

“All the Best”

I.

“Cherry picking,” George said without opening his eyes. He was stretched out in the recliner, newspaper open across his chest. He and Jarrod, his eighteen year old grandson, were alone together, while Jarrod’s parents were squeezing out one last workday before Christmas. George and Jarrod had been teasing one another about who was babysitting whom. Jarrod was sprawled on the couch, umbilical earbuds emanating from an iPod, from which something resembling music was blaring into his ears—George could hear it from across the room. In one hand Jarrod held a remote control for the TV—mercifully muted for the moment, but offering up a new channel every two seconds or so. With the other hand, Jarrod was using his thumb to scroll through text messages on his phone, occasionally pausing to tap out a response unidigitally—with just his thumb. A laptop computer open on the couch nearby was offering up a replay of a college football game. Small wonder Jarrod did not respond to his grandfather.

George tried again, louder: “Cherry picking!” Still no response. So he opened his eyes, sat up halfway and cranked it up a few decibels: “I said, ‘Cherry picking.’” Slowly, deliberately, Jarrod emerged from his digital fog, his eyes finding focus. He removed one ear bud and emitted a long, exasperated sigh. “Grandpa, I heard you all three times, even when you were talking with your eyes closed.”

George sat up, straightened his glasses, leveled his gaze and prepared for some rhetorical sparring with his favorite grandson. Calling on his grumpiest old guy voice he began, “Hmmp! How can you hear anything? You’re surrounded by gadgets!”

“We’ve been over this, Grandpa,” Jarrod replied with a smile. “We could simplify this whole setup if only some rich, adoring relative would give me an iPhone for Christmas. There’s an app that will do all of this, and more; there’s even a fish-finder app, Grandpa—take the boredom out of fishing! But, alas, I’m captive-bound and double-ironed in the first decade of the twenty-first century.”

“You don’t need another electronic toy! You need to learn how to concentrate! You’re multi-tasking your mind into mush! You have a marvelous

genetic legacy—if I do say so myself—that you’re squandering on endless distraction!”

“Oh, listen to you!” Jarrod responded. “You multi-task all the time. Here you are sleeping, watching TV, reading the paper and provoking me into a conversation simultaneously.”

“Touché,” George responded with delight. He was amazed at his grandson’s mind, and loved this conversational ping pong.

But Jarrod wasn’t going to back off while he had his grandfather on the defensive. “So, are you going to explain yourself?”

“Explain what?”

“Explain your outburst. What do you mean by ‘Cherry picking’?”

“You really *did* hear that, didn’t you?”

“I *told* you I heard you. So was that just the pitiful, incoherent eruption of an aging mind, or did you have a point?”

“OK. ‘Cherry picking’ is an expression that refers to a cheap and lazy harvesting of anything—in this case, reality. The modern world is set up to reinforce the idea that life ought to be nothing but the best of the best at every instant. Playlists replace albums so that artists can never make extended statements any more; people formulate instant likes and dislikes and listen only to what they think they like. How do they ever learn anything new? SportsCenter makes us think that existence should be one continuous highlight. Sporting events become huge screen spectacles to entertain us and sell stuff to us unceasingly, filling every instant and almost making us forget there’s actually something going on right in front of our eyes that involves real people—albeit on steroids—and not just pixelized images. Satellite TV gives us three hundred channels of garbage to choose from, so commercials don’t just lie about products as they used to, they have to entertain us at every moment because the ever-present remote control gives them about four nanoseconds to get our attention before we move on to something else, so everything, even the news—especially the news!—has to be more and more sensational to compete to occupy the four functional brain cells most people have left over. People don’t ever have to watch or listen to anything that doesn’t conform to their predetermined formulation of the way things are. We cherry pick our way through life: but what we end up with is not the best of the best but some sugar-coated, moronic, artificial, commercialized exercise in collective denial. But real life—real life—is filled with waiting and boredom and inconvenience and uncomfortable truths and experiences that don’t necessarily feel good in the moment but that shape character over time.”

“Sure thing, Grandpa,” replied Jarrod. “Feel better now? I think I’ve heard this before: you became such a jolly old soul by spending most of your childhood bored out of your mind, and I’m losing out on my chance to grow up to become just like you... right?”

George couldn’t help it: he laughed out loud.

“Grandpa, how about if I go back to picking cherries and you go back to counting sheep and I’ll wake you up in time for lunch?”

“OK, little Socrates,” George replied. “Talk to you later.” And then, just as Jarrod reinserted his earbud and turned back to the TV George added quietly, “You know I love you, don’t you?” Jarrod didn’t reply. George wasn’t certain whether he heard or not.

It was probably about half an hour later when Jarrod surfaced again. Then things seemed to happen in a hurry. Jarrod looked over at his grandfather and got an eerie sensation that something was terribly wrong. His face looked crooked and there was fear in his eyes. Jarrod asked him if he was all right, and he seemed to try to answer, but the words came out all garbled. Terrified, Jarrod first called his mother at work and described the situation. “Jarrod,” she said, “don’t try to do anything with Grandpa. Call 911 right away. They’ll tell you what to do. I’m starting for home. Call me back if they take Grandpa to a hospital. Hurry!”

II.

And then, after all the hurry, there was nothing to do. The emergency personnel wasted no time. Inside of ten minutes they were whisking George away to the nearest hospital. He was still confused and unable to talk, and had effective use of only one of his hands. But he kept pointing toward the chair. Finally Jarrod got it. “Your bag, Grandpa? You want me to bring your bag?” He nodded ever so slightly and squeezed Jarrod’s hand. And then they were gone. Not allowed to ride in the ambulance, Jarrod had waited for his mother. Together they followed to the hospital.

And then... waiting. It seemed to take forever for them to get George out of Emergency and into a room in Intensive Care. And then... they waited. Visitors were allowed in to see the patients for ten minutes every hour; so most of the time Jarrod spent in the waiting room. There was one TV there; but it had been taken over by a family with three small children, and they were hooked on the cartoon channel, which was running one Christmas cartoon special after another. The Grinch... Frosty the Snowman... Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer... now they were watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. A

doctor had emerged and taken Jarrod's parents into a family conference room. Jarrod was left alone, sitting on a couch with his head in his hands.

He tuned in and out of the noise going on all around him. He found himself thinking about his Grandpa and being really scared. He couldn't clear his mind of the sight of him lying there confused and helpless.

The *Charlie Brown Christmas* had gotten to the part where the kids put on a Christmas pageant and Linus, in that inimitable, delicate voice, begins to recite the Christmas story from the Bible, from the Gospel According to Luke. Exhausted and alone, Jarrod closed his eyes, and felt the familiar words wash over him.

"... there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed..." What kind of a government is it that thinks it can tax the whole world?

"... with Mary his espoused wife, who was great with child..." Pregnant? And they were only engaged? Jarrod thought about Rachel Miller who had disappeared from school in the middle of last year and shown up in the fall with a baby. A baby! How old is she? Maybe about Mary's age...

"... because there was no room for them in the inn." Jarrod remembered the time the whole family went to South Dakota to see the Black Hills and the motel messed up their reservation and there was no place for them to stay for miles and miles around because of the big motorcycle rally at Sturgis. Such a helpless feeling... and imagine: a woman in labor!

"And there were in that same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night." Talk about a boring job!

"And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid." A scary angel: Bob Dylan the hundred year-old angel of the Lord, good news that scares you half to death. And this is how God enters the world? God enters this lost and lonely, boring and terrifying world? God is in the mess of it, the mistakes of it, the reality of it.

"Jarrod?" Lost in thought, he hadn't even heard his parents approach with the doctor. His mother sat next to him on the couch and gave him a big hug. "It's good news," his mother said. "We think Grandpa's going to be all right. The doctors think he's had a TIA. It's a temporary..." She turned to the doctor for help. "It's a Transient Ischemic Attack. Initially the symptoms are very much like a stroke, but they go away very quickly and the patient recovers completely. He's already regaining his speech and movement, and feeling a lot better."

“He’s going to be all right?” Jarrod could hardly believe it. “We think so, yes. There are a few more tests we need to do. And sometimes a TIA is a sort of warning—we’ll need to watch him closely for the possibility of a real stroke. But he’s feeling a lot better now. And he wants to see you.”

III.

What a difference. George was sitting up in bed, holding a cup with both hands and drinking through a straw. He looked really tired, but his eyes looked right. He was back. Jarrod took a step toward the bed... and dissolved in tears. His grandfather reached out to him.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said. “It’s all right. I’m going to be OK. Take it easy there.” But Jarrod just held on for dear life. It was a couple of minutes before he was able to speak.

“O, Grandpa,” he said. “I was so scared. I thought that maybe the last thing you said to me was ‘I love you,’ and I’d never get to tell you that I love you, too.”

“I know you do, Jarrod. I know you do. We kid each other a lot, but I am so proud of you, and I’ll always love you. Always. Now... don’t you wonder what’s in the bag?”

“What bag?”

“The bag I had you bring along. It’s right over there. Don’t you wonder what’s in it? Bring it over here.”

George reached into the bag and pulled out a wrapped Christmas present.

“Here you go, Jarrod. With love from me to you.”

Jarrod eyed it suspiciously. “It looks a little big for an iPhone.”

“No fooling you,” George replied. “It’s not an iPhone. It’s way better than an iPhone. Open it up.”

Jarrod ripped it open in an instant. It was a book with a leather cover... a photo album... filled with pictures from a magical day they had spent together last summer, just the two of them, out on the lake. One of the pictures was familiar: Jarrod and George holding a stringer of fish between them, dinner for the family and a trophy of a great time together. But the rest of the pictures seemed odd. They were pictures of Jarrod, maybe twenty of them... just sitting. At first he just looked bored: head in his hands, body all slumped over, adolescence in its lowest energy state.

But about halfway through the pictures seemed to change. Jarrod was still sitting, but he seemed thoughtful, attentive, even enthralled. He studied the pictures for a moment.

“See a difference?” His grandfather asked gently. “Do you see a little before and after? I took every one of these pictures before we caught any fish. What’s the difference?”

“Well,” Jarrod said slowly, “it was so beautiful out there: the way the light reflected on the water, the sound the loons made, and remember the beaver that swam right by the boat? It was all so gorgeous! That’s what I was looking at.”

“And how long did it take you to notice that it was so gorgeous?”

“Well, I guess it, uh... it took me a while, didn’t it?” His grandfather just waited. “It took me a while of being bored to realize that more was happening than I thought; that there was beauty all around me that I wasn’t seeing; that I was just a very small part of something huge and beautiful; that...”

“That what?”

“That maybe it’s all the best. That every moment is precious in its way. That when we tune out everything but the highlights, even the highlights lose their meaning after a while.” He laughed. “People knock themselves out with presents and food; and what everybody ends up remembering is something silly—like how you rattle the newspaper when you snore or how really little kids would rather play with the wrapping paper than the presents. It’s like all of it—life—is holy, somehow. Is that what you had in mind, Grandpa?”

“No, Jarrod. That was way better than what I had in mind. Way better. Come here.” He held out his arms to his grandson. “Merry Christmas.”

Amen

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