon.

It was not a typical Christmas scene; Willy and Maude, in their mid-forties, holding hands and walking along the road that was little more than a wide, dusty path. Foliage on both sides of the road tried in vain to envelope and bury it in its embrace, but the traffic was just enough to stave off such encroachment. Had advertisers the opportunity they would have made changes. The dusty pathway would be a snow covered rural lane... the trees would be snow-laden spruce... the couple walking hand in hand would be in their early twenties, young and pretty ... it would be everything Willy despised.

The walk to the church was uneventful ... no encounters with snakes or ‘gators; no pesky mosquitoes ... the love bugs had long since gone into their dormant phase, until the following April. Both Willy and Maude felt a sense of calm. Their spirits were high but in a quiet sort of way. Maude was even heard to hum a few strains here and there of her favorite Christmas carols. Occasionally, Willy would hum along and he would squeeze her hand lightly.

This is good, Willy thought.

If she could have heard Willy's thought, Maude would have replied, "*This is very good... very, very good.*"

As they approached the old wooden church, they noticed a school bus sitting in the parking lot. Alongside were a dozen children listening to the pastor. Neither of them could hear what was being said. They entered the church and descended the stairs that led to the basement hall. As they entered the large room, they noticed tables laden with all sorts of home cooked foods. Several men were busily cooking up pancakes in the kitchen. Members of the church greeted them warmly and several mentioned that it was especially nice to see them at a non-Sunday event.

Willy and Maude felt a little embarrassed at all the attention. One would have thought they were the long lost prodigals of the group. Maybe, Willy thought, in a way they were. Willy spotted Charlie West, also a resident at the trailer park and made his way toward him.

"Hey, neighbor," Charlie said with a big smile. "Ain't used to seein' you here on Wednesdays." He nodded to Maude, adding, "At least you had the good sense to bring your lovely bride along."

As they shook hands, Willy asked, "Who are all those kids out there?"

"They're from an orphanage down around Tampa. Ain't got no family. Kinda sad at Christmas time, y'know?" Charlie shook his head from side to side.

"Why're they here?" Maude asked.

"We been doin' this ever' year for about eight years, now," Charlie answered. "If the kids have a mind to, they can pair off with a couple to eat with. Then, if they's inclined, the kid

gets to spend Christmas with them. It's just five days ... two before and two after Christmas."

"Don't know if I'd like that," Willy said. "I just came for a cheap meal with my cheap date here." He looked at Maude, winked and smiled.

"Don't have to," Charlie responded. "The kids are just here for a good meal, too. I'm pretty sure they don't eat this good home cookin' at the orphanage. They don't expect to be invited, but I'll bet they'd love it if they was."

"You gonna take one in for the holiday?" Maude asked Charlie.

"Usually do. These kids are like a Christmas present to me," he answered.

As they moved on to greet other members of the church they usually saw only on Sundays, Maude suddenly paused and looked at Willy. "Why don't we take a young'un home for Christmas, Willy?"

"Are you nuts? We don't know nuthin' 'bout no kids!"

"Ain't my fault," Maude responded. "There's somethin' wrong and I can't have no kids..."

"Oh, Lord," Willy interrupted, "I didn't mean nothin' like that. I mean we ain't got nothin' to offer no kid from an orphanage. We live in a dinky trailer; our septic tank backs up at least once a month; we got snakes and 'gators all over our so-called back yard; we never know when the lights will go out; we're always worryin' about whose trailer will burn up next. I mean, what kinda nut kid would want to spend Christmas like that?"

"I don't know, but if a young'un chooses to eat with us, will you at least think 'bout it?"

"God, woman, you don't know what you're askin'. If we have to spend any money on him, I'll prob'ly have to give up beer and cigarettes for a day or so."

“I’m sure the Lord Jesus would love you for that. What would you say to Him if you go for judgment and He asks you why you didn’t help one of His young’uns?”

“Tell the truth, Maude, I ain’t never been ‘round kids. They scare the tar outta me.”

“Watch your language, we’re in the church. Oh, look, the young’uns are comin’ in.”

The children entered in an orderly row. They took places at the front of the hall, faces bright and shiny, smiles splitting their faces, eyes gleaming with excitement. For some of them, this was the first time on the “Christmas Outing” while others had been to one before, but not at this church. The orphanage had taken obvious pains to assure the children all looked clean, neat and healthy.

“Aren’t they just darlin’?” Maude murmured to Willy.

“They all look that way when they ain’t yours,” Willy responded.

“You are such a Scrooge,” Maude answered quietly.

“I ain’t no Scrooge,” Willy said under his breath. Maude heard him anyway and thought, *Oh, yes you are, darlin’ Willy.*

Before he realized what was going on, he felt a small hand slide into his, grasping it lightly. He looked down into the face of a young boy, maybe 7 or 8 years old. His hair, a tousled but neat looking series of tight waves, was an odd mixture of auburn and light brown; he had freckles bridging his nose; bright, blue eyes gleamed as he looked up into Willy’s eyes with a broad smile. Willy couldn’t resist returning the smile.

“Hi,” Willy said. “Who’re you?”

“Everyone calls me Dorky,” the boy responded. His smile seemed to widen to a point that Willy thought might split his face in two.

“That’s a funny name,” Maude said. “Is that your real one or a nickname?”

“Oh, it’s just what they all call me. They say I’m a dork ... whatever that is. I don’t mind, because everyone says it like they’re really friendly. I think it must be a good thing.”

“And what’s your true name... your *for sure* name?” Willy asked.

“Marvin... but I’d rather be called Dorky,” the boy said.

“But, why?” Maude asked.

“Cause it sounds better than Marvin,” he answered with a smile.

“Well, would you like to eat with us, Dorky?” Maude asked.

“Yup,” Dorky smiled. “I seen you the minute we walked in and I figured you two was the best people here. Know what I mean?”

“I’m not sure we understand that at all,” Willy said, the boy’s hand still comfortably nestled within his own.

“But I can eat with you, right?”

“Of course,” Maude answered. “We can’t think of anyone better.”

After signing a number of forms to legalize the “vacation” for the children, members of the church began filing out into the parking lot, heading for the cars they drove there.

“We ain’t got no car ... at least one that’s runnin’, anyway. Sorry you have to walk with us,” Willy said to Dorky. Willy realized that there had been no further discussion of bringing one of the children home with them. It seemed to have just happened and he was glad it turned out to be Dorky.

“That’s OK,” the boy said with a smile. “Ever’ time we go somewheres from the orphanage we go in a rickety old bus. I like walkin’ lots better.”

He walked between them, hand in hand, down the dusty roadway. The road in front of the church was paved, but pavement stopped as it curved away to the direction of Willie’s house. Willy and Maude had been walking for over a month since their car blew a head gasket. Willy kept saying he was going to fix it, but there was little motivation to address such chores when there were sufficient funds to purchase beer and cigarettes. Maybe with the boy staying a few days, Willie would get around to fixing it, Maude silently hoped.

“Ain’t this the prettiest place, Mister Willie? Look at all them heavy bushes and grass. I’ll bet there’s a whole lotta critters in there, huh?”

“You better believe it, honey. So don’t you go wandering off the road or outa the yard at our place. Wouldn’t want no ‘gator makin’ you his Christmas dinner, now would we?” Maude responded.

Willie said nothing, but smiled.

They walked along in silence for quite a while when the silence was suddenly broken by the sound of a woodpecker busily punching through bark to find a morsel or two. Dorky stopped and looked around.

“What’s makin’ that noise, Mister Willy?”

“Just an old woodpecker lookin’ for somethin’ to eat.” Willy looked around in the direction of the sound then stopped suddenly.

“Look,” he said as he turned Dorkey toward the sound. “Way up in yonder tree... near the top. See him?”

“Wow,” Dorkey said with a sigh. “Ain’t this some kinda wonderful!”

“Sure is,” Willy said with a smile. “I ‘spect you’ll see a lot of them wonderful things while you’re out here.”

“I’m gonna like it here,” the boy smiled.

Maude and Willy exchanged glances with broad smiles. Maude thought to herself, “*Yes, this is surely some kinda wonderful.*”

When they arrived at the trailer, Maude went quickly to the kitchen to fix some iced tea and lemonade for their refreshment. Dorkey spent no more than five minutes looking through the trailer.

“This is a real nice place, huh?” Dorkey asked.

“Well, it ain’t no palace, but it’s home and we like it,” Maude explained. “It ain’t a house that makes a home; it’s family. People who love each other. What kinda house did you live in?”

“Me and my momma stayed in an old building where nobody lives anymore. She had a sickness and had to take shots ‘bout ever’ day. It helped her to sleep good, she said, but one night, she didn’t wake up. I ‘spect the medicine just gave out on her and couldn’t help her no more.”

“My goodness,” Maude said, feeling overwhelmed with concern. “And where was your paw durin’ all this?”

“Don’t know. Momma said he was dead, but one of her friends said he was in jail. I never saw him. When Momma died, I got so hungry I was asking for food at McDonald’s when the cops found me and brought me to the orphanage. It was OK there. I had food and a warm bed. When they told me I had to stay there, I thought it was a pretty good deal. I even got to start school when I got there.”

“Had quite an adventure for yourself, didn’t you?” Willie interjected.

Dorky shrugged. He took a long sip of his lemonade. His eyes sparkled as he said, “Your lemonade is better than at the orphanage.”

Maude smiled. “Thank you, kindly, young sir.”

Willy got to his feet. “Well, c’mon young ‘un... let’s see if we can fix that old jalopy out there.”

“What’s a jalopy?”

“Just an old car. We gonna fix it when I can get the part I need, but you’re gonna have to help me, OK?”

“Sure, but I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no jalopy... but I could give you the tools when you need them.”

“That’ll be fine. Bet we’re gonna make a pretty good team,” Willy said as he walked to the door.

Maude watched the two of them as they left the trailer. She was about to burst with joy. It felt so wonderful having a youngster around and it looked as if this was going to be a pretty special Christmas. She busied herself in the kitchen, pulling together some leftovers to make a presentable dinner for the three of them. Before she realized it, the sun was going down and she hadn’t heard a sound out of Willy and Dorky for some time. She looked out the trailer window where the car was parked and could see no sign of them. The hood of the car was propped up with a piece of board and Willy’s toolbox was sitting beside the front tire. She went to the door and when she opened it, she saw the two of them walking up the long, dusty driveway, hand in hand. Willy was carrying something in his free hand. As they got nearer, she shouted, “Where’d you two get off to?”

“Went down to Andy’s place. He had some old Fords like ours, so me and Dorky here tore into them. We found a good head gasket on one of ‘em, so we’re ready to fix up our old clunker.”

“How’d you pay for it? I know it’s just a junk yard to us, but it’s Andy’s business.”

“It’ll come out of my pay. I start workin’ there the Monday after Christmas. An’ you’re gonna have to start callin’ it a *Salvage Yard*, long’s I’m workin’ there. Andy was real impressed how easy we got that old motor apart.”

“You shoulda seen him,” Dorkey said excitedly. “Mister Willy knew where ever’tthin’ was and took that old motor apart almost with his bare hands. Bet he *coulda* done that, too.”

“Well you can do the fixin’ tomorra. Now get yourself in here and clean up for dinner.”

After freshening up Willy and Dorkey came into the kitchen area. Maude had been busy fixing things up for dinner. She had neatly folded a bed sheet to fit the table and had placed two candles on the table, each sitting in a teacup saucer, casting a warm glow on an assortment of leftovers Maude had rescued from their small refrigerator (which Willy still insisted was an ice box). Dorkey’s eyes were wide with wonder. He had never seen candles on a table like that, except on television. His eyes scanned the table excitedly: collard greens; mashed potatoes; bread; butter; and a variety of sandwich meats and cheeses. It was a veritable feast!

As they sat around the table eating, Maude looked long and hard at Willy. “You ain’t never said you was gonna look for a job. You surely are full of surprises when you wanna be.”

Willy smiled. “Well, it’s Christmas and we gotta think more ‘bout others like Dorky, here. Andy gave me a few bucks for a nice Christmas dinner and we gonna make it kinda special.”

“Well, you couldn’t get me a better present, Willy. You made me very happy.”

During the conversation, Dorkey had cleaned his plate once and at Maude’s urging, helped himself to more. “Lordy, chile, where’s all that food getting’ to? One little bitty stomach can’t hold all that, can it?”

“Oh, yes, Miss Maude. I was right hungry after all that work on the jalopy.”

They all laughed. Maude cleaned up after dinner while Willy and Dorkey sat on the couch watching television. Occasionally, Dorkey would ask a question and Willy would answer. Shortly after Maude joined them on the couch, Dorkey nodded off to sleep.

“Guess we oughta put the tyke in bed,” Maude said.

“Where?” Willy asked. “Aint’t got no extra bed for the kid and I don’t think he oughta sleep with us.”

“We can put him in our bed. We can sleep on the couch. Why, we haven’t even opened it to a bed since we moved in here. That should work just fine.”

It did just that ... worked out fine. The next day, Willy and Dorky tinkered with the car until everything was put back together. Willy had spent a good deal of time explaining the torque wrench to Dorky to no avail. The Willy said, “Tell you what. I’ll set the torque and you just tug on it one more time. Then we can tell ever’one we gave the bolts an extra Dorkey torque.”

Dorkey laughed and he no longer was interested in the mechanical theory behind the torque. Knowing about the *Dorkey torque* was enough to please him. It was mid afternoon when the engine roared to life and they both cheered. Maude went to the window, smiling. She noticed that Dorkey was sitting in Willy’s lap, hands on the steering wheel. Hunched over like next year’s NASCAR star.

Christmas came and went. Willy, Maude and Dorkey accomplished a genuine bonding in the five days they were together and when it was time to return Dorkey to the church, an air of sadness hovered around them. They left early so that Willy could talk to the pastor and get permission to drive Dorkey back to the orphanage instead of waiting for the bus. It was not an unusual request, Willy learned. Several other “sponsors” also did the driving back to Tampa to stretch the length of the visits.

“We could come t’visit you in Tampa sometimes, if you like,” Maude said to Dorkey.

“An’ bring me cookies, maybe?”

Willy laughed. “If I don’t eat ‘em on the way.”

“Oh, you can eat some of ‘em,” Dorkey said, “but be sure you leave me some. D’ya think maybe I could visit with you again? Besides at Christmas, I mean?”

“Sure!” Maude said excitedly. She couldn’t ask for a more successful five days she thought. Having a youngster for Christmas was the most enriching and rewarding experience she had ever ever felt.

“If the orphanage will let us, how would you like to come live with us?” Willy asked.

“Really!?” Dorkey bounced in his seat.

Maude stared wide-eyed at Willy, astounded by what he was proposing. Tears welled, here throat tightened.

“Well,” Willy said, “that depends if Miss Maude wants to try fillin’ out all them papers.”

“Of course I would!” Maude practically shouted.

“You, too, Dorkey?”

Dorkey was fidgeting in his seat. What could he say? What if he spoiled all this with his answer? It's what he really wanted. He couldn't help himself. He shouted, "Yes! Oh, yes!"

"Then we can take care of it when we get to Tampa," Willy said. He glanced over at Maude, then in the rear view mirror at Dorkey. Tears that had welled in their eyes were now flowing freely down their cheeks. He felt a strange warmth growing inside as he smiled and said, "Merry Christmas, y'all."