

## ***Homecoming***

He couldn't get his fill of cowboy movies on cable TV, and this night AMC was showing *Red River*, a classic. The week prior, they showed *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. He'd seen it before, but it didn't make any more sense the second time; he fell asleep halfway through. But *Red River* with John Wayne and Montgomery Clift, that's a movie.

Henry Carr wasn't enjoying it, though. His dinner hadn't settled right. Probably ate too much, he thought. He'd slimmed down some, and feared his giving in to dessert had jeopardized his progress. But he sure did enjoy his wife Mary's rhubarb pie. He decided to just sleep on it. Ready for bed, he saw himself in the mirror. Gettin' old, he said to himself, not just gray hair, your whole face looks gray.

In the morning he woke feeling a crushing pressure, as if an elephant had a foot on his chest. He was going to take a breath to call Mary, and maybe a good deep breath would clear the pain. But when he tried, the pain shrieked – the elephant balanced on one foot, the foot on Henry's chest. His left arm flailed, sweeping things from his bedside table: his reading glasses, his John Grisham novel, his water glass.

All went dark.

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"Henry?" Mary asked in a soft voice, a beautiful voice that fought through a gauntlet of annoying electronic beeps. "Can you hear me?"

He groaned.

"Oh, Henry," Mary said, sighing.

"Um ...?"

"You're at the Medical Center. You had a heart attack," she said. But she omitted a detail she had learned from the doctor, that in addition to the acute myocardial infarction that woke him, he'd suffered cardiac arrest in the ambulance before getting to the hospital.

"Unh," he groaned again.

“I’ve called Ellen and Bud” – Henry’s daughter and son. “Ellen may get here this afternoon. Bud and Linda and the kids, though, well, they’re trying to get here, but the Northeast has those snowstorms that have everything messed up.”

Though weak and foggy and hurting, Henry took stock of his surroundings. The warmth of Mary’s hand in his, the leads from the monitors stuck to him in various places, and the two IVs jabbed into veins.

“I, I feel all tied down,” he said with a quiet, gravelly whisper, “like Gulliver in Lilliput.”

Mary smiled – he had his senses, including that of humor, so his mind must be intact. She told him Donnie and Jennifer, Mary’s own son and daughter and law, would arrive about six.

Henry closed his eyes for some moments, then looked with a sad longing into Mary’s. “Am I gonna die?”

“No, no,” she assured, but her smile felt weak. She hoped Henry didn’t notice. She was conflicted, wanting to be honest but also thinking that optimism and positive expectations on Henry’s part could mean as much for recovery as the medicine. “Dr. Tang will explain it all when she comes in, but I’m hoping you’ll be home in – in a few days.”

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“Daddy!” Ellen cried from the doorway when she saw her father’s pallid face and the posse of machines surrounding his bed. She rushed to him, hesitated as she surveyed the wires and tubes, then kissed his cheek delicately. Her instinct was to hug him with all her strength. She regarded him at arm’s length through teared eyes, sniffing and wiping to keep her nose from dripping.

He said, “Hey, Kitten, you shouldn’t take time off work.”

“Daddy, this is serious. Of course I’d come to be with you.”

He asked parental questions – how was her plane trip? how was her job in California? – then got to what he really wanted. “Say, I’m a little tired. Would you sing me a song?”

“Sure. What would you like?”

He closed his eyes. “A hymn, maybe.”

She stood straight to support her sweet soprano the way she'd learned in church choir. She held his hand.

*There's a land that is fairer than day,*

*And by faith we can see it afar;*

*For the Father waits over the way*

*To prepare us a dwelling place there.*

*In the sweet by and by,*

*We shall meet on that beautiful shore ...*

She thought he had dozed so she trailed off the song. His chest rose and fell evenly, his hand gave hers a couple of squeezes.

§ § §

It was a summer in the Sixties, in the more innocent part of the decade some would later call Camelot, and for town boys who didn't have to help on a farm, Picnic Beach on Osiwatoa River was the place to be. A warm day with no wind, the river showed a placid visual palindrome – feathery clouds in blue sky, trees across the river, reflected trees, reflected clouds.

The boys – Henry, Mike, Elmer, and Jackie – went behind bushes to pull off their jeans and cutoffs even though no one else was around and they had their swim trunks on underneath. Except Jackie, whose family was poor so he made do with underpants for a swimsuit.

Mike stood on Elmer's shoulders to start his clamber up the oak tree at the river's edge. Mike had a hemp rope tied to his waist. Once he was on a sturdy branch a few feet over the water he secured the rope to the branch with an anchor hitch knot.

Mike could have climbed down, but, the strongest boy in fourth grade, he instead grabbed the rope and rolled off the branch. He let himself down the rope while pumping his legs to swing higher and higher. When he judged he couldn't swing any farther over the river he let go. "Geronimo-o-o!"

Kaplow! Water splashed halfway back to the shore. When he surfaced, he flittered his head left and right to fling water from his eyes. “Wow! It’s the best ever! Come on, guys, try it.”

Jackie and Elmer waded in splashing each other and laughing. Henry caught the rope and ran with it up the embankment to get good distance over the water in one swoop. Elmer was next on the rope. Henry and Jackie stood dripping on the bank as Elmer flew out, splashed, then emerged.

Elmer said, “We should figure out a giant sling shot. We could go flying right out to the middle!”

Mike pointed at Jackie. “Har har! When they’re wet, you can see through Jackie’s underpants. I see the fruits of his loom!” He doubled over laughing, pleased to have made the best joke of the summer.

Jackie, the smallest boy in fourth grade, was used to abuse. “Eat shit, Mike.”

“Aw, don’t be a sorehead, squirt. Sheesh. Hey, you haven’t been on the rope.”

“Maybe later.” Jackie had fun in water but was scared about diving.

“I’ll give you a good push.”

“No thanks.”

“Listen, I didn’t wanna bring you but Henry said ... well, if you *hafta* be here, *you’re* gonna have *fun*.”

“I will. I’ll go swim.” Jackie turned, intending to wade back into the river and give wide berth to Mike’s casual menace.

“Come on!” Mike grabbed the small boy around the waist with one arm and pulled the rope close with the other. “Just hold tight ’til you’re over the water.”

“No!” Jackie squirmed, kicking and pushing at Mike. “Stop it!”

“Come on, it’s easy.”

Henry cleared his throat. “Hold on, Mike. He doesn’t want –”

“Let me down!”

“Better latch on!” With both hands Mike raised Jackie above his head, forcing Jackie to grab the rope out of fear Mike would drop him on the ground. “Yee-hah!” Mike yelled while giving the hanging Jackie a running shove toward the water.

“Mike, it’s not nice –”

“What! You a sissy now, Goody New-Shoes?”

“It’s Goody Two – no, I mean, pushing somebody in the water, they can get hurt.”

Mike closed in on Henry jabbing a finger at his face. “Don’t be a bozo.”

Elmer got between them. “Stop it, guys. Easy.”

Mike sneered.

“I mean, there’s lots a stuff we can do and have fun. Right?”

“Yeah,” Mike said, cooling. “Hey, if there’s girls at the picnic tables, we can bring ’em down here and show ’em Jackie’s fruits through his wet underpants!” He belly-laughed at the funniest plan of the summer.

Elmer’s lips twisted. “Yeah, maybe.”

A blue jay’s piercing jeer echoed in the woods.

Henry stepped back. He looked at the river. The water was smooth except for a semicircle of ripples gliding to the horizon. “Jackie?” queried Henry, then he yelled, “Jackie?”

“Where’d he go?” Elmer ran to the river with the others. They stopped at the edge. “Did he ...?”

“Jackie!” Henry called again, then splashed into the water to the point he judged was the center of the now-dissipated ripples. The other two followed, peering into the murk.

“Jackie!” Henry was looking into the water to his left, in front, to his right, then spun around to look at the water behind him. “Jackie?”

Where the water was chest deep, Henry put his head under and opened his eyes. There was Jackie. Henry lunged, grabbed the inert boy and pulled his head to the air. Jackie’s brown eyes were half-open yet unseeing. Henry said, “Help me!”

Mike and Elmer each took one of Jackie’s arms. They hauled him up the bank and laid him prone on the grass.

“Whadda we do?” Elmer asked, eyes round and face pale.

Mike scratched his head. “You, uh, pull his arms up and down to make the water come out.”

Henry leaned down. “Pull his arms? Which way?”

Elmer said, “Wait. There’s the new thing, the mouth-to-mouth res-, res-, rescue-ation.”

“What?”

“Mouth-to-mouth rescue-ation. You blow into his mouth. Air goes in his lungs.”

Mike straightened. “Blow? With your mouth? *On his?*”

Henry waved his hands. “We gotta do something. Gotta get the water out.”

Mike squatted to look more closely at Jackie’s face and saw blue lips. “He – he – he’s *dead*. Scram!”

“No, we gotta *do* something!”

“Get help,” Elmer said. Perhaps there would be grownups at the picnic ground, so he took off into the trees and up the path. Mike ran after.

Henry, trembling, put his arms under Jackie’s stomach and lifted the flaccid body by the waist, hugging him, squeezing him.

Jackie made a sound like throwing up, a gurgly gagging sound as water gushed from his mouth and nose. He coughed, deep coughs, with wheezing gasps in between. He slid from Henry’s grip and plopped backwards to the ground, eyes fixed on the sky.

Henry asked, “You okay?”

More gasps, more coughs. Jackie’s eyes turned to Henry but his expression stayed blank.

“Jackie? You okay?”

After some moments, Jackie rolled on his side, then to all fours, then to his feet with hands on his knees. He vomited. With long raspy breaths he stood up and wobbled to his clothes. He almost tangled himself stepping into his jeans.

Elmer and Mike were running down the hill. Elmer called, “Henry, we couldn’t find anybody.” They stopped when they saw Jackie standing.

Elmer ran to look closer at Jackie, but asked Henry, “What’d you do? Mike said he was dead.”

“I squeezed the water out, I guess.”

“Well ... good. Maybe – maybe we should go home.”

Three boys who didn't almost drown towed off and dressed.

Jackie watched. He said nothing and answered no questions.

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Jackie's parents asked to visit Henry at home. Jackie's dad, gaunt and grim, wore Sunday trousers and a long-sleeve white shirt with a skinny black tie. One of the shirt's frayed cuffs was loose, missing its button. His mom had a face like a pink-cheeked baby, and wore a gray gingham shift.

Henry asked after Jackie.

The dad answered, "He's gone to Greenville so he'll be – he's with his aunt and uncle for a while. There's good schools there."

The mom said, "Jackie said it was you pulled him up, got his breathin' goin' again." She held out a box, cardboard and cellophane, with a G.I. Joe inside.

Henry didn't play G.I. Joe much anymore. He wanted to be honest, to say he only did what he had to, and didn't know what he was doing. He wanted to say he didn't deserve a reward, especially from a family that couldn't afford it. But what he most wanted to say, what was closest to that still-searing wound of truth: it was an accident that didn't have to happen, and wouldn't have happened if Henry had been even a little bit brave.

With too many thoughts competing for expression Henry said only, "Um, thanks. Tell Jackie – tell him I said 'Hey.'"

§ § §

Metaphors? Allegories? *Why don't authors just say what they mean?* Henry simmered in frustration with his high school English assignments. He was a straightforward young man. For him, honesty was a virtue. He tried to mean what he said, though he could not always say what he meant.

Donna Ledbetter. She was in the same grade, and she and Henry had been in the same schools since junior high. They attended the same church. If they passed in the school corridor, she would always say hello and smile. Bashful Henry struggled to reply with a timely “um.”

Donna Ledbetter. She was smart, articulate, and logical. Henry appreciated logical – he was a step-by-step, cause-and-effect kind of guy. She was good looking, in a well-scrubbed way. Whenever his gaze wouldn't be noticed, he admired her long black hair and her face – always pleasant, usually happy. He wished there might be some time they could meet – and that he could talk if they did.

Their senior year was underway and the Jefferson County High School homecoming parade and dance would be in early November. What if some other guy asked Donna to the dance before Henry could muster himself to ask? He'd barely talked to girls, and never to ask one out. Time was flying.

Donna Ledbetter. There she was, coming toward him in the hallway outside the science room.

“Hi,” Donna said, smiling at Henry but not missing a step.

“Uh, um, *wait,*” he managed.

“What? Oh, Henry. Hi. Did you want something?”

“Yeah, uh – you know – um, home, um ....”

“Yeah, Homecoming is soon. Won't it be exciting, us being seniors and all?”

“Yeah, Homecoming ....”

“Uh huh.”

“Would you –? We could, um ...?”

“Would I go with you to the dance? Henry, that's a great idea. I'd love to.”

“Oh. *Ohhhh.* Yeah!”

The pair of teenagers negotiated arrangements, faces blushing back and forth like signal lights blinking at a railroad crossing. Henry floated to class on a dreamy cloud, a mist the color of euphoria.

...

Nervous Henry showed up at Donna's home bearing the corsage his mother helped him buy. The greeting and conversation with her parents was a blur for Henry – a photograph proved it had happened.



Though Henry retained little from that meeting, he remembered that Mr. Ledbetter, an assistant minister at their church, in his admonition to the youngsters that they not stay out late, had shaken his finger and employed the word “rectitude.”

At the dance, Henry and Donna waved to chattering classmates in their various clumps and clusters and cliques. Henry and Donna, he in his jacket and tie, she in her frilly teal dress, nibbled cookies and sipped punch. While sharing with each other more grins than words, they talked about school, friends, families, and plans for Henry to become a mechanic and Donna to go to college and become a teacher. They avoided the dance floor. Members of Henry and Donna’s church eschewed both drink and dance (though the church youth were adept at finding any number of other paths to trouble).

Late, the music turned to slow-dance tunes. Henry and Donna faced each other immersed in the song,

*The first time ever I saw your face*

*I thought the sun rose in your eyes*

*And the moon and the stars were the gifts you gave*

*To the dark and the endless skies.*

With his hands beside her waist and her hands on his shoulders, and with the prescribed distance of decency between them, they became a posy, two roses delicate and beautiful swaying with the music. There were moments of gazing into each other’s eyes, then sheepish smiles glanced away.

Henry had worried about running out of things to say, then he did. With the music, and the mood, and the moment making magic, Henry said, “Donna, will you marry me?”

Donna’s arms straightened, pushing them apart. Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped in amazement. Or was it horror? “Henry Carr!”

*Good Lord, what have I done?* Henry shuddered, his shirt suddenly sopped with sweat. Would Donna turn to the crowd and yell, Hey everybody, Henry just asked me to marry him! The crowd would explode with laughter.

Donna did turn her head and looked away as she covered her mouth with her hand, but her gape of astonishment turned to an admonishing smile. “Why, Henry – we haven’t finished our first date.”

“I – I – I’m so sorry! I don’t, I mean, I ....”

She pulled him close. Quietly into his ear she said, “And we haven’t even kissed.”

So they did.

After some moments of wafting right then left with the song, she said, “We’d have to graduate first.”

Henry nodded.

“And this is something we should pray on.”

Henry agreed.

Another song started, one both plaintive and hopeful, about love and possibilities. She said, “We’ll get to know each other better. Then we’ll make plans.”

With her chin on his shoulder, they swayed with the music, no distance between.

§ § §

Jake, one of the mechanics in Carr’s Garage, had been acting kind of nervous. “Say, uh, Henry, can I talk to you? Like, well, in private?”

Henry figured Jake was readying to request a raise. “Well, okay. Come into the office.”

Jake shut the door. “I don’t mind asking advice, but, uh, this is kinda personal ....”

“I’ll help if I can. What’s up?”

Jake described how Melanie, his wife of four years, seemed fed up with him all the time. “It’s like the ignition coil on our marriage is shot so we got no spark. We used to be over the moon in love, close as two possums in a stump. Well, I see you and Donna, you folks seem so happy together, and for years now. Are you two just lucky? What’s the secret?”

As the years counted upward for Henry and Donna, he’d wondered why so many couples they knew let hot-burning love launch a marriage, then saw that love cool and the marriage crash on the shore of divorce. After all, Henry had done it backwards, accidentally asking Donna to marry, *then* getting to know her the way an intended should.

“I’ve seen folks lose opportunities by stewing over a decision, believing it has to be the perfect decision, believing that a decision determines everything that happens after. What I think it is, you gotta make a decision, then *make* it a good decision. Something like marriage, you gotta work at it to *make* it be a good decision.”

Henry described ways he helped around the house and with the kids, things he knew most men did not do, probably including Jake. Henry shifted in his chair, uncomfortable talking about being romantic. He told Jake about the time – the one time – he got Donna a non-romantic anniversary gift. Because he really liked tools, he was sure Donna would appreciate a quality mop and pail. Henry’s further recommendations: hold hands in public, flirt with your spouse to keep the romance fresh (and keep your teenage kids’ eyes rolling – secretly, they’ll be proud).

“The last thing I can tell you is that marriage *isn’t* a fifty-fifty deal. Everybody says it is, but if you hold back, thinking you’re doing too much and your wife isn’t doing enough, things go off the rails, everybody gettin’ resentful or frustrated. Make a commitment that you’re gonna put in, say, seventy percent. If both partners make the same commitment, love will flow like a flooding river. Love’ll spew everywhere, like coolant from a lugging engine’s loose radiator cap on a hot day.”

Jake and Melanie stayed married, and happily so; they would go on to spoil their grandchildren.

§ § §

Henry and Donna sat together on their porch swing. They watched firefly flashes in the gloaming, she drinking iced tea, he sipping hot coffee with satisfying slurps.

“I’ve been thinking ...,” Henry said hesitantly. “I wonder – what if there is no Hell?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well – in church we say ‘God is Love.’ Why would a loving God make a hell?”

“There’re some things we can’t know. That’s why it’s called faith.”

“Gosh. I shouldn’t even be thinking these things. Imagine St. Peter greeting me at the pearly gates checking my permanent record and seeing I had these wrong thoughts.”

“Permanent record?” she chuckled. “Henry, you’re the least likely person I know to end up in Hell. Do you think you’d be sent there only to prove a point? Don’t worry. Come what may, know I love you.”

They stayed awhile on the swing, in the dark, hand in hand, listening to the summer night opera: the ratchety ringing of crickets, the croaks of pond frogs, the hoots of owls, the chipper chitters of a whippoorwill.

§ § §

White coats, green scrubs. The pungency of disinfectant cleaners. The constant quiet cacophony of monitors, beeping in time with the patient’s pulse, bleating warnings of this too high, that too low. IVs. The bed with starched sheets and cold metal rails. The vases with flowers brought by well-wishers, visitors who would shift uncomfortably, murmuring sympathies before rushing away. These were Henry’s memories of Donna’s last weeks in the hospital.

Her hand, the hand he’d loved to hold for twenty-four years, was his favorite thing to touch. The hand that had been so soft and comforting was transformed by disease into a weak and boney claw. That hand grasped his forearm and pulled him close.

“Please, help me die,” Donna whispered.

Henry had never faced such a dilemma. Donna was in pain, pain stronger than drugs, and her prognosis was clear: there was nothing they could do. He knew it was wrong to take a life, or to help a life be taken. But he also knew it was wrong for the love of his life, the mother of his children, to be in such terrific, relentless pain, a torture attended by caring and loving persons.

Donna had told him, “Keep faith.” He would, eventually. But for the year after she died, severe doubts and very bad thoughts went into Henry’s permanent record. What could he do? Not every

situation can be made into a good situation. Life wasn't like TV westerns, where right and wrong were clear, where good always prevailed.

He knew he would be lost without Donna. And he was.

§ § §

Janelle wondered why her business partner Henry was late coming to the garage. He'd been selling her the business in steps starting three years before, part of his plan to retire. Still, he was usually in by 8AM. Worried, she called the house and left a couple of messages. At noon, Mary called Janelle to relate the news of Henry's heart attack, and suggested that Janelle wait to visit until the next morning.

When Janelle came into his room, she put her hand on Henry's. "Henry? How you doin'?"

"Janelle, I'm so glad you're here."

"All the guys in the garage are worried about you. And Daneesa sends her love to 'Uncle' Henry."

"How is she? I haven't seen her in a month of Sundays."

"She's on the Dean's List at Eastern State!" The proud mom covered her heart with both hands.

"That's great. Say, how are things at the shop?"

"Fine, but don't worry 'bout that. Let's get you better."

...

What was Henry going to do? He had expanded Carr's Garage, adding two new bays with lifts, and found himself with much less time for office work. He needed a bookkeeper, and tax season loomed like a dark cloud smelling of gathering rain.

The county employment office provided the résumé of a recent graduate of the local community college. He called Watkins Appliance where she'd interned for three months; Bill Watkins said she was solid.

"I'm Miss Johnson, but please call me Janelle."

Henry welcomed the woman, apparently in her mid-twenties, into his office, leaving the door open as that seemed appropriate for a gentleman interviewing a lady.

He asked about her experience: did she know receivables and payables? What about inventory and payroll? All that was good, and Janelle could also draw up balance sheets, cash flow statements, and profit and loss statements.

That was more than Carr's Garage required, but she was available for half-time work, and she did have good grades and the good reference. Janelle was poised, personable, and well spoken.

All seemed great, but .... After Janelle admired photos of Henry's family on his desk, she showed him a photo of her toddler daughter, Daneesa. Miss Johnson had a child, but had never married.

Henry knew single moms, never-married moms were common in the modern world, but were not common in his. Goading his misgivings, the voice of his grandfather entered his mind. *Now why would you be hirin' one a them into yer operation?* His grandfather would have been explicit.

His parents wouldn't have been so overt. News of Henry hiring a Black woman would have garnered raised eyebrows and a not-so-subtle suggestion, "I'm sure it'll be fine, but at closing time check that the cash in the till matches the receipts."

Over time, old slurs and later phrases like "Negroes, Afro-Americans, or whatever they call themselves these days" had been replaced by African-American or Black, but ugly stereotypes went underground, lurking within many minds though not spoken aloud by the genteel portion of Jefferson County's white population.

Henry had long been troubled by inconsistencies between the Sunday inculcations – the preachings and teachings – and the Monday-through-Saturday practices of churchgoers, whether in his sect or others. When he set aside doctrine and dogma and got down to what Jesus said, it was not about thou-shalts and smiting, but about humility and loving others. Henry had become bothered by church folk freely dispensing disparaging judgments of others even though Jesus had spent his time with those scorned by his society. And as to single motherhood, come to think of it, Mary and Joseph – and the Holy Spirit – didn't that constitute a complicated state of affairs?

Longtime customers would take their business elsewhere, acquaintances would find they no longer had words to share. Would Henry worry about what other people thought? Or would Henry be a little bit brave?

Henry and Janelle made a decision to work together, employer and employee, and both strove to make it a good decision.

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It wasn't always easy for Henry. As she gained confidence as bookkeeper and then full-time office manager of Carr's Garage, Janelle made changes, such as eliminating obsolete inventory. He complained.

"Mr. Carr. Those fan belts been hangin' on that peg since Henry Ford horseless-ed the carriage. They disintegrated in my hands!"

"Well, maybe, but I was kinda used to lookin' at 'em ...."

Still, efficiency improved; mechanics lost less time waiting for parts.

To ask 'controversial' permissions, Janelle learned to wait until Henry was diagnosing an older car, one from before computers controlled them, where intuition guided analysis and certain sensitive adjustments were close to shamanism. One day she asked, "Okay if I replace the rotten sofa in the waiting room?" Duct tape bandages overlaid duct tape sutures on its vinyl cushions. As she expected, he replied "Um hum" while concentrating, and so the waiting room was spruced up. *People* and *TIME* and *National Geographic* joined *Field and Stream* on the side tables; the coffee was fresh all day.

New customers came, all races and creeds, all hues and hews.

When Henry's children were college-aged – too old to be fun yet too young to bestow grandchildren – he delighted in the company of Janelle's daughter, Daneesa. She'd drop by after school and sit at his desk to "draw for Uncle Henry." She was ecstatic when he brought her the box with sixty-four crayons in tiered rows, a choir of crayons ready to sing their colors into her compositions, works she conducted as her tongue explored her left upper lip.

“There!” She finished her picture of a delivery van in the shop. Proud Henry posted it for all to see. “Boop – boop – boop” – Daneesa provided the soundtrack for the drawing of a grinning, newly mended vehicle backing out to resume its rambles on the byways of Jefferson County.

§ § §

Jim Barnes came to Henry’s hospital room the morning of the second day after Henry’s heart attack. Jim was pastor at Henry’s church. He told Henry that the entire congregation was concerned and that he was in their thoughts and prayers.

A particular message came from the chairman of the deacons: Henry *had* to get better. The deacon had a 1972 Pontiac Grand Ville convertible, admiralty blue with a white interior. Henry was the only mechanic who could keep it running like the deacon remembered it did back when he courted young women with an undeaconly zest.

There were all kinds of reasons, then, that folks found Henry trustworthy and dependable, not only his simple intention to do the right thing.

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Four years after Henry’s first wife, Donna, died, Henry brought to Pastor Barnes his concern about remarriage. “Donna, before she passed, said I should remarry. But she was sick. Was she wrong?”

Henry was thinking seriously about asking Mary French to marry him. They’d been part of an informal support group of the recently widowed meeting for dinner once a week. But after two other widows moved away, Henry and Mary continued to meet and, over time, became comfortable with the idea that they could be a couple.

Pastor Barnes noted that people remarry all the time, but Henry needed specific assurance. “Not just ’til death, isn’t a marriage forever? Even in Heaven? If I remarry, in Heaven, won’t it be – confusing?”

Pastor Barnes dreaded these questions. Usually, distressed adults brought him infidelities, addictions, money problems; it was little children who vexed him for details of the afterlife. He didn’t answer Henry



immediately, instead recounting to Henry his memory of squatting down into a tiny chair like the ones the surrounding youngsters sat in to read them a story and answer questions.

A towheaded tyke asked, “My dog Skitter died. Will he be in Heaven with me?”

“The Lord makes a home for us in Heaven,” the pastor pronounced confidently, “and will give us what we need.”

“That’s not an answer. It was a yes-or-no question.”

So. The preacher with all the answers didn’t know everything. A shoal of shark pups circled, the scent of a stumbling seminarian’s blood in the water. “Yeah, it’s a yes-or-no!” “Uh huh.” “My grandma’s cat Purrcolater is sick. Is he gonna die?” “Daddy says politicians don’t answer questions, either. It’s ’cause they’re slippery.” “I have a goldfish. He winks at me.” “Yes or no: is Skitter in Heaven?”

Pastor Barnes led a brief prayer, then, as fast as middle-aged knees could lift him from the tiny chair, he bolted.

He told Henry that at times like that he’d wished he’d gone into music ministry. Henry got a good chuckle out of the story.

“It didn’t work well for me then, Henry, but about remarriage? I give you the same answer: the Lord prepares for us a home in Heaven and will provide whatever we need. In the Bible, the Lord countenanced and even blessed many, uh, situations. Abraham had Sarah and Hagar. King David had many wives. And King Solomon, oh my, he had a thousand wives and concubines.

“Henry, Heaven isn’t high school. Trust that it will be okay.”

...

Henry and Mary married before the end of that year. They made a decision, and made it a good decision.

§ § §

Henry's condition deteriorated; he spoke less and less, then pulled Mary close and said, "It's time."

After that, he didn't even grunt or moan, only responding with squeezes of a hand. The family consulted with Dr. Tang. They signed a DNR, a do-not-resuscitate directive, for Henry.

Back in his hospital room, Mary asked Ellen, "Maybe he'd like to hear a hymn. Can you ...?"

Ellen nodded, barely, and dabbed a tissue at a tear. She swallowed twice to relieve some of the hardness from her throat, took a deep breath, and started,

*Soon we'll reach the shining river,*

*Soon our pilgrimage will cease.*

As they recognized the tune, Mary, Donnie and Jennifer, and Bud and Linda joined in, taking a few notes to agree on a key,

*Soon our happy hearts will quiver*

*With the melody of peace.*

*Yes, we'll gather at the river,*

*The beautiful, the beautiful river;*

*Gather with the saints at the river –*

Henry shuddered, just a bit. His chest fell and stayed still.

Henry is Home.