

Edward F. Tablak

## Michael's Journey

### Prelude

This was his first day. Little Mike did not want to let go of his mother's hand. She was urging him to join the other children on the playground of the parochial school y.

The other children were strangers except for Rudy and Jimmy, some of them bigger than he was. His brain was trying to come to an understanding of what was about to happen. Suddenly, his other hand was in the warm hand of someone else.

He looked up to see the smiling face of a nun emerging from the white wrapping around her face and under the black hood of the Benedictine order. Her smile was so inviting that he didn't realize he had let go of Mom's hand.

"My name is Sister Margaret and you're Michael Polski. Is that right?"

Mike shook his head up and down but said not a word. The nun led him to a small group of boys and girls who were playing Ring around the Roses. She put him between two little girls who took his hands. In a moment he was singing and laughing, his mother forgotten.

In class, the first lesson was how to hold a pencil properly and how to create letters of the alphabet. This was old stuff to Mike, whose mom had taught him all this a long time ago.

When the Sister handed out the soft cover reader, he peeked at the first page and recognized all the words. He was the second one called upon to read and did so without a stumble or even a tiny mistake.

He heard Rudy Wausi mumble something in a snide loud whisper. He was sure the Sister heard it but she ignored it. "That was well done, Michael."

After lunch on the playground, Mike was talking with two girls and a neighborhood friend, Jimmy. Suddenly, he felt a hand on his shoulder, yanking him around.

"Alright, smarty pants. Let's see how tough you are."

Mike reached up to remove Rudy's hand from his shoulder. His unwanted enemy took affront and punned Mike in the stomach and followed with a left to Mike's jaw. Down went Mike. The girls began to scream.

Within seconds, Sister Margaret was yelling at Rudy, “Don’t move.” She bent down to inspect Mike and sighed when he seemed to be fine, physically.

Rudy’s buddies were congratulating him and pounding him on the back. Sister Mary came running and took Rudy by the ear and asked the others to tell her what happened.

Even at age six, Mike was humiliated. Rudy was two inches shorter but heavier than Mike.

He wanted to be one of the boys and this was not a great start.

Up until now, he had been sheltered and protected by his mother. Other than his mother’s arms, the world seemed like a hostile place with problems that had to be faced and conquered.

Not only had he been hit with every childhood disease imaginable, but he had endured the pain that went with the long process of repairing his birth defect, CTEV, two club feet.

He had dealt with the pain that accompanied serial casting and then braces to hold the feet in position and then the straight lace boots, r custom foot or hoses

All the manipulations began within a month of birth. All those years, he often sat looking out the window at the neighborhood children playing and hoping he could be like them and join them.

What he did not know was the emotional pain that his parents endured. His dad had long periods of unemployment. His mom went into a period of depression when confronted with the news of Mike’s CTEV. “We don’t have enough money to pay the doctor’s bill, let alone pay for treatment for Michael and we can’t let him grow up like that.”

He was to find out much later that Dr. Skua offered his services without charge and convinced a well-to-do member of the parish to provide the funds for all other expenses, including the physical therapy that involved hours of treatment.

To further complicate his development, his mother could only provide meals of the least expensive foods, mostly some form of carbohydrates. His dad spent hours growing fresh vegetables n season and canning many to carry them through the winter.

The Sunday after Mike’s escapade w with Rudy, he was looking at the colored comics of the Sunday newspaper. The last page had a large ad featuring Mr. Atlas, displaying bulging muscles.

“Daddy, will you read or tell me about this Mr. Atlas?”

His dad explained that this was an ad for a book about building strong muscles.

“Can you buy that book for me?”

His dad sighed. “Sorry, Mike, but we don’t have the money for something like that.”

“How can I get muscles like that?”

Patently, his dad explained. “First you eat all the food on the plate, especially the vegetables, whether you like them or not. Second, you can build up your arm muscles by lifting some weights like half bricks or some smaller logs from the wood pile. Third, you should develop your legs with jogging, running or skipping rope. I’ve never read his book but I’m sure that some of the book describes fancy ways to do these same exercises.”

Mike took his dad very seriously for one reason at least. His dad had hard bulging muscles in his upper arms.

On the other hand, his mom often rested after doing some chores. Mike noticed that his dad was doing some of eh chores that his mom always did, like washing and ironing the clothes

Within a few months after he noticed the first changes, his dad set up a bed in their living room so that Mom did not have to climb the stairs to their bedroom.

She was still strong enough to do some of the cooking and always was available to help Mikey with is hoe work.

There came a day when Mom could not get out of bed. Aunt Mary or Mrs. Halko, the next door neighbor would be at home to meet him after school.

Mike came home one afternoon to find his dad in tears, his arms open to receive Mike. “Your mom is in the hospital. She is very ill.”

At seven, o’clock, during his visit, Mike did not totally grasp the implications but was distressed to see his pale faced mom.

The visit was brief because hospital rules forbade children in the patient wards.

He was deeply saddened as he sat and talked to his mom who could not respond to his questions or comments but he still did not understand that she was on her death bed.

A week later he was shedding tears at the gravesite when his dad handed him some dirt to toss onto his mother’s coffin.

He walked away wondering how he could live without his mother to support him.

His grandmother, “Baba” immediately stepped in to play the role of his mom. It wasn’t until years later that he came to understand what all these experiences meant for his life.

It was also when he discovered that his mom, who had been ill for months, had refused to go to the doctor because she had no funds to spare for a doctor when she hardly produced adequate meals for her growing son.

It was in that conversation that he first heard the word “cancer.”

Even then, he could not understand how those childhood experiences would impact his life.

Mike was a disciplined boy and was to be seen most days doing his weight lifting in the basement. He also learned to play soccer on the street with his German neighborhood friends. Soccer involved a lot of running.

He was dedicated to making sure no future Rudy would embarrass him.

He had no way of knowing that this discipline, balanced with guidance of the nuns and his “Baba” was the foundation of a two hundred and ten pound Marine Lieutenant with a sensitive heart.

## Chapter 1.

When Mike was in the fourth grade, he knew he was already one of the smartest kids in St Edward's school. He overheard Sister Madeline telling Sister Mary.

When the priest visited the classroom, he always picked on Mike to answer questions.

His only competition was Martha, who was a cute blond. From the third grade on, she was his competition. He managed to win most competitions with her.

There came a time when he began feeling differently about girls. They were not as bad as he had thought.

The nuns always arranged for the smartest kid to sit in the first seat of the window row and the least able to be in the last seat near the door.

He liked Martha and would let her win a spelling competition once in a while. That placed her directly in the front seat immediately in front of Mike for the following week. Doing so allowed him to enjoy looking at her and whispering to her.

He found ways to talk with her during recess and sometimes he would walk her home on the way to his house. "She sure is cute."

His weight lifting and running helped Mike develop athletically. On the playground or on the sandlot or the street corner, Mikey always ended up being the leader of the kids. He was not only very athletic but also mentally sharp and always aware of what was happening around him...

While he was not the strongest kid, he came to the defense of smaller kids when they were being abused by a bully.

Although his family was poor, his dad would not let Mike take a paper route to earn some money. "You need that time to study and play. We'll find a way. You do your part as we ask you".

Dad would not let Mikey even do chores that required manual skills because he was so determined for Mikey to make a living with his brains. That turned out to be too protective, causing Mike to learn those skills under duress.

For some unexplained reason, Dad seemed to approve of Mike's disciplined exercise and the early morning jogging.

The nuns taught him to be respectful of people. His grandmother taught him to be concerned for people.

It was the long conversations with Baba during evenings before bedtime that that moved him most, times in which she shared her joy and sorrows and taught Mikey how to cope with both.

Her words were not hollow advice but were complemented with days of action when she was somewhere in h neighborhood caring for a sick mother or siting with a little girl who had broken her hip.

It was the third Monday in May of mike’s seventh grade year. Baba and he were sitting in the living room of the rectory waiting for Father Xavier. “Mikey, are you sure you are not in trouble for some reason?”

An uncertain Mikey said, “Not that I can think of.” He kept letting his mind rove over the last few days but couldn’t think of anything he had done that called for a special meeting with the parish priest. Yet, he was as tight as a drum when Father Xavier entered the room. He felt his muscles lose their tension when the priest smiled at him and took his grandmother’s hand.

“Relax, Michel. You are not in trouble. In fact, I bring good news; at least I hope you think that way.”

He spoke to grandma. “The nuns and I are agreed that our school has little more to offer Michael academically. After careful consideration we have arranged to have him skip the eighth grade. Our seventh grade curriculum is almost identical with the part of public school eight grade classes. Michael has excelled with the advances studies that that the nuns offered as a challenge.

The public school will accept his registration as a freshman in September. This envelope contains the paper work. All you have to do is take this to the principal’s office any day this week.”

Mike was dumb founded. His grandmother asked “Are you certain this is best for Michael?”

“We believe so. He would be bored and not stimulated to study. You must be aware that he has breezed through all his homework this year.”

“I noticed and challenged his excuses but he kept bring home all A’s.”

Mike continued to be mindful of the words of farewell he had from Sister Mary on the day she told him that he was graduating from St Edward’s.

“Remember, Michael, the things ingrained in you here must be carried forward wherever you may be. Respect all your neighbors. Stay sensitive so you may be of assistance to those who need you. You have been gifted with a good brain. Use it for good.”

Later that day, Father Xavier, asked him to come to the parish house.

“Michael, you have been an outstanding altar boy and an excellent student. You could even do better if you took more time to study. You have been blessed with gifts from God.

I am sure that Sister Mary has given you a special lecture. I hope you will pay close attention to what she had to say.

I have watched you on the playground. You are a natural leader of the boys and girls. I would urge you to use that talent well. When it's time to take charge, do that.

When you speak always speak with integrity. When compassion is called for, be the first to offer your help.

“Michael, do you remember the day that you knocked down two boys who were abusing Johnny Hatocheck. I saw that from the window and wanted to tell you how proud I was but it would have given the impression that I approved of fighting. That was one time I approved. Johnny was a lonesome boy who was not treated well at home especially by his father.”

“You saw that, Father”

“Yes I did and I loved you for it. I saw you befriend him during the weeks that followed.”

Johnny had been lonely for several reasons. He was belligerent when kids teased him, particularly about his body odor. They had no way of knowing that he had poor hygiene habits mostly because his dad forbade bathing because water usage was expensive.

As Mike befriended Johnny, he confided some of his problems to Mike. One day Mike brought a towel from home and took Johnny down to the river just before dark. Johnny had a great time bathing with a small piece of soap that Mike had brought. He had brought several pieces of his own underwear at Mike's insistence so he could rinse them out.

On one occasion Mike talked his grandmother into letting Johnny come to their place for a bath.

The priest had heard that story from Mike's grandmother.

“Michael, you have done something special for Johnny, maybe saved his life in a way. You played the part of his angel just as Dr. Skua did for you when you were a babe.”

Father Xavier continued “ I think you are sharp enough to understand what I am about to say. No matter where your life takes you, I urge you to consider remembering Jesus as a good model for your life. I say that because I see in you some of the same qualities that he had.

Your father is a carpenter as was his. You may not become a carpenter, but you father has helped you develop other talents.

Jesus was considered to be exceptionally bright at an early age, a trait you have in common.

While carrying out his chosen profession, he observed persons in need and stopped to give them a helping hand. You remember the stories of the cripple at the pool, the man in the tree and the blind man.

He was not always accepted but was rebuffed and developed opposition but he persisted to bring healing to the sick and good news to the poor.

Through all of his short life, he was a man at peace with himself, something, I believe, is God's plan for our lives.

Whatever vocational path you choose, if you choose to follow his example, you, too, can find that inner peace."

He wanted to ask what it was that Dr. Skua had done for him but he was being dismissed as the priest said,

"Do what you believe is right, no matter whether there is resistance or criticism. May God go with you, Michael?"

The priest shook his hand as though Mike were an adult. That impressed him so much that the afternoon would often return to his mind over the years to come.

It was several months later, the first day of school. Janet Ross said to her two girlfriends, "I'll catch you at lunch time."

As she headed for room 2, she heard the two minute bell and sprinted forward. In her rush she accidentally bumped into Mike.

"I'm sorry. That was clumsy of me.

"That's all right. No harm done."

Mike stooped to pick up her tote bag and the comb and lipstick that had escaped the bag. She also stooped and this time, accidentally bumped heads with Mike.

A group of boys nearby jumped into action. Two of them insisted on helping Janet stand while the third gathered her items and bag, all three ignoring Mike.

One of them muttered, "Clumsy oaf. Hands off Janet."

Mike flushed, turned away and headed for Room 2. He found his seat in the fourth row, three from the read.

He couldn't shake the image of the good looking girl that bumped into him. "She is really good looking. I hope I run into her again".

He laughed to himself, "I don't mean that literally." He turned to face the back of the room, toward the doorway. As he turned, the bell ran and a rushing Janet ran squarely into him then bounced backwards. He put his arms to catch her falling body.

The rest of the class was already seated, giving Ms. Johnson, the homeroom teacher, a clear view of the incident. She smiled as she watched a blushing Michael Polski standing with his arms embracing Janet Ross. It was a lovely tableau.

"It is all right to take your seats so that I can start the orientation."

A blushing Mike dropped his arms and made room for this lovely blonde to take her seat directly in front of his desk.



Sitting behind this good looking blonde, took him back to the days he admired the back of Martha's head at St. Edwards.

Janet missed the first comments by Ms. Johnson since her mind was on the good looking boy who was sitting behind her.

When the class was over, Janet stood and turned to Mike. "I'm Janet Ross and I see from the roster that you're Michael Polski."

Mike smiled and she laughed. "I guess we sort of ran into each other."

He said, "And bumped heads, literally."

She asked, "Where is your first class?"

"Room 22, algebra."

"Me, too. Let's walk together By the way. Are you going to the frosh dance a week from Friday?"

"I'd like to but I don't know how to dance."

James's pulse quickened. "Would you like to learn how?"

"I sure would but I can't afford lessons."

"I think I could teach you, if you like."

"Wow. That would be great."

"Good. Are you free to walk home with e after school? Our house is only three blocks from the school."

"I can do that. Oops, I think our room is coming up."

At four thirty, she was holding his hand as he was saying goodbye at her front door. "Mike, you are going to be a good dancer. You promise to come Saturday at seven thirty so we can practice some new steps."

"I promise."

He ran all ten blocks to his home. His mind was filled with thoughts of the afternoon, Janet in his arms, her breast close to his and the feelings that were stirring in his body.

The next day during the lunch break, Dan McCloud, leader of the Three, as they were known, without warning, walked up to Mike and began a right arm punch to Mike's jaw.

It may have been the look on Dan's face that had alerted Mike. He blocked the punch with his left arm and, with a short straight right to the jaw, drove Dan back and flat on his ass.

Dan's two buddies started to rush Mike but two seniors who witnessed the incident, stopped their rush. "Let your bullying friend fight his own battle."

Dan rose and rushed to wrestle Mike but was grabbing at air as Mike neatly sidestepped the rush. Dan lost his balance and went headlong to the ground. The gang that gathered were rooting, calling out, "yeah Mike".

McCloud rose and ran off, followed by his two friends.

“Mike, I hear that you put Dan on his fanny with one punch,” said Janet, when they met in the English class later that afternoon. I’m glad. He has been the bully in Junior High for two years and fancies himself as my boyfriend.”

Mike asked, “You do know he started the fight?”

She laughed, “And so does everyone else, including some of the teachers. I hear that Mr. Smyth, who had the yard duty, saw the action and walked away when Dan was on the ground. I have a feeling that the faculty approve of the result, feeling, for some time, that Dan had it coming.”

The conversation was interrupted as the bell sounded for the start of class.

At the dance, Mike was lucky to have the first and last dance with Janet. Every time, he looked. She was surrounded by admiring boys.

A small group of girls were smiling invitations to be asked to dance. Every one of them seemed to know his name.

Janet didn’t wait for him to ask but let him know that he was to walk her home after the dance. There was some lemonade waiting for their arrival which they shared, seated on the porch swing.

They were seated in the deep shadows of the tree-line street. The quarter moon flickered among the stirring leaves of the huge elms they sat silently after finishing their drinks.

Janet reached for his hand. “Mike, I get the feeling you want to kiss me and I would like that.”

Within seconds, two young lovers were making out with the passion of adolescence on the way to growing up.

They walked to math class every morning and back from English class every afternoon but Mike had competition for the walk home after school.

It seemed she was always available for the walk on Friday after school. Her mom always had iced tea, lemonade or cokes ready.

It was on the fourth Friday since their first meeting that Janet took his hands in hers. “Mike I sense you would like to take me on a date, but you never ask. I’d say yes, if you asked.”

Mike’s face flushed as he tightened his lips. He had dreaded the day the subject would be raised. He started and then stammered. Janet squeezed his hands to encourage him.

“Janet. I’ve wanted to ask you but I am too embarrassed to say that I can’t afford to take you to a movie or even buy you a sundae at the creamery. My heart aches, especially on Fridays or Saturdays when I know you’re with one of the many guys who surround you all week long.”

“I’m sorry, Mike, sorry your family is in such tough financial straits.” She pulled Mike to her breast and gave him a warm hug.

“Right now I want some of those kisses that I have been yearning for since that night. Then I want to share some thoughts with you.”

She was running her fingers through her hair to give some semblance of neatness and grinning. “Mike, no matter what you believe at the moment, there will be a day when you will be the boy that takes my virginity.”

She laughed as he began to blush. “Of all the boys I spend time with, you are the one I like best. You’re a bit younger but more mature than any of them. “

“My mom and I agree that going steady at this age is not a good idea. In fact, I hope that I have a lot of different dates during my high school years.”

“I want you to be one of those, in fact, the one I spend most time with, that is, unless you find someone who becomes our steady. You don’t need to take me to movies. Other boys can do that. Some movies I prefer to see with my girlfriends.”

Mike started to say, “But”

She stopped his words with her lips locking onto his.

“I would love to take walks, holding hands and sharing our thoughts. I want to make out on the swing or on our sofa. We can do our homework together.”

“More than anything I hope we can be friends. If something romantic develops before we graduate, then we can deal with that.”

Mike was impressed with her plan. This was a girl who had given thought to her life instead of struggling to get through each day.

Academically Mike breezed through high school finishing as co-valedictorian with Janet. For four years, they studied together, helping each other with extra projects in science and sociology cramming together for exams and competing for highest honors when in the same class.

They were a strange couple, At times they were like brother and sister, supporting each other and trading secrets there were also the times they were teenage lovers, making out, dancing hip to hip and breast to breast, knowing they were stirring each other’s libido up to a certain limit.

She told him that her family was extremely wealthy, due to her mom’s inheritance but lived simply because of her dad’s request and her mother’s love for her dad.

Both her parents loved Mike and included him in meals and other events when Janet was included.

Janet turned eighteen six weeks before graduation. Her mom and dad gave her a Mustang as a combination birthday and graduation present. Her mom added an extra present, a Visa credit card.

Mike had been earning and saving money for a gift. He found a pair of handmade earrings, beautifully crafted and not too expensive.

For Mike's birthday, three days later, Janet gave him a pair of Bermuda shirts with a shirt to match and a sexy pair of swim trunks.

He raised his eyebrows before kissing her a thank you. She said, "I've been true to my promise for three years, respecting your wishes but this is special. Mom and Dad are inviting the two of us to celebrate our birthdays for a weekend at the Nemacolon Country Club."

"I want to learn to ride and hope you will too. Do say you will come. Let me and my family splurge just this once. A few months from now our paths will diverge and may never join again"

There was no way that pride could stand in the way. He had been dreading those words, "our paths will diverge."

He borrowed a leather suitcase from Uncle Andy and his dad bought him a new pair of tennis shoes to go with his new outfit.

Mike had just finished unpacking. He stripped down to his boxers and about to step out of them and head for the shower. He heard a knock and headed for the entrance but turned when he heard the second knock, which, surprisingly, was coming from the interconnecting door to Janet's room.

"Open up, honey."

"Just a minute."

"Come as you are. Surprise me."

As he pulled back the door, his eyes opened wide. A beautifully developed female body, a vision of loveliness and sensuality was on display. The only bit of clothing was small triangle of pale yellow below her belly button.

She was grinning. "I see that my disguise has worked. You may do something more than adore me with your eyes.

It was a few minutes before they were ready for words. Janet said, "I thought we could play in the shower. I am eager to see if all the arts are in place, matching my studies of the male anatomy. I hope you are willing to double check all my nooks and crannies."

Teasing, laughter, oohs and aahs filled the huge shower and continued through the towelings

Janet assured him that she was on the pill as approved by her mom. "She wishes us joy as we make love for the first time, warning me that it may take more than one joining before we discover real joy."

Mike said, "The only piece of advice I had was from an uncle who said, "Take it slow and wait for your partner to signal that she is ready."

After what they called "two practice sessions, they opted for a swim and lounging by the pool while the sun was high in the sky.

Mike felt a bit self-conscious during the cocktail hour but the casual manner of Janet's folks finally put him at ease

The two evening and one early morning practice sessions went well. Janet never even pulled back the covers on her own bed.

She did delay her riding lessons for another twenty-four hours. Instead, she and Mike both had their first golf lessons.

The two of them had one more evening of making love two weeks before graduating. Her folks were away overnight. Janet was sure it was planned so "that the children could have this last night together."

Janet made a nice breakfast before Mike left that Sunday morning. Teary eyes dominated the conversation. "Mike, I am sure I will meet the right man at some future date but he will have to be someone very special. I will pray to find someone as gentle and caring and open as you have been

I also have admired the way you handle adversity and the handicap of being poor. Mom says there are only a handful of men who will match you. I pray I will meet one of them."

Thunderous applause met both valedictory speeches. The two met briefly after the tossing of caps. Choked voices said, "Good luck at Vassar. Good luck at Penn State."

## Chapter 2. Approaching Kuwait

It was late August, just as the first light of day peeked over the horizon, Mike saw the trenches and barbed wire defense set up by Saddam's forces. He radioed his company commander.

The response was, "Slow down." Thirty seconds later, "Move to the first trench and take out any visible targets. Hold position while artillery lays down a barrage."

During the barrage that was directed at the defending forces, the land movers were brought forward to take out the barbed wire.

Mike, watching from his tank, saw the inching forward of the land movers. He decided that the Iraqis were hoping the trenches and barbed would slow the enemy advance instead of using their manpower to slow down the Allies. No such luck.

Within an hour, Mike and the entire division were headed toward Kuwait City.

They ran into more trenches and barbed wire. However, these positions were poorly constructed and defended, and were overrun quickly.

"Enemy tanks at ten o'clock"

To his driver, "Forty degrees left."

Forty seconds later, "Fire." Peering through his field glasses he saw a direct hit just ahead of the turret of his target. He witnessed two hits from other tanks in his company.

"Twenty degrees left."

Thirty seconds later, "Fire."

The explosion hit the Iraqi's left track sending the enemy tank careening to the left then toppling onto its side.

He heard the command. "Hold fire. Enemy is out of commission."

As the lead tank for the company, Mike was given their current coordinates and setting for his compass and speed for movement to Kuwait City.

He kept his crew informed. “We’re going to have minimal resistance. Most Iraqi troops are surrendering. According to news from HQ it seems that most Iraqis are putting up a short fight before surrendering”

“Enemy at three o’clock,”

He shouted, “Hindered degrees right. Full speed. Up three degrees. Fire.”

A few seconds later, “Great teamwork.”

During a rest break and refueling stop, Mike was called to a briefing at battalion headquarters. The essence of the briefing was, “We are joining forces to chase down the Iraqi Republican Guard We will be part of a force of more than one hundred and fifty thousand men and more than a thousand tanks.”

From that point, Mike and his crew were no longer riding point but were one of thousands of tanks that moved steadily toward Kuwait

The fighting finally became heavy as they neared Kuwait City. Iraqi forces in Kuwait counterattacked the Allied. Despite the intense combat; the Allies repulsed the Iraqis and continued to advance towards Kuwait City.

The war ended for Mike on February 27<sup>th</sup>, the day that President Bush declared the city liberated after Saddam ordered a retreat.

Mike, on his way to HQ for a conference, ran into an Iraqi soldier, who had been isolated from his unit, apparently unaware of his orders. He was trapped near the temporary division HQ.

The meeting was so unexpected that Mike had no time to pull his side arm. He saw The Iraqi pull his bayonet and sliced into Mike’s ribs. Fortunately, a marine walking nearby, saw the attack and shot the assailant.

Mike was rushed to the battalion medical tent for emergency repairs, and then transferred to a naval aircraft carrier for major surgery. The long gash that started at is left shoulder had ripped his shoulder and back muscles on the left side of his body.

Five days later he was flown to the naval hospital at San Diego for final treatment, therapy and a long convalescence before discharge from active service.

### Chapter 3 San Diego 1991

The mail caught up with him the day he arrived at the hospital. The only important piece was a la letter from Aunt Mary, a letter that had gone to Germany and then followed him here. The original stamped date was seven days ago. In usual fashion, the letter was brief.

“Dear Mike, I don’t know how long it will take this letter to reach you in the Marines. Your dad and grandma were killed by a drunken driver on their way home from church.

The funeral will be held tomorrow. Both will be buried next to your mom’s grave. I am sorry that the funeral director could not wait until we hear from you.

Uncle Andy is the executor of the estate and will write you with the final accounting.

Sorrowfully, Aunt Mary.

Although he had left home on the day he departed for Penn State, it was hard to imagine having no immediate family still someplace on this earth.

He decided to spend a short time in the hospital chapel to say a prayer and a good bye to dad and “Baba”.

Some days were a drag. He was in the beginning days of special physical therapy that might take months. His mind was craving activity

The day he had arrived, only one bed in the ward was occupied. The I.D. read Sgt. John Stokes, who didn’t even grunt a response to Mike’s greeting and turned away when Mike attempted a conversation an hour later.

Two other beds were occupied when Mike arrived from physical therapy on the following day.

Lt. Jack Strong, USN and Ensign Ryan O’Toole, USN, were sitting on the sides of their beds and chatting. Lt. Strong had both arms in a cast and O’Toole had his right arm in a cast and a cast on two small fingers of his left hand?

Both gave Mike a warm smile and introduced themselves. Even at first glance, Mike guessed they were both Navy Seals. The wide shoulders, broad chests and narrow hips were impressive. He raised his eyebrows and asked, “Seals?”

Both nodded. Mike said, “Marines. Kuwait?”

Nods all around.

Mike excused himself. Five minutes later he returned with four cold bottles of Coke, straws in two bottles for his handicapped friends.

He walked over to the bed of the first occupant. When he got no response he opened the bottle and left it on the side table.



Within minutes, the three new friends were chatting about the fine treatment each had received after their injuries.

For a moment, Mike was surprised when both friends stood and leaned over the table to sip their drinks. He recovered quickly and stood next to the men, holding a coke bottle in each hand in a position where the men were able to sip the drinks.

After the first sip, each smiled and thanked Mike. He returned the smiles and silently thanked God that he had reasonable use of his left arm, a good right arm and both hands.

When the lunch trays arrived, one of the nurse's aides was there to assist with the feeding. Mike realized that Ryan would have to wait for the aide to finish feeding Jack. Mike bolted down his sandwich and moved to help Ryan.

"Mike, place the sandwich where I can reach it with my fingers. In the proper position, I can pick up the food and transport it to my lips."

The aide became upset when Ryan tried to pick up the plastic glass of milk and spilled the contents. The three of them burst into laughter and assured the aide that this was the first of many such accidents in their future.

Mike had one eye on Sgt. Stokes who had no problems eating but kept his head down, thus avoiding eye contact with the others.

Mike asked the aide to have someone bring in a cribbage board for four players. All three tried to talk Stokes into joining them, with no success.

Mike had to roll the dice for Jack and move the pegs after each throw. He placed the dice into Ryan's left palm for each throw.

Ryan was leading the scoring. It was his turn. He tried to pick up the dice with his thumb and two fingers. Mike did not rush to help. Ryan's clumsy effort resulted in scattering the dice onto the floor. The three of them burst into laughter.

They were unaware of Stokes moving closer and watching the game. He bent over from his wheel chair to find the dice and gently placed them in Ryan's hand.

Ryan took a chance and asked, "Would you mind throwing the dice and pegging for me while Mike helps Jack?"

"I guess I can do that."

Ryan won the game. He said to Stokes, "The two of us make a good team. How about we take on Jack and Mike?"

"I think not. I need to get back to bed."

He rolled the wheel chair to his bedside but did not get into the bed until the three others were involved and not looking in his direction. He removed the blanket from his knees and hoisted himself into bed, quickly pulling up the blanket.

At one thirty, Stokes was wheeled to physical therapy after loosening a verbal battle with the husky male attendant.

The moment he was out of the room, Ryan O'Toole said, "We need to make Stokes comfortable with us. Isolating himself can't be good for his psyche."

Mike said, “Ryan, “You’re right. Since he chose to help you, I think you should try to get to know him. Once he accepts you, you can invite him to join with us in a gabfest or playing some game. If you were to ask, he might tell you that he prefers to play some other game, like gin rummy or backgammon.

Hell, just give him a warm smile like you did to me. That smile made me feel that you were approachable.”

Ryan answered with, “I ‘m not sure. I’ll try if you stand with me, Mike.”

It took several tries but Ryan persisted and had Stokes involved in a match of Cribbage won easily by the team of Stokes and O’Toole.

After the match, Stokes insisted on buying the Cokes. He handed the money to Mike, who fetched the drinks.

The conversation turned to the pain related to their individual therapies. The Sargent listened but had nothing to contribute until Mike said at one point, “There are times in therapy when I actually scream in pain and I can’t hold back the tears.”

Stokes started to roll his wheelchair away but Mike said, “John, please stay. Tell us about your pain. We’re friends.”

Stokes could not stop the tears that gushed from his eyes. A sob escaped his lips. “Dammit. Grown men are not supposed to cry.”

Mike stood and put his hand on John’s shoulder. Ryan and Jack did the same. A long minute later, John nodded.

“You’ve undoubtedly seen me fighting the attendant about going to therapy. The pain is so great that I can’t abide it. When I get there, I refuse to participate. I’d rather be seen more obstinate than have anyone see me cry.”

Jack spoke up. “John, the three of us have had our times of crying. In my case, I felt better once I let go of that silly notion of shame in front of therapists and their staffs.

They’ve seen it all and probably already know what you are resisting. I’d be delighted to accompany you as your friend during you session today, if you want.”

John, unable to say any words, nodded his approval.

There were blocks of time when no one else was present in the ward. Mike mostly used the time to catch up on his reading.

Today, he didn’t feel like reading. He lay back and let his mind drift back to his early years.

He couldn’t help smiling at the first thought. Like most kids, he had his times of dreaming about his future. He wanted to grow up to be a fireman, then a star second baseman for the Pittsburgh Pirates, an All American running back for Notre Dame, or even the president of the United States.

Mike was getting sleepy. In the moments before he slept, he was thinking about his real dad who had died when he was a few months old.

While, at that time, he was unaware of the influence on his life to come, the deep relationship with his grandmother, the love and discipline of his parents along with the teachings of the nuns, had implanted deep within him a moral compass that kept him making the corrections his life journey would require.

## Chapter 4.

He looked at his watch. “An hour before chow time.”

He opted for a walk around the hospital campus. Five minutes into the walk, he saw Dr. Jane Walker, his psychologist, sitting on a bench and apparently meditating. Deciding not to interrupt her mediation, he started to walk by.

“Michael, I was just day dreaming. If you have a minute, please have a seat.”

Her invitation was welcome. He needed someone to talk with.

She asked, “Have you made a decision regarding your first step after being discharged?”

He smiled. “I thought we, that are you and I, could escape to some deserted island to spend a month together.”

She laughed. “I don’t think my Danny would be pleased. After all, who would cook his dinner? So, since you know that, give me a hint.”

“I’m having trouble, Doc. This afternoon, I was remembering the people of my youth who loved me and nurtured me. I was reminded of their hopes that I would use my gifts to make the world a better place. I decided that up until now, I haven’t been faithful to that charge. I have been focused on survival for the dozen or so years since then.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, I thought about the early years. During high school, while I did other things, my primary focus was getting grades that would get me into college.”

“The next four years, I majored in getting an education and working to enable myself to stay in school. “

Jane said, “That’s an interesting summary that leaves out some of the things that we talked about. How do you view your year on active duty with the marines?”

She continued. “Mike, you are well balanced, considering the emotional distress that filled you on so many occasions. As I mentioned in our last session, you are in a good place now.”

“You might want to consider your military time as a year of service to others. Why are you so hard on yourself?”

“I have this sense that something important is missing in my life. I have a sense that I am not living up to my youthful expectations.”

“So, where does that leave you? Are you just frozen or have you been leaning in any direction?”

“I thought I might try to get a teaching certificate. I have a lot of credits in the sciences, my first love. The problem is that puts me, vocationally, working with

teenagers. Based on my history, I have an easier rapport with adults or with younger children.”

“Have you thought about using that science background to consider a career in medicine?”

“Not really. The requirements would require years of study, even if I were headed for nursing.”

“Not if you choose to be a technician or a therapist. Besides, what’s your hurry?”

“It isn’t only about time. I was an easy achiever in school, gifted with a keen mind, but I always hated homework and collateral reading although I loved reading fiction and non-fiction as long as it wasn’t related to homework.”

“The only hurry I’m in is to serve and meet the right woman.”

“Ha”, exclaimed Jane.” You’ve been hiding that idea from our therapy group.”

Mike felt a flush creeping up his neck. Jane laughed. “Well, I will need to see if I can help that along.”

“No matter your past feelings about homework, whatever you pursue will be demanding and you know that. Besides, you are now an avid reader and that will serve you well.”

She looked at her watch. “By the way, I don’t agree with your assessment about relating to teens. Why don’t you spend a little time, today, offering you help to those teenagers in the children’s ward? I’m glad you are involved in that reading program.”

She continued. “I need to run. If you need some one-on-one time, just call for an appointment. In the meantime, why not consider writing a summary of events and people in your life. Try to write details of your successes, your failures, obstacles you’ve overcome and obstacles you did not tackle head on. “

Thinking about the suggestion, Mike headed for the children’s ward. Ten minutes after his arrival, a nurse was leading him to a bedside, handing him a copy of Winnie the Pooh and introducing him to Timmy. No teenagers today.

The young patient was a six year old, recovering after major surgery on his legs that were shattered in an auto accident.

Timmy was grinning from ear to ear in expectation. The next hour turned out to be the finest hour of Mike’s stay at the hospital.

After the reading, Timmy was eager to tell Mike about his daddy who was a marine and just left for a place called Kuwait.

As Mike wiped the tears from his eyes and rose to leave, he heard a feminine voice asking, “Would you like to read to a group of my girls at the other end of the ward? You make the characters come alive as you read.”

Mike was honored and pleased. He walked alongside Gloria, the nurse, who was pushing a wheel chair. She introduced Cissy, who was four years old.

A minute later he was being introduced to four other pre-school age girls in wheel chairs. All had been on a school bus that had been hit by a drunk driver and sent all the children to the hospital. The bus was headed back to the Navy housing base at the end of the day in kindergarten

Gloria handed him several large print children's books with illustrations and pictures... A half hour later he had five new fans asking him for more.

Gloria relieved him of the books and whispered, "Five thirty, as usual?"

He nodded.

She said, "I'll be in my parking spot."

This was his sixth date with Gloria. Drinks, dinner, and unless there was a good movie at the local theater, they spent the evening playing board games.

A few weeks earlier, Mike had been trying to find a way to approach Gloria when she surprised him by taking a seat at his table in the cafeteria during a crowded coffee break.

He had seen her in the children's ward, a beautiful woman with no ring on her finger. Mike was hungry for some casual female company in a social setting rather than nurses in the ward, his psychologist and PT assistants, all at work.

He found her receptive to his obvious pick up line. She joked and laughed at his jokes. She mentioned that she also had a coffee break at two thirty each afternoon.

Two days later, after enjoying three coffee dates, she was driving him to her apartment for dinner. He hadn't paid much attention to the sadness around her eyes. His own need for a woman friend after months alone in a hospital bed was paramount at this time, even for a sensitive and caring guy like Mike.

Each evening, Gloria found some new creative way to stir up Mike's hormones. No matter the game, they laughed and wrestled their way to bed so that the day's worries or pain was nowhere to be found. It was especially so for the broken hearted Gloria.

This evening, Gloria opened a bottle of her favorite wine, Merlot, shortly before they sat down to dinner. The steaks were on the grill. Mike had just tossed the salad.

Mike said, "This is a feast fit for a king, Gloria."

She smiled. "Maybe not for a king, but definitely for my gentle prince. By the way, I thought you were exceptionally great with the children today."

"Thank you."

Gloria seemed a little preoccupied during dinner. Her laughter at his jokes was muted. She wasn't as sharp at Scrabble as usual.

Her teasing manner was not present this evening. On the sofa, her subtle moves were more direct. To Mike; she seemed in a hurry to lead him to her bed.

Lying in his arms, after making love, Gloria seemed unable to separate herself. She clung to Mike with her head buried in his chest.

“Gloria, what is it?”

She mumbled something that he could not understand. He waited, knowing that all would be clear but not necessarily good news.

Finally, she whispered, “Mike, we have never spent a night together but I want you to stay tonight. This will be our last time together.”

Mike was confused. “What’s going on, Gloria?”

“I’m taking a position at the Children’s Hospital in Philadelphia.”

“Oh, I thought you were happy with your work here.”

“I am but there are complications.”

“Can to share?”

“Not really. Today was my last day of work. I’ll be packing tomorrow and leaving on the red eye special tomorrow night. I want tonight to be etched in my soul.”

Gloria did not want to explain that she had not kept her promise about falling in love with Mike.

He had walked into the ward offering his help with the children. Her first thought was, “I’d love to get him into my bed. The way his eyes are undressing me may make this work for both of us.”

She pulled out the stops before and after she had him reading stories to the children. Mike, who had not been with a woman since before his call to active duty, was an easy subject. He wondered what it would be like to make love to an older woman

There had been nothing accidental about the meeting at the cafeteria. The coffee dates served them well for a mutual seduction.

During that first evening in her bed, they had promised to care for each other but limited this time to a brief affair.

As she got to know the surprisingly caring Mike, she knew early on that loving Mike would come too easily.

She could not help but respond to as guy who went out to pick a few flowers from the neighbors’ yards to put on the table for dinner. She had witnessed his conversation asking their permission

“How do you not respond to guy who helps you with the dishes and the laundry and who is total present when you speak of things personal?”

She would miss the warmth of his kiss on her head while she was tossing a salad

For all the reasons she did not want to separate, she knew it was time.

At six the next morning, Gloria dropped Mike at the hospital and left in a hurry. Mike, with teary eyes made his way to his quarters. He knew that the next days would be filled with memories of the joyful times with Gloria.

He would never know that in a special way he had been e Gloria's savior. She had been jilted by her longtime partner and was on the edge of depression.

It was on their second date that Mike had seen the sadness in her eyes and offered his friendship. He told her jokes, brought her coffee, teased her out of her down times and entertained her through the way he related to the children with his made-up stories.

Mike was everything she needed at the time, the tonic to avoid depression.

Now she was leaving on her terms...

Back in his room, Mike let the memories flow. He would miss Gloria. She would not be there on the following day in the children's ward where he was to make new friends and enjoy a renewal with his friends of this afternoon.

What surprised Mike was the blue funk that came over him when he walked into the ward and a new nurse was there to greet him. What started out to be a carefree sexual relationship had become more meaningful. Today was not one of his best days with the children.

During his free hours the next day, he began to write notes about is experiences, just as Doctor Jane suggested. He purchased three ring lose leaf note book, knowing that his memory would not bring reminders according to the calendar.

His first notes were of the afternoons with Gloria in the Children's Ward and the intimate evenings at her apartment.

As he came to the end of those notes, he was reminded of is his first opportunity to have sex. Irene Sobczak was kind of going steady during their junior year in high school.

They had often made out on the large sofa but both knew nothing serious would occur while her folks were playing cards in the next room.

This evening, Mike was unaware of her folk's presence since Irene had the music playing when he arrived and her welcoming kiss a bit more passionate than usual

She wasted no time teaching him the three new Latin dances in preparation for the Junior Class dance. They laughed and joked as Mike stumbled through the Mambo and the Cha-cha. But it didn't take Irene long to have him doing reasonable well.



It was the Tango where Irene made her move. “Not that way Mike. Shoulders and chest arched back, so that we are locked at the hips. That’s the classic ball room position. Now, once more.”

Irene kept them locked that way until Mike said, “Honey, do you know what’s happening to me?”

She smiled. “Yep. Me too.”

Mike suddenly realized that Irene’s blouse was open and her breast was on display. He felt her fingers opening his shirt.

“Mike, this is our chance. My folks are out to the movies.”

Mike had dreamt of a time like this when he and Irene would be alone and now it had come true. He froze.

Irene said, “Don’t worry about getting me pregnant. I have two of Daddy’s condoms. He has dozens in the bedside table drawer.”

Mike’s mind was racing. He was remembering catechism class about sex and mortal sins. He remembered a story he heard from the gang about Jay, whose condom failed and got Sue pregnant.

“Come on, Mike.” She moved, locked her hips onto Mike’s and undid two more shirt button. “Touch my nipples, Mike. Ooh, that’s nice.”

Mike’s doubts were no match against his desire. He began to remove her blouse.

Suddenly they heard the arrival of a car in the driveway. “Momma must not have liked that war movie. Hurry and button up, Mike. Less than a minute after the car door slammed, she and Mike were at the door greeting her parents.

When they were alone, Irene said, “Dad and Mom are going to bed.” She opened her blouse and began to undo the buttons on Mike’s shirt. Mike put his hand over hers.

“Not tonight. I don’t think our first time will be fun if we have to stay alert to being discovered. Besides, it will be safer when you are on the pill, which is only a few weeks ahead.”

Irene was disappointed but said, “You’re right but I am not buttoning my blouse. I want your hands on my flesh not my blouse.”

That was the only time he had come close with Irene. Shortly after that, Irene found a more willing partner, leaving Mike to his yearning that lasted until his senior year.

A week or so after saying good bye to Gloria, Mike took the Liberty Bus to the Symphony concert in town. He knew from past experience that at least one unused ticket had been turned back and was available at no charge to military personnel

He was dressed in his Marine Greens. Millie, who tended the Will Call window, had his ticket ready. "You lucked out, tonite, Mike. Twelfth row, aisle set. A beautiful young lady just dropped off the ticket." She gave Mike a wink and a light laugh.

Anne Waleski was reading the program notes, aware only that someone had taken Sue's seat. She was sorry that Sue chose to visit her folks this week and miss this concert.

The house light dimmed. Anne to put away the program and focused on the entrance of the conductor.

She was enraptured with the orchestra's performance of Beethoven's seventh symphony and then completely taken when the guest pianist played three of Beethoven's sonatas. The response of the audience was overwhelming.

She became aware of the very enthusiastic applauding by her sea mate who was calling out "Brava, Brava."

It was something she had never done but his enthusiasm encouraged her to call out the same. Soon, a myriad of Bravas was sounding and continuing through four curtain calls.

When all was calm, Mike rose, stepped into the aisle and nodded for Anne to precede him up the aisle for the intermission.

He couldn't help admire her beautifully constructed body as he followed her up the aisle.

As they neared the drinks table, Mike asked. May I buy you a libation as a thank you for the excellent seat?"

"Oh. How did you know that I returned that ticket?"

He laughed. "Millie and I have become old friends. I show up at each performance, hoping for a free seat. She accommodates marines with the best of whatever gets turned n. She says I am her best customer."

"All her previous cancellations, today, were phone calls. You preceded me by only a few minutes."

She smiled. "In that case, I accept. Branch water and a twist of lime will be fine."

Mike chose a Perrier for himself.

"Are you stationed at Camp Pendleton?"

Mike shook his head side to side. I'm at the Navy Hospital. By the way, I'm Michael Polski."

Her face broke into a grin. "Nice to meet a fellow Pole. I'm Anne Waleski."

She went on. "If you're at the hospital, you must be a patient. We have no marines stationed at the hospital."

"Guilty. I'm in the last stages of physical therapy and participating in the required psychological group therapy."

Anne's face darkened as she frowned. "I'm sorry."

Mike laughed. "Don't be. I'm happy to be nearing the end of a long convalescence."

She smiled. "You know what I mean."

"I do. Thank you. How do you know there are no marines stationed there?"

"I'm an OR nurse at the hospital."

They were interrupted with the tinkle of the bell announcing time to return to their seats.

Mike was just as enthusiastic when the orchestra concluded the concert with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

As the audience began to leave, Mike and Anne stood. He asked. "Anne, may I be as bold as to invite you to join me in a light supper?"

Anne had guessed that Mike would attempt to invite her for a drink or something. "I'm sorry; Michael, but I have other plans."

She saw the disappointment on his face, but she would not give in. She was thinking, "Marines, like sailors, have an ulterior motive when inviting you to share a meal. I don't intend to make myself available."

She had planned to have supper at her special café around the corner. As she approached the café, she saw Mike opening and walking through the entrance. "Damn."

She turned around and walked to her car and drove home. Lost in her thoughts about the event, she got out of the car, clicked the automatic car door lock, and strode to the apartment door.

"This is not how I wanted to end the evening."

At the café, she would have joined a large round table of singles who had been to the concert and discussing the performance.

Anne knew she was not comfortable in one on one dates and found it easy to be lost within larger groups.

The more she thought about the turn of events the more anxious she got. On the drive home she had developed a headache and noticed that her skin was damp. By the time she arrived home, she realized her tension had built so that she felt like a bundle of nerves.

"Getting to sleep will be hell."

In her anxiety to get to her apartment, she forgot her routine of checking carefully for intruders before unlocking her car.

She suddenly thought, "That was careless, dammit."

She wasted no time getting to her antidepressant medication. It still took some time for the sandman to arrive.

In that hour of wakefulness, she tried to analyze the basis for her anxiety attack. “Was there something about this Michael that was threatening? That can’t be it. He appeared to be a gentleman Why did I avoid the café? I guess I didn’t want to admit to him that I lied about another appointment.”

Sleep finally relieved her of the anxiety and, apparently, staved off depression.

She was tense as she prepared for work in the morning. At work, she was a bear. She brooked no foolishness and her work mates tread carefully all day. By afternoon, the second antidepressant pill had its effect. She became the Anne that her team expected.

Mike’s was disappointed for two reasons. He loved getting to know new adults with whom he could have interesting conversations His impression of Anne was that she knew classical music while Mike was just getting into classical.

There was no receptionist at the small café. He was looking for a seat when another young man waved him to join the group at a large round table.

“Hello I’m Ian Scott. We’re an assortment of concert goers who end up here after each concert. We critique the performance with great disagreement and lots of fun.”

“Hello to you. I’m Michael Polski, in rehab at the naval hospital.”

There were waves of greeting across the table. Ian said. “You’ll get the now the individuals because we agree to say our names the first time any of us speaks to whatever subject emerges.”

Mike had nothing to say but got to know a good many names and appreciated the knowledgeable comments

As he was leaving, he wondered if Anne had ever met with this group.

Mike was now writing in two journals. He was writing notes in a daily diary as well as stories from his past into the loose leaf binder.

That evening, he reflected on the round table. The discussion reminded him of the discussion at the round table in the coffee shop at Penn State He understood the rule to be that an empty chair was an invite to sit in.

He took out the loose leaf journal to start writing. He recalled his being in awe of the worldly knowledge of those upper classmen. He saw himself as a hick from a small town (which he was) being baptized into a world of sophisticated big city world citizens.

No one at the table spoke to him that day, or on the second day. He listened and learned a lot but felt that he was not wanted. It was only during the third session, when he stated a little known fact, that he was acknowledged and asked to give his name and class.

By the end of the first semester, he was a regular and was asked to join the prestigious debate team. In the years following, he made it a point to acknowledge newcomers on the first day they took a seat at the table.

As he completed this journal entry, he was reminded of the continued prejudice in parts of society that still existed at the end of the twentieth century.

“Hell, I may as well include the slights I endured and the prejudice I saw during my years at the university.”

He wrote, “Smyth, the president of the debate club and top debater on the travelling squad, was talking just as I entered the room He was facing away from the door.

“This new guy, is he a Polack or another Polish Jew?”

The expression on the faces of his audience told him that I had entered the room. He turned, said, “Sorry” and walked away.

I wanted to call him out on the spot but I had no idea how others felt. I decided to bide my time.

A month later during the intra-squad competition, I was his opposition in the second round. I don’t believe I ever prepared for any exam as fiercely as I did for this debate and I whipped his ass. His overconfidence betrayed him. Two weeks later, he resigned from the team and the club

Vengeance is never sweet. My anger lost us one of the finest debaters that ever competed for Penn State.”

That entry brought to mind another story.

“I overheard the sergeant in my tank team use the word “Dago” when he heard we were getting a replacement whose name was Patterna. I called him aside and asked what he meant by the word. His answer was, “Where I come from, all Italians are either wop of dagos.”

I said, “On this team Italians are Italian like English are not Johnny Bulls or Russians, Ruskis. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

I put away the journal but let my mind reminisce about an earlier year. Up popped a picture of beautiful, animated Betsy, my first adult love.

For eight months of our senior year at State, we were inseparable. We had a plan worked out for our lives. I was so loved, so wanted and so needed. I woke up each morning on the virtual Cloud 9

Then the dream went poof, as in a cloud of smoke, when she said that she would not marry me because I was about to be a participant in shooting war.

I hadn’t dated a woman from that day, through the end of the school year, my entire time of active service as a marine until I was in rehab. I guess I was ripe for a relationship when Gloria wanted someone on her rebound.

Three evenings after the Beethoven concert, the Canadian Brass was giving a special concert. Mike decided to see if he could get a ticket. Millie found one that was in the back of the second balcony where the acoustics were fine but the musicians were viable as a group not as individuals.

At intermission, he was surprised to see Anne walking from the drink table in the balcony.

“Hello Ms. Waleski.”

“Oh. Hello. It’s Michael, if I remember.”

“It is. I thought you might have been end season ticket holder in the orchestra seating.”

“I do for the Symphony but not for guest appearances.”

Mike asked, “Are you enjoying this concert?”

“Yes. I wasn’t sure about coming but I thought it might be a change.”

Mike agreed. “That’s why I decided to come. I’m also looking forward to next week’s concert of the Schubert and Faure compositions.”

The bell sounded as a reminder to head for their seats. As they began walking, Mike asked, “I would like to invite you to join me for a light supper, if you are free later.”

She was shaking her head to refuse, and then remembered the last time she went back to her cold apartment. “That would be nice, but it must be Dutch treat. There is a small café two blocks from here where we usually have a bite after concerts.”

He was wondering who the other part of us was. “Shall we meet out front after the performance?”

Mike steered them to a small table, not the round table. During the light repast, they exchanged information about their current situations, upcoming concerts and other art scenes in the greater San Diego area.

Anne wanted to know about his injury but decided that subject could wait. “What are your plans after being discharged?”

“Believe it or not, I am considering a career in medicine. I’ve been doing some research into nursing, physical therapy or occupational therapy?”

Anne was beaming. “Hospitals could use more male nurses and therapists. How did you come to consider these choices?”

Mike looked at his watch.

“That’s a long story which involves telling you about my early life.”

“That could be interesting.” She smiled. “I might even learn some secrets and I love secrets.”

He chortled. “I’m not into telling secrets about my life but I would be willing to share a few if you are willing to reciprocate.”

Mike could see doubt racing across her face for a few seconds. She seemed to resolve her doubts. "It's a deal but you go first."

To her, "There is something about Michel that makes me want to know more. He sounds like a real gentleman, not my idea of a marine. I can tell him enough to satisfy his curiosity."

She nodded affirmatively.

Mike felt that he had no choice except to tell her about his being the outstanding student that led to Sister Mary's charge.

When he paused at that point, she waited, and then said. "There's more."

"Yes, but the waiter is hovering. I think he wants to call it a day and we are holding him back."

She grabbed the check and called to the waiter with a credit card in hand. When Mike started to protest, she hushed him. "I need to hear the end of that story. We'll go to my place. I have my car."

"I'd like that but I'll miss the bus."

"I'll drive you to the hospital unless you object."

"Oh, no. In fact, that sounds great."

They sat at opposite ends of the sofa while Mike continued his tale. He quoted Sister Mary's words and told her of the raise from the priest after he reminded Mike of the good deed of Mike's looking after young unwashed Johnny.

That part of the story brought tears to Anne's eyes and again when he told her of his "Baba's" charge. He concluded with, "I was unaware of the influence on my life that the deep relationship with my grandmother would have. She sensed that my greatest chance for happiness would come from service to others."

"I'm sorry to bore you with all the details but I hope that helps you understand my motivation."

"Thank you, Michael. The details were very touching. I feel like I got to know some deep part of my new friend. I certainly have a clear picture of your motivation to serve others."

She looked at her watch, Mike felt sure that she would find an excuse to renege on her promise but was surprised by her suggestion.

"Michael. It's getting late and I have a very early shift in OR. How would you like to join me for dinner here? I can keep my promise over a glass of wine and dinner."

She could tell by his grin that he was about to say yes. She continued with, "At what time are you free to leave?"

"You choose. I can always skip the group therapy meeting."

Anne said, "I should be ready to leave by three. I can pick you up at the main entrance at three."

“I’ll be ready.”

When Anne dropped Mike at the hospital, she began fretting about her promise to share stories with Michael. To her, it was obvious that he was interested in her just as she was about him. Such intimate sharing often could lead to one saying more than was intended. “I am going to have to be very careful.”

When she returned to the apartment house, she parked in her assigned spot about twenty five feet from the front door. She had negotiated for that spot years ago when she worked three shifts at the hospital. Long walks in deserted parking lots at midnight could be extremely dangerous.

Even here, she remained in the car for a minute, scanning the area for sign of intruders.

By the time she was undressed, she was having second thoughts about her invitation “I should have suggested a restaurant

A marine who is invited to an apartment for dinner could easily make an assumption, but I am not ready for that. Dammit, if I had his phone number I could call it off.”

Standing at the curb, Mike was getting impatient. It was ten after three and no Anne. In fact, it was twenty after before she appeared.

“I’m sorry to be late, Michael. A friend needed to talk.”

She burned rubber with her fast start, causing Mike to wonder if she was someone who always ran late and had to play catch up.

At her apartment, she handed him a paring knife and a pron. “I presume you know how to peel potatoes. I thought we could get the pot roast started while we have some drinks and chat. How does that sound?”

“That sounds like a plan and I am pleased to do the potatoes.”

“How was your day, Anne?”

Anne put down her glass. “First, in some manner, I feel sorry that you feel the weight of the love of your grandmother, the sisters and the priest while I envy the kind of love that many of us never experience. As I see it, it is a blessing and a burden.”

“I was never that close to anyone. My mother was a very successful psychologist. Totally wrapped up in her profession, she focused on her clients and had minimum time for my nurture.

I had a series of nannies, only one of whom seemed devoted to me and my welfare. Unfortunately, her husband was moved to another city and Marian, naturally, went with him.”

My father is a high powered executive in a multinational corporation, works long hours and travels often on extended trips.



I used the verb was but in both cases, they are still deep into their professions.”

“No matter the expensive gifts they gave me or the travel experiences they provided, I was a hellion. That may be the reason I had so many nannies and, later, companions during my teen years.”

I was clumsy in my relationships with boys and a failure at making friends with girls my age.

I found solace in reading love stories and dreamed of the life portrayed in many of those novels.”

“I had no church related experience. My parents are agnostic, not interested in organized religion.

I don’t remember any teacher taking special interest in me although I was at or near the top of my classes. I was a bright and lonely child. ”

I must have built walls in order to protect myself from being hurt. I did not receive an invitation to the senior dance. My folks were too busy to attend my graduation, even though I gave the salutatorian address. There were no shouts, only a shrinking of hand claps as my name was called to receive my diploma.

Since I had no party invitation, I spent that evening going to a movie.”

My shrink says there is little doubt that those years created a sell around me, wariness about my personal relationships.

“It was during my freshman year at UC San Diego that I roomed with Sue James, a nursing student. Late night chats in the dark opened my eyes as I was discovering this young woman who knew what she wanted and why.

I had no idea where I was headed. I was in college because I was expected to be.”

“During the spring break of my senior year, I went to Mexico with all those college kids and, like them, got drunk. Screwed a couple of boys and had a lousy time. I wanted more in life”

“Sue was studying to be a nurse, a profession in which she could help persons overcome their physical problems and find their lives again.”

“That sounded good to me so I changed my curriculum. Hell, it was better than just drifting. Surprise. I found myself spending time with young women and a few men who were committed to a life of service and found joy in what they were pursuing.”

“It was the right choice for me. I haven’t had a moment of regret, no matter what problems I had to face.”

Mike refilled their glasses after Anne checked the roast and said “We have another half hour.”

Mike said, “Your enthusiasm makes me want to reconsider and choose nursing, even if it takes longer.”

“I wasn’t trying to sell you, Michael. I am sure you can find the same rewards working as a therapist. In surgery we make the first move, with our skills, to start patients on a path. The nurses in ICU or on any ward and the therapists have just as important a role. Their love and care for a patient may be more important than the work of the surgical team.”

Mike asked, “Are you implying that love and care are not attributes of the persons on surgical teams?”

“Oh, we care a great deal but we have no emotional or spiritual contact with the patient. In fact, emotion might become a hindrance. In some way, I moved toward surgery because I lack the touch that I saw in ward nurses that made their patients adore them. At least, that was my rationale and I never regretted the move.”

Mike was about to tread in dangerous waters with a personal question. Perhaps, sensing the tone of his voice, Anne said, “We should toss the salad. Want to give that a shot while I set the table.”

“Of course.” He decided that the opportunity would rise again.

The camaraderie at dinner was delightful. Anne told a few stories of the ambience during fairly routine surgeries, the kind of music some surgeons wanted to hear during the operation “The choices can run the gamut from heavy classical to light classical to easy listening or light rock.”

“Some surgeons like to have warm ups by the telling of off color jokes. Others want to go directly to work with no light conversation, no music, and no jokes. I work mostly with three surgeons, all of whom want light classical music in the background.”

She answered his questions about the courses of study for nurse’s training.”

He contributed a story of his teenage disastrous love affair and his hesitance about seeking sexual favors because of his religious training.”

Anne did not respond to those stories but changed the subject.

Mike reflected on her sudden switch of subjects. “I wonder what that’s about.”

They cleared the table as a team. The she rinsed and he loaded the dishwasher. After wards, she opened her laptop computer and asked him to sit next to her on the sofa

She Googled “Physical Therapists.”

“Physical therapist assistant's study programs focus on rehabilitation methods. Courses may include therapeutic exercises, physiology, medical terminology, healthcare law, human development and rehabilitation procedures. Curricula typically incorporate three clinical practicums in the final three semesters of study. Clinical experience may involve first aid training and lead to CPR certification.

Licensure or certification is required for physical therapist assistants in most states. Licensing requirements vary by state but generally include completion of a CAPTE-accredited physical therapy assistant program. Candidates typically must pass the National Physical Therapy Examination, administered by the Federation of State Boards of Physical Therapy.”

After reading the notes, Anne said. “I picked this article because it points a way for you to get your foot in the door. If you choose, you can continue working while you attend night or weekend course or online courses to get a doctorate. You can make about sixty grand a year as an assistant”

“Thanks, Anne. Are there extra requirements if one chose to work with children?”

“I presume some child psychology studies would be in order, but you would be working under the supervisor of a doctor. He or she might require some study while you are working. That’s just a guess. Why do you ask?”

Mike told her of his experience in the children’s ward. He finished with “I loved it and decided that I want to continue volunteering for as long as I can. I just discovered the kind of joy that my grandmother predicted.”

Anne had uncovered another layer of the essence of Michael. She decided to make a point of dropping into the children’s ward tomorrow afternoon to watch Michael reading.

She stowed her lap top and asked, “Do you like to play cards”

“I do and I like Cribbage and Acey Deucey.”

She grinned. “Cribbage it is. Now, let’s have dinner before I tan your hid t cribbage.”

Anne was an enthusiastic dice thrower. She talked to the dice, clearly enough to win two of three.

She decided at nine to drive Michael back to the hospital. “I have another early schedule in the morning.”

Mike thanked her for the dinner and the on- line research and promised to keep Anne informed about his thinking.

He was very much on her mind as she prepared for bed. “I have this gut feeling that I would like what I might find if he were really willing to talk about his plans for life and maybe a bit more history. I could use a friend like that.”

The following afternoon, Anne found the way to the children's ward. The section was rather small since it served only children of military families in the area.

She stood in the doorway watching two five year olds holding Michael's hand as they walked across the room. The group consisted of eleven children, five in wheel chairs and the rest taking seats on the floor.

Anne wondered what kind of story Michael would read for children ranging from four to eight... She got her answer when he began telling a story of youngsters going to school in Saudi Arabia, a story that had the children spell bound in seconds. They hung onto his every word, laughed aloud at something he said and then displayed long faces as his story continued.

She walked away, unnoticed and deep in thought. "Who would have guessed? I would not have equated the word Marine with what I just witnessed."

That evening she had a phone call from Michael. After extending his greeting, he asked "Will you be at the concert on Friday? If so, perhaps I can buy you supper after the concert."

"I am. I was going to call you to say that Sue's seat is available I'm not sure we should meet for supper."

She told herself that was foolish but then rationalized, "If we get even a bit too cozy, I will panic when he suggests a deeper relationship."

## Chapter 5.

Mike insisted on buying her a drink at intermission and then gently pressed her to join him for supper.

At supper, Mike thought a simple question might be a good beginning. “I’ve wanted to ask you about the kind of operations your work. Would you care to enlighten me a bit?”

Anne appreciated the easy opening for their first supper date.

“A common operating is called Anterior Cervical Discectomy. The neurosurgeon performs the operation on the neck to relieve pressure on one or more nerve roots, or on the spinal cord.

The doctor reaches the cervical spine through a small incision in the anterior that is the front of your neck. If only one disc is to be removed, it will typically be a small horizontal incision in the crease of the skin. A more extensive situation may require a slanted or longer incision.

The assistant surgeon or I may help the doctor to separate the soft tissues of the neck. The surgeon removes the intervertebral disc and bone spurs. The space left between the vertebrae may be left open or filled with a small piece of bone through spinal fusion. Each case is different. In time, the vertebrae may fuse or join together.”

My job as head of the team of nurses is to be sure no boo boos occurring at any time. I double check to ensure the presence of each piece of equipment that may be needed. I also rehearse the procedure with the other nurses prior to entering the OR.”

“Thanks, Anne. Does tension run high in the OR?”

“Things are rather calm in most instances, unless something unusual arises. A patient may be what I call a bleeder. When unexpected bleeding occurs, one can feel the tension until the bleeding ceases.”

Mike changed the subject. “A little bird told me that someone fitting your description was spying on me the other day.”

Anne blushed. “Guilty. I was impressed. Every child in that group seemed total absorbed with your story. I was thinking of the word spell bound.”

Mike laughed. “Thank you. If you had stayed, I would have been delighted to present my new harem.”

“You seemed so comfortable.”

“I know. That surprised me on the first day. Never thought I related well to children. Do you relate to children easily, Anne?”

She considered his question for a minute. Her mind said, “That is the type of question that leads to risky waters, Oh, hell, go with it, Anne.”

“I haven’t thought about that. I spend almost all my life with adults. I have no close friends who are married and therefore no direct exposure to children.”

“Do you plan to have children?”

Anne steeled herself before saying, “Like most women, I just assumed that children would be part of my life.”

“That answer was about your past thinking”

He was about to ask, “Is that a continuing assumption?” when he saw her body tense and her eyes darken.

“Am I pushing too hard, Anne?”

Her voice was tight as Anne said, “You have noticed that I have avoided any conversation about my past while you have gently hinted that more detail would be welcome. Am I right?”

He smiled. “You are and I didn’t press because I did not want to do anything that might cut off our friendship.”

“Thank you. It is just one more thing about you that makes me want to develop a continuing relationship.”

Mike like the sound of relationship instead of friendship.

Anne went on. “I guess I would be willing to share some secrets if you are. I am aware that people remain strangers until they are willing to open their hearts.”

Mike reached across the table to take her hand in his. “I’m sure you would like me to go first, as usual.”

She pulled her hand away and laughed. “That would make it easier for me but I will go first, if you want.”

He started. “As I said earlier, I had a lot of hang ups because of my religious training. Once I got past that problem and found myself being hotly pursued and conquered by a hot Catholic girl, I went all out. Like a lot of college kids, I was out of sight of my watchers and let my libido run freely.

That came to a halt in my senior year at Penn State when I fell I love with Betty. She was from a religious Presbyterian family. We did not sleep together for weeks after our first date. Betty wanted to be sure that I was a serious candidate for marriage before she agreed.

We were deeply in love, making plans for our future. It was during the week before receiving our diplomas that I told her that as a reservist was being called to active duty right after graduation. It was less than fifteen minutes after a marvelous session of making love.

I was holding her in my arms. I felt her body tense and then the tears falling on my cheek. Silence reigned for long minutes. She pulled away and rose from the bed and began to dress.

I got out of bed and went to her to ask what was happening. It took her a while until she composed herself.

“Mike, I am so sorry. I never made the connecting that your being in the reserve meant you might be activated to full time service. I couldn’t possibly be married to a fighting soldier or marine, worried during every moment of our time apart as to whether you would return wounded or even return.”

I was stunned. “Are you saying that we are done? You can’t. I know you love me and I certainly love you.”

“I must. Michael, I love you and probably always will but I will not marry you. As hard as it is for me, this is goodbye. I will come by sometime tomorrow to pick up my things. Now, kiss me so that I have that last memory.”

“Ten days later, I began active duty that quickly took me to Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Kuwait and then to this hospital.”

Anne said, “Wow. I can hardly believe that. I would be honored if my fiancé or husband were serving his country, scared as I might be. Oh, Michael.” The empathy in her voice was palpable.

“Michael, I need a stiffener. Would you join me with a brandy?”

Without waiting for his response she waved for the waiter and gave him the order.

Anne began her story after a couple of swigs.

“As you must have gathered, I have not been much of a hand at relationships with men but this was traumatic, to say the least.

Fifteen months ago I was arriving home after an emergency operation just before midnight. I had been called on behalf of a neurosurgeon that never operated without my presence in the OR

I dashed, still in my pajamas since I would be showering at the hospital and donning my greens.

On the return I was still in my pajamas when I got out of my car at five in the morning.

A very large male, wearing a mask, grabbed me and stuffed a cloth into my mouth. He tied my hands; tore off my p's and raped me in the bushes thirty feet from the apartment house."

Anne paused and took a breath. "If you don't mind, I'll skip the details but the bottom line is that I became pregnant and even the cleaning after the rape kit did not prevent the fertilizing of my ovaries."

I held no religious view about abortion but for some unexplainable reason, I did not want to cut short a life that was conceived even though I knew I could not raise the child"

The adoption agency found a wonderful couple who had been unable to give birth. They were very open with me.

I have a legal right to visit my child provided I do not try to claim my rights as the natural mother."

"I signed the agreement, telling them that I reserved the right to visit even although I never intended to do so."

"They email me a photo each month but I never open the attachment. I do save the emails in a separate directory

The birth and the giving away the baby put me in complete emotional turmoil. Although my gynecologist counseled against it, I chose to have that seemingly minor operation, tubal ligation that would make it impossible to have children in the future."

The tears were slowly escaping but she continued. "I have no idea how long it may be before I am healed emotionally. I continue my therapy. Doc says she believes I should begin dating again."

Mike handed her a handkerchief while she insisted on continuing.

"Even though I am aware that I am not at fault in any way, this sense of shame won't go away. It makes me feel like the words of that old saying, "soiled goods."



She tried to hold back the tears with a swig of brandy but to no avail. The tears burst from behind her eyelids. Mike was on his feet, pulling her to his breast and soothing her hair with one hand and reaching for a napkin to dry her tears with the other.

The waiter was nervously wringing his hands. The proprietor, sensing a drama that might disturb his other patrons, ordered the waiter to set two more brandies at the couple's table.

Mike, taking the suggestion, took a seat, pulled Anne to his lap and put the brandy glass to her lips. After two more sips, she had calmed a bit, eased off Mike's lap and returned to her seat.

Mike started to say something but she interrupted. "I know that is foolish thinking but the thought keeps popping into my head. Most times it is but a fleeting thought but saying the words broke through the logic. Thank you for the comfort of your arms."

"Anne, what does your counselor say when you talk about this?"

She encourages me to be open to offers of dates from men I have known for a time, such as a fellow employee or a neighbor.

I asked her about blind dates. She says only if I totally trust the one making the date for me. So far, I haven't had the courage to accept an offer other than a coffee conversation."

"Now, that you know my secret, let's talk about something else. Let's eat light. Then we could go home where I can whip you at a game of Cribbage and have some dessert. I have the day off tomorrow so I can stay up a bit longer than I have on our other dates."

"Wow, did I just say dates? I haven't thought about our times together as dates."

Mike reached for her hand. "Well, I don't have a name for our meeting but at the end of each, I keep hoping there will be another."

Mike reflected on his statement. Up to this point, he was hoping for some romantic times with this beautiful woman but her story made this relationship a whole new ball game.

Anne's smile was replaced with a slight frown and she immediately changed the subject. "Are you up to the challenge for Cribbage?"

"I am."

At her apartment, her mood was light and gay as they battled for the win and she teased him mercilessly when she swept him in the three game series.

As she put the game pieces away, she asked, “Do you want to hear the news? Radio station 680 has news in three minutes.”

“The first sound was not an announcer’s voice, but the first strains of a Benny Goodman recording of “You’d Be So Nice to Come Home To.”

Mike swept Anne into his arms for a dance. Her body stiffened but she did not try to pull away. He whispered in her ear. “It’s only a dance, Anne.”

She said nothing but her body stayed stiff. Mike could tell that she was an accomplished dance partner. He sang the words of the refrain as he remembered them or made up his own as needed.

“You’d be so nice to come home to.  
You’d be so nice by the fire

While that breeze on high sings a lullaby  
you’d be all my heart could desire  
under the stars *something, something*  
Under an August moon shining above

You’d be so nice, you’d be *a prize*  
to come home to and love”

Anne could help laughing when he *sang prize instead of paradise.*

Ann’s body relaxed a bit but resisted Mike’s attempt to pull her closer. When the number came to a close, she started to separate but Mike held her in place.

“Mike, what are you doing?”

“I like the feel of our body in my arms, Anne. I would love to have you dance this next number with me.”

“Oh, all right.”

Mike’s embrace strengthened so that she was in tight. Her attempt to pull away was futile. She gave in and let her body melt into his. When the dance was finished, Mike continued to hold her close. She asked, “Why did you pull me so close when I was trying to resist?”

“Because I wanted you close. I love the feel of your hair under my chin and the smell of the fragrance from behind your ear I knew I would love the feel of our body melted into mine and I did.”

“Michael, are you trying to seduce me?”

“Not yet, although there may be a time.”

“I’m not sure that I understand. In our times together you never even hinted. ‘Michael, I’ve never known a guy who failed to make a pass after two or three dates. Why haven’t you?’”

“I believe that your body language and avoidance of certain topics were telling me that you weren’t ready. I couldn’t understand why a beautiful woman like you went to concerts alone but I was willing to wait until you would reveal yourself.”

“I certainly did that at supper.”

“Yes and you did give me a picture of the woman that was but I believe that your future has a different look.”

“How can you say that?”

“Two clues emerged during our conversations, One was your words describing a disappointment during spring break when you said “I wanted more than getting drunk and screwed” The other was your admiration of Sue’s choice of nursing and then choosing the same vocation. I do not believe that you want to stay behind an emotional wall. At some point, there will be a breakthrough.”

“I wish I could believe that. If you are implying a marriage or even an affair, you’re wrong. Fear grabs my gut whenever I think of having sex.”

“Anne, I may be wrong but I believe you will change.”

“That sounds like you are willing to sleep with me.”

“Yes, when you are ready and give me the signal.”

“You do mean it, don’t you, Michael?”

“I do. You need only tell me when.”

Anne slipped out of his embrace “That is a giant step and looks risky to me. I need to sleep on that. If I say not yet, will that spoil our friendship?”

“No way”

“Good. You are the best thing that has happened to me in ages. If you are free to come to dinner on Friday evening, I will pick you up about four thirty.”

I’m available. It’s a date.”

She smiled when he stressed the last word. They never got around to the promised dessert that evening.

Anne had another sleepless night. Her thoughts were battling each other. She had a friend, a good friend, one she wanted around. On the other hand, she was on notice that he was open to a sexual relationship “Is it possible to have one without the other?”

“Even if I agreed, my fears and tension would make a mess of that.”

Mike was wondering if he was doing the right thing. “Everything about her makes me hungry for sex but is there chance that the experience may make her even more fearful. As much as I want this, I need to tread carefully. It might be better to call off our date.”

He called Dr. Jane, his psychologist, the next morning. She said, “I can squeeze you in at noon for a half hour.”

Mike got right to the point. He described his meeting Anne and inveigling her into a date. “She is gorgeous, the kind of woman I dreamed of taking to bed. She played it cool but I continued my pursuit. I felt sure she was attracted to me so I pressed. During an intimate conversation she told me she had been raped many months prior.”

“Her counselor suggests she start dating again but she has not done so. She feels sure that she will panic when the reality of sex is at hand.

Doc, I feel sure that with patience I can become her first lover again but I’m in a quandary. As you know, it is my nature to want to help but in this case I can’t separate my desire to sleep with Anne and my drive to help.

I’m also afraid that I may cause her some kind of harm.”

Jane asked for and got more detail

“Mike, knowing you, I am sure you will not act in any way that will harm Anne. You’re the kindest and most sensitive man I have ever met.

It is not wrong for you to pursue personal satisfaction. If you really feel that she is willing to overcome her fears, I believe you have the strength to endure the short term consequences. You know what I mean.

For instance, if she indicates a desire for sex with you and panics at the last moment, you will overcome your strong desire to complete the joining.

You're my patient and I want what is best for you. Play it with your heart Mike and you will not go wrong. I am certain you are up to the challenge"

When she drove up on Friday, Anne noticed his small tote bag. "I see you remembered to bring a swim suit."

He smiled. "And a tee shirt. I don't want to shock you or others at pool side with my scars.

Anne said, "Damn, in all our conversations, I never thought about the aftermath of your war experience. I am so sorry."

"It's history, Anne. I never asked for or got pity but I received a lot of love from my caregivers."

She flashed him a warm smile.

They were the only occupants of the pool this late afternoon. Anne was a fierce competitor in the splashing contest. She challenged Michael to a fifty meter sprint and won. Her dives were almost perfect while Mike created large spouts around his entries.

"Lordy she is beautiful." He said to himself as she posed on the diving board before doing perfect back flip.

She handed him the towel dry her back after she had done the same for him.

Mike thought, "I like the vibes. I hope I am reading them correctly."

They dressed in shorts as planned for the warm evening. Mike, upon watching her come into the living room, had to admire the flesh of her breast that topped the halter of her outfit.

He rose from his chair and boldly opened his arms into which she moved without hesitation. She laughed when their bodies melted. "I guess the short shorts worked. "

"They do, almost as well as what the halter top invites. That new eau de Cologne is enchanting and sexy."

Within a few moments, Mike sensed her body tightening. He brushed her hair and moved his hand to caress her bare back. That seemed only to make her body even tauter.

She laid her head on his chest and within a moment he felt her tears. “Michael, I am so sorry. I want your arms around me. I was sure I was ready. It all vanished when the reality of your body met mine. Will you just hold me?”

“Of course.” He lifted her and sat on the sofa, she in his lap. His heart went out to her as he sensed the struggle that she was enduring. He smoothed her hair, rubbed her arm and kissed her forehead. He thought he heard a faint sigh.

It was many minutes later when Anne slipped off his lap and went to fetch a light robe, feeling like it was unfair to have her almost nude body snuggled into his with no sexual promise in the office.

In those minutes while holding Anne, Mike knew he had to divert his mind to something beyond this lovely body in his arms. He found himself listening to Sister Mary’s voice, “Stay sensitive so that you may be of assistance to one who needs your help.”

Mike rose and went to change from shorts to slacks, tee shirt to a sports shirt. He found Anne in the kitchen rinsing vegetable, unaware of his presence. He walked up to her, slipped his arms around her waist and kissed the top of her head.

“Oh, Michael, how can you be so kind after the shabby way I treated you.”

“Anne, we both knew that could happen. In my mind it’s a slight stumble on life’s path. There was nothing shabby about a woman who dared to face her fear. I applaud your courage.”

“That’s kind of you, Michael, but I know a bit about men’s bodies and emotional stress.”

“Thanks for that. I said I could handle such a situation because you are honest about your willingness to face what it takes.”

“Now, let me help with dinner preparations.”

They played gin rummy and it was Mike’s night to gloat. They discussed plans for the next day since Anne was off for the weekend.

She was surprised and pleased when Mike told her that he had included a change of clothes in his tote bag because he planned to stay overnight. He said, “I thought we might be sleeping in the same bed but I will be happy to sleep on the sofa.”

Mike was cooking bacon and eggs. The aroma brought a sleepy head Anne out of bed.

They left early for a full day at the San Diego Zoo and Safari Park and Sea World. Two very tired day tourists brought home some Chinese takeout and hit the hay early.

Mike heard a scream. He recognized Anne's voice, bounced off the sofa and dashed for her bedroom. She was yelling, "No. No. Not again. No. No. Get off me."

He hit the on switch that lit the lamp on the right side of her bed. Anne's hands were slightly bent at the elbow, her hands shaped like claws, ready to scratch to pluck the eyes of her assailant.

"Anne. Wake up. This is Michael. You're having a nightmare."

She squinted and looked about her. Her expression was one of bewilderment. "Did you catch him, Michael?"

Mike took her hands into his and sat down on the bed at her side. "There was no one to catch, Anne. You were having a bad dream."

"Are you sure? It was the same man. I would know him even here in the linen room. He caught me just outside and forced me into this closet."

Mike pulled her into sitting position and embraced her. She came willing but was still quivering. She was drenched in perspiration, her tee shirt plastered to her body.

It was several minutes before the shaking stopped. It was only then that she acknowledged the nightmare but resisted any movement by Michael that would separate them.

Mike said softly, "A hot shower would help you relax and cleanse you sweaty body."

She ran her hand over her tee shirt. "Yikes. I must smell to high heaven. You're right. She looked down and laughed. "Now, you've seen the penultimate of my physical secrets."

He smiled. "They are lovely."

"Oh, you. This is not the time for humor. I can't let you out of my sight but I'm not ready to share a shower."

"Stay. I'll be right back."

A minute later, he returned with a large beach towel. “Now, you can stand behind this shield and undress. I promise not to peek.”

Mike held up the towel while she shucked her very damp shirt and panties the followed her to the shower as she opened the sheer door, she said, “This is silly. At some point in the near future, you will have more than a view. That I promise, although I can’t say when. Put dons that damn shield.”

Mike gave her a mischievous grin, just before she closed the door.

He decided to offer a bit of royal treatment. He took the towel to the kitchen and turned on the oven to heat the towel. He was walking back when she called, “Michael, I need that towel.”

“One moment, Lady Godiva.”

She burst into laughter, opened the door and took three steps to the waiting warm towel. “Oh, Lordy you are a dream boat. Thank you. I feel like a queen.”

She then said, “Why don’t you shower and then join me. I will not be going to sleep for a while and I need you close until I do.”

She was sitting in the slipper chair when he entered. She had pulled a vanity bench alongside her chair and pointed to it. She took his hand. “I need you close so I can hold onto you. I was practicing to close my eyes while you were in the shower. The image of that monster kept intruding each time.”

“With you near, I can close my eyes and envision what I want. I tried just as you entered and it worked.”

Mike waited. He felt certain she had a solution and would get around to it. A minute later she offered her idea.

“Michael, I want you to sleep in my bed while I make up a bed of my extra blankets and sleep on the floor next to the bed.”

Mike said, “I can’t let you do that.”

“Why not? The alternative is the two of us in the same bed. I need you close. That is asking too much of you.”

Mike looked at his watch. “Do you realize that it is only mid night, a long time until morning? How sleepy are you?”

“Not at all. In fact, feeling the way I do, sleep may never arrive.”



Mike asked, “Why don’t we go the living room? Talk to me about some of the reactions you’ve had. We will sit close and even hold hands. Fatigue will eventually descend on our bodies.”

“Okay, I’m willing as long as you are close enough to touch.”

“One of my worst reactions was the guilt feeling about being “soiled goods. We talked about that. I kept asking myself how I might have avoided the attack.”

“I also had a sense of contamination I felt unclean and assumed that other others felt the same way about me”.

“In the beginning, I was suspicious in my personal relationships, and avoid social contacts even with friends.

“I was angry. My counselor told me that my angry about being violated probably was the healthiest reaction, because it turns the pain outward instead of inward.”

“When are you most fearful, Anne?”

“Unless I am with someone I trust, I run scared anyplace but the OR. When alone, even the hallways of the hospital are frightening.”

“That’s enough tonight, Michael. Thank you for wanting to know how I feel and what affects me. Almost from the beginning I had this sense of being able to trust you. I appreciate the fact that you never judge me.”

Anne decided to read her novel. Mike thought that was a good idea, sure that sleep would come more quickly. It was one fifteen when Anne dropped her book and her head fell to one side.

Mike lifted her and moved to her bedroom. As he placed her in bed, she took his hand, “This is nice, Michael.” She was back to sleep in seconds.

He felt that he could not leave He was very aware that he was lying next to a very fragile woman at this moment

It was already light when Anne opened her eyes. For a split moment, she was confused. There was a man in her bed. She was about to scream but covered her mouth as she realized this was Michael. In a moment, she grasped the meaning. In her fear, she would not let Michael leave her alone.

“Poor Michael. I am treating him terribly.”

She eased out of bed, slipped on a robe and headed for the bathroom. Twenty minutes later, she was pouring the orange juice when she sensed his presence in the kitchen.

Mike asked, "Did you sleep well?"

She turned and flashed him a smile. "With your presence and help, I slept like a baby. How about you?"

"I had three or four solid hours once I knew you been sound asleep."

"Thank you. The last thing I remembered was reading my novel. I assume you carried me to bed."

"I did and you hardly stirred until I put you down."

"Thank you. You seem to be on hand when I am in crisis. Drink your juice and have some coffee while I prepare breakfast."

As they finished breakfast, Mike said, "Anne I did some research on the subject. I know you have been faithfully attending counseling sessions Is there anything that; you hold back from you psychologist?"

I don't think so. Have you noticed something else we ought to discuss?"

"I'm not sure. Would you mind if I ticked of some subjects to look at?"

"Go for it. I trust you to be there if something sets me off."

"Anxiety."

"Very much on our agenda in personal and in group therapy. I don't think any more discussion will help on that subject."

"Sense of helplessness."

"Doc and I agree that is not my problem."

"Hyper vigilance."

"Everyone in our group admits to that".

"Ability to maintain previously close relationships."

"I never mentioned that but I am having some problems with that. It doesn't seem to bother me but maybe it does hurt my friends."

"Depression or constant fear"

“We beat the subject of depression to death n group meetings. I seem to have some rare moments.”

“Panic attacks.”

“In a general way, I haven’t experienced attacks except when I experience a flashback.”

“I do have less of a feeling of safety and as you know wariness about new relationships. I also know that in many ways I have fewer problems than most of my group membrs.Doc also tells me that is so.”

## Chapter 6.

Aft breakfast, they decided to picnic in the park and have a swim when they returned.

They spread the sheet in the shade of a great oak tree on the edge of the meadow. After her first bite, Anne put down her sandwich and reached for a devilled egg. “Have you done any more research regarding your future?”

Mike answered. “Yes, I just received an email on my I-phone. I am going to attend a special school in Los Angeles. With my science studies, I have been assured that I can qualify to take my boards, with two years.”

Anne’s face darkened and she frowned. “Do you have to go to Los Angles? It seems so far away.”

“The school is highly regarded and willing to accept some of my under grad studies to help me graduate within two years.”

Anne said, “I was hoping you would find a school here.”

“Me, too. That would be nice but this seems best for my career. By the way, I asked Doc to discharge me. Scholl begins in nine days.”

The conversation put a pall on the rest of their picnic time.

Except for two teenagers, Mike and Anne were the only swimmers. Anne did not remove her shirt jacket until the kids left. As she removed the jacket and headed for the diving board, Mike was very aware of that same bikini that set him off the first time.

He dove into the pool to cool off. That didn’t do much good. She dove deep and swam underwater, coming up extremely close to Mike, so that he was staring at her beautiful breast. She put her arms around his neck and pulled him under water and swan away.

She laughed as he emerged, sputtering and spitting water. The chase was on until she let herself be cornered, her body merged with his.

He looked into her eyes to discover the meaning of her playfulness. He read her correctly.

“Michael, after your news at the picnic, I realize this is the time. I must try. No matter if I resist, I am asking you not to give up. You are the only one I trust to break this fear.”

He nodded in understanding.

She was holding his hand on the walk to the apartment. She was saying, “Other than the flirting, I’m not sure how we should proceed.

He said, “Let’s start with some of that California’s fine Chardonnay as a prelude”.

After they toasted each other, Anne said, “You do realize that I might have to call a pause or even a halt. How will that affect you?”

“I can handle that. I promise that I will not hurt you or press you, but I’m betting that will not be tested tonight. First, let’s shed these wet suits for shorts.”

Five minutes later, they met in living room.

“We can go gently and let it sneak up on us. Put down your glass and come sit on my lap.” He chuckled. “We can make out just like our high school days.”

Anne joined in the game, laughing as she resisted his hand moving too high up her thigh. She said, “Just like every kid that ever got me on his lap.”

She thought he was about to say something when she felt his hand sliding under her blouse and cupping her braless breast. “Wow that was slick. Those kids were never that fast but I always encouraged that move. It never took long to get me excited in those days but that was as far as I went.”

She loved the teasing way he kept her in the game of making out, teenage fashion. She felt her body tense as his hand moved to unbutton her blouse “Mike has slyly moved from a kid’s game.”

She steeled herself to accept his undressing her but then found herself loving his admiring appreciation of her nude body. The admiration in that look melted away the last of the tension.

She began teasing Michael as she slowly removed his shorts. “This is fun and imaginative, Michael.”

At the moment she felt his arms lifting her, the old fear returned. She began shivering. Her first thought was “That’s enough.” She was about to say so when his lips found hers and moved in a caress that turned her fear into desire.

She could not help responding to that passionate kiss. She was lost in the moment and responded with a kiss that blatantly was asking him to love her in every way possible.

She had been prepared to feel some pain but determined to endure whatever. She was not about to disappoint this caring lover.

That thought, however, was interrupted with a flashback to the night when she was attacked. She jerked out of Mike's arms and slithered to the far side of the king size bed. Her arms up to defend herself.

Mike rolled off the bed and hastened to go around to her side. "Anne, its Michael. You're safe."

She was shaking and wide eyed but was recovering. "Oh, Michel, it seemed so real for that moment. I am so sorry." She slid to her left, making room for Mike to lie with her.

He was about to ask if she wanted to continue when she said, "Hold me tight, so I can feel your whole presence. I want to go on for your sake as well as mine.

She lay in his embrace, slowly relaxing and enjoying the ministrations of Michael's caresses

She became so lost in the moment that she wasn't aware of the pause until Michael said, "Anne, I want to be sure you experience no pain."

She realized his concern. She reached into the cabinet at the sided of the bed and handed Michael the tube of KY cream. His loving concern for her comfort brought utter joy to her heart and a determination to be a truly active participant, which she was until they both lay exhausted.

Anne would not release him. Her joyful tears rolled onto his chest and down to the sheet beneath. Her happiness was complete. Michael was her hero and she was not about to let him go.

To herself, "Why did Iwai so long to experience such joy with Michael?"

It was only when sleep overtook Anne, and her body slipped away, that he was able to rise.

Mike, showered, pulled on his shorts and tee shirt and went to the kitchen to prepare a light dinner. He finished putting together a salad and was reaching up for some herbs when he felt her arms encircling his waist and her head coming to rest on his back.

She pulled back one arm, slipped it under his shirt and softly stroked his long scar.

Mike loved her soft hands on his scar... He turned slowly so as not to interrupt her touching. "That's nice. May I reciprocate?"

"I'd love it and a kiss would be welcome."

Eventually, she asked, "What can I do to help?"

"I was planning shrimp cocktail and some shrimp fired rice."

"What about canapés with or drinks?"

"I have some oysters open."

She snuggled closer, saying, "Wow."

She opened the refrigerator and bent over to retrieve the shrimp. When she closed the door and turned, she saw Michael's grin of appreciation.

She blushed "Ooh. I forgot that your shirt would reveal so much when I leaned over. Anyhow, fanny pats are welcome."

"This was a new Anne, one who was making light fun with sexual innuendo.

The brief scene was heartwarming to Mike. He knew now that Anne would be welcoming a reprise of the earlier performance.

Mike managed to get some revenge at Cribbage and taught Anne how to play Acey Deucey, a nay game which he learned from another patient in the hospital.

Anne said, "There's a hot movie on HBO. Would you like to watch it? By the way, you are staying the night, I hope."

"If you wish."

On the sofa, Anne snuggled under Mike's right arm, placing her head to rest on his chest. The movie was X-rated and had its effect on the viewers. When she pulled his fingers to cover her breast, Mike moved his hand slowly up her thigh meeting the kind of resistance that encouraged not discouraged.

It was only about a third of the way into the movie when Anne said, "We can watch this some other time."

She giggled. "Your bed or mine?"

He laughed and lifted her into his arms. "Your bed has more room."

She chortled. “Good. I can make you chase me. That should be fun.”

“That’s the idea. Sex should be both, fun and serious.’

The room was filled with laughter and laughter as they explored each other and found the body places that excited their partner. Two happy but out of wind lovers ended up locked onto each other.

Anne rolled Mike on to his back and lay atop. “Michael, there is no way for you to really understand what miracle you have wrought. This afternoon was beyond my imagination because you to me to the edge of Nirvana and held me there, but this was the perfection. I can’t remember if I ever had such a fulfilling ending.”

“Even greater than that is the way I feel right now. I feel like a butterfly that has emerged from her cocoon.



## Chapter 7

Anne wasn't due at the hospital until ten on Monday morning. Mike prepared the breakfast while Anne did her hair. As she sat down and reached for her juice, she asked, "When will you be discharged?"

"I'm guessing the day after tomorrow. That gives me a couple of days before I leave for LA."

"That means you need a place to stay. I hope you accept my invite to stay with me. That king size bed of mine will be honored to support your body for a few nights."

Anne saw a bit of hesitation and rushed to say, "Please say yes. Who knows where life will take us? If this is goodbye, I need at least a couple of days to do so."

"I will, Anne, but I hope we can stay in touch. And see each other."

She nodded, unwilling to trust her voice. Anne was sure that this was good bye. Michael was the angel who came for the healing but had a mission that included serving others.

On the drive to work, she thought more about the impossibility of a future with Michael. "I've known from the beginning that this was an interim thing in our lives. I just haven't given much thought to our eventual separation."

"Michael loves and wants children, something I can't provide. We start the next part of our lives, a hundred and twenty miles apart, weeks or months separating us. Michael will seek or be sought by women. He is like a magnet for women. I've seen women eying him at the concert or at supper."

She had much to discuss with her counselor during their five o'clock session this afternoon.

Doc listened as Anne discussed her thoughts about Michael's leaving. When Anne finished her soliloquy, Doc asked, "so what are your plans or your thinking?"

"I'm struggling, asking myself if I'm in love or just grateful. I believe I have to let Michael go. He deserves to find a love who will be the mother to his children."

"What will you do for your own health?"

“I guess I need to take your suggestion to start dating again. One problem will be finding another man like Michael.”

“You may be surprised. I was two years older than you are when love found me. You must provide the opportunity and find ways to give of yourself. If you can emulate Michael, who admitted to you that he is happiest when serving, love will have a chance to find you. That I believe.”

Thanks, Doc.”

“You haven’t mentioned the word anxiety, today.”

“That’s interesting, isn’t it? I haven’t had a hint of anxiety or depression recently.”

“Good. Let’s talk in a month. Meantime, keep up with the group.”

Neither was hungry at dinner on the last evening of Mike’s stay. There was very little teasing as they prepared for bed but their merging was intense and deep felt, dampened by tears. Both knew that this was goodbye.

The ride to the train station was mostly silent except for Michael’s reminder that he was only as far as his I-phone in case of an emergency and “I expect an email at least once a month Remember, I am still your friend no matter the miles that separate us.”

Anne’s tears were unstoppable as she watched his long strides to the terminal.

## Chapter 8.

That night, Anne poured herself into her novel. She wanted to lose herself in a story and keep loneliness at bay. Perhaps it was a mistake to have Michael stay with her those last days.

She was awakened by some strange noise outside her window. She reached to awaken Michael and then panicked when she remembered that she was alone.

She reached for the mace spray that had been her nightly companion and guardian for months. She lay awake, listening for any sign of movement outside. She thought she heard another sound of someone moving, but she wasn't sure. "There, I heard it. That's the sound of breaking glass."

Anne picked up her cell phone and dialed 911. When she hung up the phone, she sighed with relief. The officers would be on the scene within four minutes. She started watching the face of her alarm clock.

Seventeen minutes later she heard the sound of loud voices and waving light rays seeping in around her draperies. A minute later all was silent. She could not bring herself to rise and peek out the window.

Ten minutes later she had a call from the police. "Thank you for alerting us through 911. We apprehended two teenagers who had broken into an apartment and stolen some electronic gear loose cash. The unit was unoccupied this evening. I think you can rest easy."

The policeman may have thought so but Anne was not comfortable. She knew that sleep would not come quickly. It was too late too late for a sleeping pill, given her early work load.

"I'll drink some really strong coffee and take one of my uppers when I get to work."

Images of the many conversations with Michael flitted across her mind, until her brain focused only on one. She recalled that it was one of one of the earliest. She remembered the thrust even though not the exact words. "Found my greatest happiness when I was serving others."

Her mind flashed to the scene of his story telling to the youngsters in the children's ward. It was the last thing she recalled when she awakened in the morning.

Her supervisor greeted her in the cloak room. "Anne, pardon the expression .you need to sit this one out. You look completely done in."

“I know, boss. I had a horrible night. Our apartment complex was the target of some burglars. I heard them and called 911.”

“Go. Get a two hour nap if you can. I’ll explain to the surgeon when I stand in for you.”

During the two hours or so on the Southern Pacific rail ride to Los Angeles, Mike couldn’t get Anne off his mind. He was feeling sorry for the short notice about his leaving although both were aware that it could happen this way.

He knew that he had been of some help to Anne but wondered if he would have been of greater help if he weren’t leaving at this time.

He dismissed the thought. “I have to take advantage of this opportunity to develop my future.”

He had been careful to listen and respond and hoped that she never thought he was preaching.

He began reading again the literature about his next educational step.

Three hours later he was settled in a nice one bedroom apartment just north of Wilshire Boulevard about thirty blocks west of downtown Los Angeles.

The school was about ten blocks south, a nice walk. Wilshire also provided easy bus access and a convenient ride to the cultural and civic center.

He had a good feeling about himself. He was looking forward to his first day in class, opening with physiology.

He had a basic knowledge of physiology as the study of normal function within living creatures, covering a myriad of topics including organs, anatomy, cells, biological compounds and how they interact together to make life possible.

His course of study would be how the human body works through an organ-system approach, that is, collections of cells, tissues and organs, each of which have dedicated functions in the body.

His second class was a specialized physics class, centered on body mechanics. He knew he was going to enjoy the next couple of years of his life.

Mike realized that he was older by at least five years than the other students in his class. At noon of the first day, he walked into the large students' coffee and break room. He noticed that some students had brown bagged their lunch while others had Big Macs from the McDonalds down the street.

He hadn't thought about food when he left the apartment this morning. He noticed a snack machine with candy bars, another with soft drinks and another with an assortment of chips.

With a Coke and two candy bars in hand, he looked for a place to sit. Stella, a student in his physics class, waved, inviting him to join a round table with four students sitting around.

Mike smiled a greeting and moved to the table. Stella said, "I'm Stella. This is Marie, Phil and Josh. We remember your name after the instructor called on you."

Mike laughed. "I remember yours for the same reason, Stella."

She laughed. "You knew the answer but I gave the right answer to the wrong question."

When they quit laughing, Phil said, "You seem to have a good grasp of the material, Mike. We were wondering if you could spare an hour to help us."

"I would be happy to help. Are you asking about physic only?"

Marie said, "Any help I can get I any course would be welcome. I would be willing to pitch in some funds for a tutor."

Mike said, "Not for hire, but I have a suggestion. If we can find a common time, let's form a study group. We can all use help remembering all the parts of the body system and their functions and interrelationships."

Marie said, "I'd like to devise a fun game to help us with the memorization of part and functions."

Mike said, "Great idea. I never liked memorization studying. Working with a group will be self-serving as well."

The suggesting delighted the foursome. Stella said, "We can do the organizing and find a place to meet if you agree to be our leader. We only need to decide when."

The group decided on Wednesday evenings at the fairly large apartment shared by Stella and Marie, four blocks from the school. There were three additional students who joined the group. All were serious students and each benefitted from the sharing of information and the challenges that Mike created for them.

Marie Andreas, who was the only daughter of an investment broker, drove a Buick station wagon. She invited the original five to spend an afternoon at the Getty Museum as a break from their studies. Only Josh was unable to attend.

The afternoon was a great change and relaxing. Marie did a slight detour on the return, taking them to her home in West Los Angeles.

Her folks were pleased to meet them, served up drinks and ordered Chinese take-out.

Marie was an excellent driver and a good conversationalist. Stella and Phil were very good at making out in the darkness of the back seat

The next Sunday the same foursome spent the afternoon at the Norton Simon gallery in Pasadena.

Monday morning, Mike awakened too late to prepare a bag lunch. At noon he decided to catch the food wagon and have a couple of tacos. He was about to order when he heard a soft voice. "If you order four, we can eat lunch at the table in the park around the corner."

Mike chuckled and ordered two tacos for Marie. They strolled to the park, sat side by side and used a lot of napkins to keep the taco sauce off their clothing. Laughter and food jokes dominated the first part of the lunch period.

Mike took the wrappings to the disposal area. When he returned, Marie said, "This was nice. Lunch in the student room is like not leaving the class room. I understand the need but you never get a moment to yourself."

Mike smiled. "You noticed."

"I did and often wanted to drag you away in order to give you a respite."

"I don't mind, really."

"I know because you want to help others who are struggling. That's part of your charm. Never the less, let's make a deal Once a week, we walk to the Taco Wagon in order to give you a break and I promise not to talk shop."

Within two weeks, they were at the Taco Wagon twice a week. During the talk in the park on the second Wednesday, Marie said, "This is nice, Mike. We always seem to have so much to talk about. I hate eating alone, mostly because my mind travels to our studies."

"By the way, Stella and I were talking about you the other evening. She suggested I invite you to have dinner with us on Wednesdays. That saves you making the

trek to your apartment and cooking your dinner. It would save you time since the study group meets at our apartment.”

“Thank you. That’s kind of you. You’re right about saving me time.”

“No thanks are necessary. By the way, some of us are going to the movies this Friday. Are you available?”

“That sounds great. Friday evenings are my times to lay off studies.”

Mike wasn’t sure how it happened but he discovered that he was holding her hand on the walk back to school.

As they walked silently, Mike liked the feel of her hand in his. He found himself making an appraisal. “She is charming, warm, and full of little funny quips, a quick study with a beautiful smile on a beautiful face. I wonder why she dresses down in those loose fitting jeans and sweat shirts.”

After class on Thursday Marie asked, “Mike, would you like to come to dinner tomorrow before we go to the movies?”

“If it’s not too much trouble, the answer is yes.”

When he arrived for dinner on Friday, he discovered a table set for two. Marie noticed his expression. “Phil decided to take Stella to dinner out. They will meet us at the theater.”

Low side lights, candles glowing on the table and a nice Merlot greeted Mike. “I could get used to this. I wonder if she is dating anyone. She must be. I’ll bet she is a real looker under those baggy clothes she wears.”

They had roast beef, rare and a salad while they killed the bottle of Merlot. Somehow she had found some swing music from the 30’s and 40’s to play softly in the background.

Mike was totally relaxed and grateful for the change of pace. He insisted on helping Marie clear the table and stow the dirty dishes in the dish washer.

The gang was already present in the balcony when they arrived. The movie was so, so, thus making out became the activity of the evening.

It was somewhat embarrassing for Mike. He wasn’t a kid like most of his classmates and he and Marie was not an item so holding hands was the extent of their making out.

Mike was hoping for an invite to return to the apartment but Marie drove straight to his apartment and made it clear that she was not available.

At the end of their last class together on the following Friday, Marie asked Mike, “If you can make it on Saturday afternoon, I would like you to come to our place for a swim and diner. Bring your books, if you like, and need some study time. You might be able to help me a bit.”

Mike was more than agreeable but was surprised. He felt coolness at the end of the movie get together and had not been able to understand why.

“I’d like that, Marie but I will have to study. We can do that together.

Her face broke into a wide grin. “I’ll pick you up about one o’clock.”

Marie’s folks offered a warm welcome. Her dad invited Mike to join him on the patio for some conversation. “Marie says you were in the Marines. So was I. Vietnam. Were you I Kuwait?”

Within a minute, they were sharing memories. A half hour later, her dad said, “Before I leave, I want to thank you for all the help you have given Marie. I have no idea why she wants to be a Physical Therapist but she is determined and you seem to be making that possible.”

Mike listened but couldn’t find the words to respond. Dad smiled, “No words are necessary. Please feel free to come out any weekend.”

Twenty minutes later, her parents were hugging Marie and saying, “Come out next Saturday, Mike. We won’t be leaving until Sunday morning.”

Marie returned to the patio after a long conversation with her folks. She found Mike asleep in a chaise lounge.

“Poor Mike. I’m glad I invited him. He needed a change. He is wiped out from overwork, helping us and getting little sleep.”

She pulled up another chaise and mused on the subject of tis warm human being who had come into her life.

She was pulled out of her thoughts as Mike stirred.

He said, sheepishly, “I guess I needed that.”

She took his hand into hers. “I’m glad you slept. I was aware of the long hours you’ve been working and studying. In part, it’s what prompted this invitation.

Mike laughed. “I guess I found out that I’m not Superman.”

“In my eyes, you are the next thing. Now are you ready for that swim? You can change in the guest room.”



Ten minutes later Mike was practically gawking at a vision of loveliness in a pale yellow bikini. She was grinning.

“Why have you been hiding that beautiful body under those loose blouses and Wrangler jeans?”

“I don’t like to show off. You are the exception. I wanted to show off for you. By the way, there has been no way for you to hide your gorgeous body. You must be the envy of every guy at school.”

She reached for his hand. “Let’s have a swim and then talk.” She started to tug at his t-shirt. “I love your shirt but I need to see that chest and se of shoulders.”

He trapped he trapped her arms in his. “The remains of war wounds do not present a nice scene.”

Oh, Mike. I’ m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. You had no way of knowing. It’s history with only a scar to remind me.”

“Never the less, it can’t be fun swimming in that shirt. I expect I will be seeing bodies with greater wounds if I get to serve in a military hospital or with Doctors without Borders.”

Mike released her arms and let her remove his t-shirt. “Oh, Mike. I t is awful. I want to hear about it after our swim. She bent her head and placed a gentle kiss at the top of the long scar and took his hand and led him to the pool.

They raced and competed with dives. They splashed each other and wrestled as a prelude for what was to come. Just before leaving the pool, Mike pulled Marie into an embrace and locked his lips onto hers. The kiss was passionate and took forever, neither wanting to part.

“Oh, Mike. I knew it would be like this. She took his hand and led him out of the pool she picked up a large beach towel and began to pat down Mike’s body. “Your turn after I’m done.”

Their reciprocating actions were politely seductive, Mike removing her bra to “be sure I dry every spot.”

He lifted her into his arms. She giggled as she said “Better bring a towel to dry the remaining damp area.”

Lying in his arms on the double chaise lounge, “OH, Mike, that was awesome. I felt so cherished, so respected as a woman and then so fulfilled. I was so clumsy at the beginning but you were so patient Thank you.”

Mike said, "You have nothing for which to apologize. That was a beautiful experience. You did seem to be in a hurry."

Marie was silent for a couple of minutes. She sighed, "You ought to know that I wanted you to make love to me soon after I saw the loving way you treated all of us. You saw each of us as individuals to be accepted regardless of our ability or determination.

You took extra time with Sue, who is the slowest learner in the group. You were patient with Josh when he kept repeating the same question. You encouraged Phil to work his way through that leverage problem."

"By the way, I sensed that you and Josh have become good friends."

"We have. He is sharper than his class room performance might indicate. He is a shy person and lacks the confidence to put him on the spot. We spend some coffee time together when possible."

Marie said, "He seems to be doing better recently. You must be a real boost to his confidence."

She paused and snuggled closer. Mike caressed her back and shoulders. It was two minutes until Mike said, "We seem to have changed subjects. There is more that you want to say. Isn't there?"

He saw the beginning of a tear escaping her eye. "Mike, I was feeling a bit desperate to have someone make love to me as a woman, not an object to satisfy some self-centered male. The more I saw you in action, the more I wanted you. That's shameful."

"Oh, no, Marie. That is very human I have no sense of being used. In fact, I feel very happy that you took the lead. You have been very much on my mind since we spent time together at the Getty. In fact, on the way home, I wished that you and I were making out in the back seat instead of Phil and Stella."

Marie started to say something but was put off when Mike reached and pulled her body tight to his. She felt his face nestled in her hair and his hand continuing to caress her back. It was as soothing as a light massage that lulled her to sleep.

She had no idea how much time had passed when she began responding to his lips on hers and a tingling in her breast as his fingers were circling her rosebud.

Much later, she was massaging and working in the cream that Mike used to soften the scar tissue. "Mike, I am sure you have no idea how beautiful you make me feel. I feel like I'm glowing."

body.”

“Me, too, and now your magical fingers are also bringing healing to my

Marie laughed. “My first hands on PT practice. I love it. I wouldn’t mind doing this every day.”

Mike turned onto his back and pulled Marie to him. “Which one”

“Oh, you.” She offered her lips which were quickie absorbed by his.

After a shower, both decided that it was time to do some study. Silence prevailed for the next ninety minutes or so.

“Mike, are you about done?”

“I can take a break.”

“What would you like for dinner?”

“I was thinking pizza and salad. It’s my turn to treat. You and Stella have been feeding me for weeks.”

Marie was about to remind him that he paid for the tacos but realized that he had his reasoning. “That sounds great. I like cheese and pepperoni and mushrooms. How about you?”

“You just announced my favorite combo.”

An hour later, she was reaching for her third slice of pizza. Mike smiled and asked, “How do you eat like that and keep that figure?”

I adhere to my diet except for special occasions. I also work out every morning. If you stay overnight, you can work out with me in the morning.”

“I wasn’t planning for overnight but I appreciate the invite.”

“We have extra tooth brushes. We can throw your under clothes in the washer and dryer and I would love to have your warm nude body next to mine for the night.”

Mike burst into laughter. “That is a slick sales pitch to which I give a resounding okay.”

They lay on the double width chaise lounge, holding hands. The quarter moon was rising to the southeast the faint sound of jet liners departing LAX could be heard in the distance.

“Mike, if you feel comfortable about the subject, tell me about your wound and your life in the military.

He gave her a brief recap of his training, the tank rush to Kuwait and the surprise confrontation with the Iraqi soldier”

When he finished, she said, “Mike, there is nothing about you that says Marine. You exhibit caring and love for your fellow students and faculty members. You show such respect for all of us. I must have the wrong mental picture of a marine.”

“Marines are people, born and loved and cared for by mothers and friends. Some get more love than others.”

Mike told her of the influence of the parish priest and the expectations of Sister Mary for behavior toward others that offered the best chances for happiness.

He asked Marie, “How about you? I have seen you helping the slower of our class mates and your appreciation when I did something to help one of our groups. You have a soft heart for underdogs.”

“I can’t explain it. I’m not close to my folks. Neither has taken time to guide me. My nannies were nice but not motherly. None of the nuns took any special interest in me, although I was an exceptional student.

I haven’t ever felt lonely although I had no really close friend at any age. Our developing friendship over the last months surprised me since I had never come close to such warmth from another human being.”

“That is surprising. You must have been a beautiful child and a lovely teenager.”

“That may have been part of my problem. Like most teen girls I wanted and got sexy looking clothes and bras to display my boobs and long legs. In the tenth grade I was the envy of every girl and the object of affection of every boy’s desire to get into my panties.

When I refused, I became the object of derision by the boys and still could not relate to the girls.”

I talked my dad into transferring me to another private school where I dressed down to avoid similar situations. From one extreme to the other.”

Mike found himself squeezing her hand in sympathy. She finished with “When I gave in a few times I was disappointed by the attitude of the boys. For a modern girl of my age, I am truly an inexperienced lover who never knew the joy of sex until today.”

Mike realized how difficult it was for Marie to tell her story even if she felt the need to do so. He put his arm over her body and pulled her body to his, her head on his breast while the tears flowed.

The moon had raised high in the sky. Mike asked, "How about a swim?"

Marie rose, began stripping and saying, "Last one in is a monkey's uncle."

The both hit the water simultaneously and came up from underwater in each other's arms.

Sunday morning began with Mike learning a bit about yoga while Marie went through her routine. A ten lap swim followed by a teasing ten minute shower preceding breakfast.

Both hit the books for a couple of hours until lunch.

Lounging on the patio later, both shared stories of their youth, including some of the mistakes they made as teenagers. Mike told her of the time he was caught stealing cigarettes. She shared the story of taking her dad's Mercedes for a joy ride without permission and the subsequent grounding for two weeks. "I missed the graduation dance and the party held on graduation day."

Mike liked the way Marie was playing with his fingers. He was thinking about the surprising different weekend from the one he imagined when he accepted the invitation. He smiled inwardly as he relived the intimate love making and her openness about her sexuality. He was thinking, "I hope we have more times like this weekend."

His thoughts were interrupted by Marie's asking, "Would you like to come next weekend? I've had such a beautiful time with you and I hope we can do this again."

He took a moment before responding. Marie hurried on. "Dad and Mom will be leaving early Saturday evening. Dad said he would like to have a chat with you before he leaves."

"I'd love to come, but won't it be embarrassing to have your folks guessing or knowing that I will be spending the night?"

"There is nothing about which to be embarrassed. They will be expecting you to be with me. In fact, they will want to know all about this weekend when they arrive tonight."

Josh was extremely proud of his new friend, Mike. He wanted his family to meet Mike, so he invited him to his family dinner on the following Thursday evening.

Even before dinner, during cocktails, Mike could see some of the root causes for Josh's shyness. His dad was a business executive, a CEO. His mom was a full professor in the political science department at UCLA. Liz. His older sister was getting her PH.D. in Economics at Southern Cal.

Poor Josh never had a chance to offer an opinion during the entire political discussion throughout the drink period and the first part of dinner.

The three engaged Mike and offered friendly dispute to his ideas but hushed Josh's attempt to offer a thought.

Mike got the impression that Josh was always overlooked or disregarded while his parents seemed to be in awe of Liz's contributions.

Josh drove Mike home afterwards and told Mike that his family obviously enjoyed his visit and asked Josh to invite Mike again.

"Josh, do you ever have an opportunity to participate in their discussions?"

Mike could not see in the dark but he was sure that the silence meant that Josh's face was turning beet red.

Eventually, he said, "I'm used to that, Mike. Sometimes, I feel like an afterthought. Liz gets all their attention at home. I don't mind. I get my own way about most things and have enough money to meet my needs and no objection when I chose a community college instead of UCLA"

"I hope you don't think I'm out of line but do you think that is the reason you never volunteer an answer in class? You are aware that you usually know the answer, don't you?"

"I guess so."

"Come on, Josh. You do know the answers"

Josh was pulling into a parking spot outside Mike's apartment. Mike asked, "How about coming up for a cup of coffee, that is, if you feel like discussing my question and some implications?"

"I'd like that."

Sitting at Mike's dining room table, Mike asked, "Josh, have you talked with any counselor about your shyness?"

"No, I haven't."

"Have you thought about possible difficulties with communications when you start having to treat patients?"

"I have somewhat, but I figured if I know what to do and how to do it, the patient will get everything he or she needs."

"But you will have to ask questions and probe patients' feelings and some emotions in order to do the e right thing. Moreover, you will have to display openly confidence that you are professional ad known what you are doing."

John blushed. "I hadn't thought about that."

How do you think the other students see you?"

"All must think I am not tool bright. Some, I know for a fact, think I'm aloof and stuck up. If they only knew how I really feel. "

"How's that?"

"I don't see myself not on a par with most of the others."

"Any thoughts about changing?"

"I hear there are classes on shyness, especially clinics attached to the universities."

"Good, I know a little about the subject because I made it my business to learn since we became friends. I have a suggestion that I want you to think about while you make up your mind."

"Consider telling all the students in your classes that you're shy; you probably have not because people will label you and use it against you.

Since you haven't shared that info, most have drawn conclusions of their own and odds are they are less favorably impressed with you than if you had told them. I know because I have heard them talk."

"Your shyness is not always obvious since you often avoid eye contact with people. People, like you, are often mistaken as arrogant or aloof, even by fellow shy people, when nothing could be farther from the truth."

“I believe that by telling people you're shy, you're telling them that you want to be a part of what's going on and that it's OK if they notice you're a little uncomfortable. That may even help them feel more comfortable, too.”

Josh said, “That sounds risky but you have never led me down the wrong path before. “

“Josh, just give it some thought first. It might be a good idea to see a counselor sooner than later. I'm no expert, but I am a concerned friend. , If you choose a counselor and or a clinic, ask about joining a group like Toastmasters. I have two friends from my college days who swear that a year with Toastmasters was worth four years at the university.”

Josh expressed his thanks and hugged Mike. “Time to run. I still have some studying to do. Thanks again, buddy.”

On Saturday, Marie's parents, Charles and Frances, met Mike at the front door while Marie was parking the car. Charles said, “Welcome, Mike. Come into the den. May I offer you a cocktail?”

Mike answered, “White wine will be welcome.”

“Good. I have a nice Chardonnay”

When he was seated, Charles got right to the point. “What are your plans for the future, Mike?”

“Still a bit fuzzy, I'm sorry to say. I would like to spend some time working with an organization like Doctors without Borders and then find either a hospital or a private clinic where I can work with children who need my skills and care.”

“That sounds very noble.”

“I don't think of it as noble, but I believe I can find a happy as well as a fruitful life serving children who need a helping hand.”

“Thank you for responding, Mike. I'm appreciative. It may not be as specific but you have a direction and a plan for a good life. Marie has been telling us about the way you care about people and her belief that you are exceptionally bright, I wanted to explore the possibility of inviting you to shift directions by changing your course of study and entering our field of helping people plan financially for the future.”



“That’s very kind of you, sir but I am committed, even more so now that I am deep into my specific studies.”

“Well, I wish you good luck. Like any father, I might be asking about other matters but Marie has given us a pretty full picture. I simply ask you to be kind to our daughter and enjoy the weekend.”

Marie asked no questions about his conversation. She poured two Chardonnays and served up some cheese and crackers. “How does a cheese omelet for dinner sound?”

“Great. I’ve loved every bit of food you have prepared so far. I didn’t know beautiful women also knew how to cook.”

She chortled. “Mother did teach me some things. For instance, one way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.”

“You say one way. What is another?”

“I’ll be happy to demonstrate if you can delay dinner for an hour or so.”

Mike’s grin gave her the answer she wanted. Within two seconds she was on his lap, her hands inside his shirt and her lips seeking his.

After dinner, they moved to the double chaise lounge to pursue some serious discussion.

“Mike, Stella is moving out at the end of the semester which is soon. She and Phil are moving in together. Would you consider moving in with me? I know this sounds pretty brazen but I’m not asking in that way.

Finding the right apartment mate is a risky business. Aside from our romantic relationship, you are great company and utterly responsible. I think you know enough about me to see that I can claim the same attributes.”

“Sweetie, I can’t afford an increase in rent at this time.”

“I know and you know that I don’t need more money. If you choose not to say yes, I will keep the apartment until year end without a roommate. If you choose, you can pay the same amount you pay at present.”

“You do understand that week days, I am a bear for study. Since I take two more courses than you, I have longer class hours and loner study hours.”

I’m aware and I still think this would work out. Please give it some thought.”

“I will. I’ll let you know before the end of this visit.”

An hour later, Mike was toweling down Marie's gorgeous body after a skinny dip in the moonlight. Marie said, "Although the heated pool is great this December air is getting too cool for nightly swims. Let's head for the sofa."

Ensnared on the sofa, wrapped in a huge beach blanket, Mike said, "This is cozy but I need to ask a question. I've never asked about your plans after getting your license. I know you want to work with children."

"I'd like to spend some time in disaster areas or with DWB. After a year or so, I would like to find a job locally, get married and have some children."

"I know a man should never ask a woman her age but I will."

"Thirty. I am taken for younger and like any woman I never disabuse guesses of twenty five or younger."

"What did you study in college?"

"Science and math. Why the third degree"

Mike hesitated for a whole minute while he decided how to tell her his thinking. "It's only been a short time, Marie, but I believe I am falling in love with you. I also am aware that I will be graduating a year ahead of you."

Marie was agape. This is not where she expected the conversation to be headed. She rolled over and straddled Mike.

"Michael Polski, are you really falling in love with me? Yes, I see it in your eyes. Wow, I dreamt of this but never thought it would come to be." She smothered him with a thousand kisses before straightening up.

"I can guess the next question. You want to know if I would consider speeding up my studies so we can graduate together. Is that it?"

She didn't wait for his response. "The answer is yes. That also means that you must move in with me to support me. I will need a lot of help and discipline for the next three semesters and summer classes."

Once the emotional reactions were behind them, Maria had an alternative to put forth. "Mike, what I really want to do is work directly with patients. That only requires a degree of Physical Therapist Assistant. The core program we are taking is in preparation for getting the Assistant's license. If I stayed on that track, we can both take our exams at the same time, you as PT doctor and I as PTA."

"Are you sure?" There is a significant difference."

“I know but I can always pursue a doctorate at any time, either online or coming back here or any other quality institution.”

“All right. We have a few more weeks before the beginning of the new semester.”

“I hope that you will still plan on sharing the apartment with me.”

“Okay, as long as you understand that my schedule can present some problems”

Marie grinned. “Agreed. I promise that I can handle whatever, when necessary.”

Mike said, “I need another favor. Would you consider taking over the new study group for next semester. I can attend as a resource but since I am adding another class, organizing and providing the material can be burdensome.”

“Consider it done, honey. Wow. That sounds so nice. I’ll ask Josh to help. He wants to contribute more to the group.”

“By the way, Ama, the student from Palestine, wants to join the study group. I had coffee with her the other day and found her to be charming and dedicated.”

“She had started teaching an Arabic language class at the Community College to earn her way. I told her we were considering using our new skills to serve with DWB. That triggered a discussion of the needs for medical technicians in the Middle East. What do you think of the idea of my studying Arabic with Ama?”

“Terrific. You can teach me some of the basic terms, may be even make love to me in Arabic.”

Marie punched him in the arm as she giggled.

## Part II

### Chapter 9.      2 years later

Marie and Mike had done extensive research on the country of Jordan, the sole stable Arabic speaking nation in the area. Since the end of the Six Day War with Israel, Jordan had been accepting and providing for refugees who were forced from their homes in embattled nations.

For years they absorbed into citizenship Palestinian refugees. Now, the country was flooded with tens of thousands of refugees from Iraq and Gaza.

Mike was napping while Marie continued reading statistics on the population explosion she elbowed Mike, saying, “This is unlivable. A small refugee camp for a hundred families grew to over seventy five thousand people within a few years. Mike this is a bigger challenge than I imagined.”

Mike rubbed his eyes, hoping to come fully awake. “I think you will find more than one example, honey.”

The intercom buzzed. A soft female voice announced in three languages, that they were beginning the descent into Amman.

“Welcome to the MSF in Amman, Dr. and Mrs. Polski. I’m Jeanne Faure, head of Staff Relations for the hospital and our official welcoming committee.”

Mike said. “Nice to meet you and to say we are delighted to be welcomed. You, of course, know of our limited experience but we can assure you that we are ready to serve in any way that we can.”

“Come; meet Steffi, who will be your guide. Steffi is a volunteer from a small village in Central France. After you are settled in your quarters, Steffi will take you on a guided tour of the entire facility. She will also introduce you to your respective associates in the Physical Therapy department.”

“Steffi Champs, meet Dr. Michael Polski and Ms. Marie Andreas.”

An hour later, they began the tour and comments about the twelve year history of the hospital.

Steffi showed some slides while she presented a short commentary about the hospital.

“Doctors without Borders or Médecins Sans Frontières, that is, MSF, officially opened this surgery hospital in Amman to provide improved treatment to war-wounded patients from across the region.

MSF first established a specialized surgery project in Amman in 1986 to care for victims of the continued conflicts in Israel, Palestine and the Gaza Strip.

Recently, we enhanced the project by moving into another hospital structure and renovating it.

In this expanded facility, our highly trained and specialized medical teams from the region are able to improve the quality of care provided to our patients. Our highest patient numbers are currently from Kuwait and Iraq, as well as Jordan.

The people of these countries have already witnessed and experienced so much suffering. Our directors feel that the increasing tensions across this part of the world will bring greater demand for our services, especially for reconstructive surgery.”

Steffi said. “Here is our official brochure where you can read the quote from our head of mission.”

“This facility provides a comprehensive care package for its patients, which includes physiotherapy and psychosocial support alongside surgical interventions. Patients are also given accommodation, now available on site in the new location. They, also, receive financial travel assistance to reach the hospital and return home after or in between treatments, if their care plan is staggered over time. Patients often arrive with a family member to assist their care and recovery if needed.

We will need to grow by at least two hundred percent in the next twenty years.”

She put down her papers. “A few others are joining us for the tour. Please help yourselves to coffee or tea while I gather the others.”

“Michael.” It was a voice out of the past. “I can’t believe it.”

For a moment Marie was wondering who was this beautiful woman hugging her husband. Then, she remembered Mike’s story of Anne Waleski, the rape victim.

Mike was saying, “Anne, what a delightful surprise. Are you working with MSF?”

“I am. I arrived yesterday and was asked to report today.”

He pulled back from the hug. “Anne, meet my wife, Marie Andreas, a PTA. We just arrived a few hours ago.”

A brief silence ensued, but was quickly smoothed over when Anne surprised herself with a warm welcome. “I am delighted to meet you, Marie.

She said to herself, you are beautiful, not that I expected less for Michael.”

Marie said, “It is nice to meet a friend of Mike’s. Perhaps you can tell me some secret of his past” She was not about to let Anne know that she was privy to their earlier relationship.”

Anne nodded her response but was interrupted by Steffi’s voice before she could say anything.

“Shall we begin?”

Marie was thinking about the surprise turn of events. “This may be awkward if we end up working in the same vicinity or in the same clinic. Has it been possible for Mike to bury his feelings about his affair with Anne?”

“Hell, this is foolish. My own insecurities are making me jealous. I have no basis for such thoughts.”

She would not have been pleased to read Anne’s thoughts. “I wonder how his wife will react. I need some time privately with Michael. I need his broad shoulders.”

After the tour, Steffi led the participants to a large room with tables set up around the room. She handed each person a card with a number that related to the number of the table to which each was to report.

The two of them went to table 12 and met DR. Thomas McKeag, the head of Physical Therapy for this mission in Jordan .He smiled as they approached.

“As you will note from my accent, I’m from Belfast but stationed here for a dozen years. I’ve read your resume and I’m impressed. Let’s chat a bit about your hopes and our needs. “

Mike responded. “Naturally, we would prefer an assignment where we work reasonably close, whether as a part of the same team or not. We are prepared to work in whatever environment MSF needs us, urban or rural or anything in between.”

“Good. We will try to have you work in close proximity but I can’t promise to have you on the same team. We’ve had some difficult situations in the past, but I am not ruling it out.”

“During the first six weeks, you will be operating as interns here at the hospital, obviously not on a team together. If all goes well, as I expect, you will be assigned to a clinic or clinics north of Amman. There is a camp of about seventy thousand refugees with two of our larger well-equipped clinics, out of which we have doctors and technician’s also working in the field, sort of making house calls. Our staff often pulls extra duty since we are always shorthanded or short of equipment.”

“You should know that the clinic is the only modern establishment in that community at present. The environment is quite challenging.”

Marie said, “We’ve talked about that, Doctor, and believe we are emotionally prepared. Of course time will tell.”

“Good. During your internship you will be evaluated for a number of things, as you expect but I want to mention what I believe are two of the most important:

You will need the ability to handle the emotional stress of working with patients in need of compassionate health care.

You are also asked to render assistance to individuals of all cultures from across the area without prejudice”

At the summary evaluation meeting six weeks later, Dr. McKeag was smiling as he said, “You are both more than ready. Your leaders are convinced that you will make a great team, so we shall begin your assignment with that in mind. “

“You have two days R&R. I hope you take the time to walk among the people of Amman, absorb a bit of the culture and get some rest. Your future in the clinic at Phata will offer very few times of rest longer than a day.”

“I highly recommend that you really rest on your days off. When your supervisor says, “Rest”, consider it an order. Overly fatigued doctors and technicians tend to make less clear judgments. God bless you for your service.”

They spent two days as ogling tourists. During the first evening, Mike spent considerable time bringing his journals up to date.

As they rode into Phata, they noticed that the camp had market-like units along the main street where goods like vegetables, basic household equipment and clothes can be purchased. There were also coffee shops.

Their driver explained that since the opening of the camp, four years ago, the population has repeatedly held peaceful demonstrations. The main concern has related to the lack of sufficient food supplies and livable accommodations.

He went on, “The camp has seen an increasing crime rate, including prostitution and drug-dealing.”

“Demonstrations are used as a forum to create awareness of the conflict in their home lands and to express political views against their respective current home governments.”

“This camp also experienced a riot that resulted in a number of injuries to both refugees and Jordanian police. That was two years ago.

On the surface, life is a little more settled now. But stay alert when you move about the camp. Up to now, no medical personnel have ever been threatened or harmed. It is recommended that you have some outer sign of your profession apparent such as a doctor’s satchel, a white jacket or a large Red Cross pin.”

When he had answered their questions, Marie asked in Arabic, “Abdul, would you mind my using my Arabic as I ask more questions? I need some practice.”

He responded in Arabic. “Delighted. Where did you learn?”

“I took a class with a Palestinian student who was earning money for her education in the States.”

“She did an excellent job getting your accent right. Fire away.”

“I didn’t understand that last phrase.”

Abdul laughed. “That’s because I used some slang to test your understanding of the colloquial. I said “Fire away” for continue.”



He continued, “I presume you have an English-Arabic dictionary. There is a young lady named Aziz who is a receptionist at the South Clinic. She is studying English and would be glad to work with you. Her name translates to “friendship.”

Dr. Henri Chirac, head of the clinic was enthusiastic in his greeting. “Dr. Polski, you, especially is needed. I have been trying to serve as the PT since Dr. Chin, our PT, became ill three weeks ago. I will continue to be your resource. I sure hope you are a quick study.”

His laugh was a bit more brittle than he had hoped to display.

“Ms. Andreas, I didn’t mean to slight you. Welcome. Anja will be here in a moment. She is the senior PT Assistant and will show both of you to your quarters. Doctor, please return her when you are settled in. Anja will be at your service, Ms. Andreas.”

“By the way we tend to be informal here. Please call me Henri and if I may, you will be Michael and Marie.”

There were smiles all around as they prepared to leave.

Marie commented to Mike. “So much for our hope to work specifically with children. Obviously, the shortage of personnel requires our skills to be applied to all ages.”

Mike said, “I think Dr. McKeag gave us a hint. I certainly was not expecting to be the head PT at such a large clinic. Well, here we go down the road not expected.”

“Mike, I think you should enroll in the basic French class, since it is one of the three official languages of MSF.”

“I know you’re right and I will try to work that. Right now, I am pleased that so many speak English because I am about to be overwhelmed.

A month later, he was on his own as the only PT and head of the unit. Henri was too busy with his managerial responsibilities to be easily approached.

On the thirty fifth day, Mike was surprised to be introduced to another young doctor just arrived from England who would be his new associate PT.

Dr. Roy Fox was from Liverpool and two years younger than Mike.

Mike was thrilled to have help but knew his limited managerial skills were about to be tested.

Marie moved into her responsibilities with ease. Aziz, the senior PTA was a great teacher and guide and like her receptionist friend, Anja, was eager to practice her English. The three developed a close friendship within days. Marie spoke to them in Arabic and they tried on their English.

Mike's eleven to twelve hour days were packed with examinations that included broken limbs, skull fractures, replacement hips or knees, green fractures as well as palsied child or a senior with a heart condition.

He understood his responsibility to help each patient reduce pain and improve or restore mobility, if possible, without expensive surgery thus reducing the need for long-term use of prescription medications.

In some cases, he might call for an additional visit so that he could teach the patient how to prevent or manage the condition in order to achieve long-term health benefits.

Each case also required him to develop a treatment plan, possibly starting with a plan to prevent the loss of mobility before it occurs from inaction.

This was his personal case load in addition to overseeing Doctor Fox's work and coordinating the work of the staff.

Needless to say, Mike was one tired doctor when he arrived at the apartment, usually about nine or ten o'clock each evening. His face broke into a smile when Marie met him with arms wide open and after a deep kiss, began to strip off his clothes.

Within minutes she had him lying on a soft mat as she applied her skills as the masseuse extraordinaire. After the shower, Marie applied the cream to his scar tissue. Dressed in short Japanese style kimonos, they had their evening meal,

Mike received a message from Henri's assistant. "Please prepare a list of equipment that you would like to replace or add to the therapy department. You are to attend a conference at North Clinic two weeks from today. Suggestions for new group activities will also be on the agenda of the conference, a three day time frame."

Just as Mike was exiting the conference center at North Clinic, he heard his name being called. "Michael, its Anne. Are you up for a drink or dinner?"

"Hi, Anne. So this is where you were sent. I'm sorry to be tied up for both but I am free after dinner, about nine thirty."

Anne invited Mike to join her in the common room of the staff apartment house. “It is always vacant. We’ll be alone for a nice conversation. I am eager to find out what had happened on your journey since you left San Diego.”

They sat on the comfortable sofa in a very pleasant common area on the mezzanine, looking at the starlit night in the desert. A sliver of the moon was rising in the southeast. The view was awesome.

Mike was uncomfortable to feel Anne’s knees abutting his and her hips close but not quite touching his.

At Anne’s request, Mike gave his account first. Mike thought she didn’t show much interest in details other than some details of his relationship with Marie. She pressed him for personal details that Mike avoided, wondering why she was so interested.

It was now Anne’s turn. “When you left, I poured myself into my work. I even took some additional half-shifts to occupy my time.

I missed you, Mike. You had made a big contribution to my life, even more so than my shrink. Eventually I took your advice and opened myself to some dating

As you would expect, most dates expected to bed me. Refusal usually meant no second date. I think it was on the fourth date that I allowed myself to give in. You can tell from my words that this did not turn out well.”

Mike was getting anxious as Anne was revealing details of her love life. “I should not be listening to this.”

He frowned but Anne paid no attention. “I froze. My partner was patient at first but grew frustrated when I was not responding. He talked to me in sweet talk and finally asked me to talk, but no words were forthcoming.”

“I was expecting him to force himself on me but he gently removed himself and left without saying another word.”

Anne was near tears, but stoically held off. Mike waited until she was composed.

“Before he could say anything, she continued, “It was another two months before I dated again. I met him in OR, a new doctor on staff, just arrived from San Francisco.

We had a couple of coffee dates and then a movie date. My non-invitation at the door of my apartment did not turn him off. He asked for a dinner date, which I accepted.

I had a bit more wine than I should, thinking that being high might be a good thing since I figured I would be inviting Mac to my bed. The problem was that I got sloppy drunk and Mac, being a gentleman, took me home and put me to bed.”

On the next date, I did my best to accommodate Mac, but as you might expect, I froze. Through tears, I told Mac my story. He listened with a compassionate ear but he was not patient like my Michael had been. “

“He and I became good friends but never dated again.”

“Have you sought out a counselor since you arrived here?”

“No. I don’t see how that can help. Look at how long I’ve been seeing a psychologist and still no real result.”

“You can’t give up, Anne. You’re a young and beautiful woman with a full life ahead of you.”

“That’s what Doc always said but here I am. I want to love and to be loved but I can’t seem to pull myself out of this rut even with professional help.”

Mike felt her frustration and was sympathetic. He was wondering what advice he had to give and feeling that there was nothing he could add.

His thoughts were interrupted when he heard her asking, “Michael, I want you to sleep with me these two nights that you will be here. “

Even though she had been signaling this possibility, he was momentarily stunned. “I can’t do that, Anne. I could not and would not be unfaithful to Marie.”

“It isn’t a matter of being unfaithful. I am not asking for love. You are the only person who can help me open my womanhood for coitus.”

Mike said, “That may be your view, Anne, but I couldn’t face Marie afterwards. Moreover, I can’t see how sleeping together will help you beyond those few hours during which I would only be fraught with guilt. It just won’t work.”

Anne’s shoulders slumped. Tears began seeping from behind her eyelids. Mike moved closer and took her hands in his. It seemed natural to pull her head to his breast but he didn’t want her to think he was giving in.

“Anne, I don’t know what a shrink would say but it seems that facing that problem head on may be your only solution. You trust me enough to risk the imagined pain that never came. When the next Mac comes into your life, you might want to take the risk.”

“I’m sure you’re right. Thank you for listening and caring. Marie is a lucky woman to have you. Now, just hold me for a minute while we say goodbye.”

## Chapter 10

Henri was impressed with Mike's accomplishments but he was also aware of the toll that the work was taking of Mike's energy. He put in a request for another PT, although he felt the chances were slim.

He submitted the paper work and then called Dr. McKeag who listened carefully to Henri's request. He then asked, "How are you doing, Henri? You must be under the same amount of pressure or even more."

"Naturally, I'm overworked but so is everyone else. If someone were available, I would gladly have an assistant but this situation in PT is more acute."

"How is Polski doing as the administrator? Are his people pleased and cooperative?"

"If my other departments ran as smoothly, I wouldn't even be tired. His people love him and I get compliments from patients very frequently, which, as you know, is usually rare."

"That department has helped decrease the number of surgeries by a minimum of ten percent, which is more than we were expecting."

"That's great, but, as you say, it may be taking a toll on the PT staff. I'll do what I can. Thanks for the call."

Ten minutes later Henri had another phone call. Emergency was on the line. "A small bus with eleven field workers just over turned, less a mile from the clinic. We should have your PT and some PTA'S on the scene to handle injuries that will not need or should not be admitted to surgery."

Henri called Mike and five minutes later; Abdul pulled up in front of the department and was taking Mike, Marie and Anja to the accident scene.

The first case, to which the triage manager pointed, was a dislocated elbow. After a brief exam, Mike told Anja to go to work. She reset the elbow, gave the patient a shot of pain killer and whipped out a heavy bandage to hold the bones in place and then a plastic cast to firm up the connection.

Mike reminded her to call an M.D. to do a final check before she completed her paper work.

Meanwhile, Mike was referred to a second patient. The emergency doctor had just reset a clean break of the left femur and handed the case to Mike.

Marie, who was standing next to Mike, said, "I've got it, honey."

Mike waited as the triage doctor completed his setting of priorities. The doctor said, "Mike, if you're comfortable, help me reset this dislocated shoulder. You can take it from there. I see no need to send this patient to the hospital.

Mike nodded his agreement. Doctor gave the patient a painkiller and moved away.

Mike's extended exam affirmed the original diagnosis. He went to Marie's bag and removed the items needed to make a sling and told the patient that he was going to be fine.

Anja was getting out the paper work and giving out cards to the patients that informed them of the need to come to the clinic for a follow up. Suddenly, her patient moaned.

She went back to the patient and was joined by Mike, She asked, "Are you hurting?"

He mumbled something that only Anja could hear. She burst into laughter, turned to Mike, saying, "He says he wife will not believe him about the accident. She will kill him for being in another brawl. Mike, I don't mind riding with the driver in order to get him off the hook."

Mike laughed as he nodded his approval. "I also need you to go with my patient to help his family and the patient to deal with the sling and his own temporary limitations."

She nodded and said "See you, tomorrow."

He joined Marie who was completing her paper work and getting ready to accompany her patient to his home.

“Honey, while I’m out, I think will make those house calls scheduled for later this week. Abdul said he is free to work with me after Anja and I drop off our patients. Anja will be a big help since I’m never quite sure my Arabic is adequate.”

Mike left the clinic at six that evening. He wanted to cook the evening meal as a surprise for Marie.

She bounced in about seven thirty. Her grin was a wide smile as she approached Mike with wide open arms. It smells delicious and you are a doll.”

She gave him a special sly smile. “I presume it will hold while I wash your back and do some fooling around.”

“You, dear woman, always exceed my expectations.”

Three weeks later, Mike was called to Henri’s office just before noon. Henri met him at the door to his office. “Come in, Mike. I want you to meet your new associate, Peer Jenson, form Copenhagen.”

Mike extended his hand and gave the newcomer a warm smile. “I am delighted to have you come aboard, Peer. “I’m Mike, in case Henri has not mentioned our informal manner of relating to each other.”

Henri said, “Mike I’m extremely busy. Here’s Peer’s paper work .Take him to lunch and then do what has to be done.”

Mike called Roy, his English associate, to join then for lunch. After the introductions, Mike asked Peer to give them a bit of background.

Peer said, “I am truly green and expect to be treated as an intern. Greta, my wife of two months, will be arriving next week. She is a pediatric nurse and is assigned to the hospital here in Amman until an opening appears in one of two clinics in



this camp. She has been my support, financial and otherwise through my doctoral studies.”

“How tall are you, Peer?”

“Let’s see. Meters to feet, Six feet and an inch or so.”

“Almost as tall as Roy who is almost as tall as I.”

After the laughter, Roy told Peer that he was single and had completed his internship. “If history repeats itself, you will have plenty of chances to use your initiative. Mike is a hand off supervisor but expects you to ask if there is any doubt in your mind. We have a great team and some beautiful Jordanian and Palestinian women on staff.”

Mike was smiling as he said, “A handsome brute like you will be in great demand.”

Peer was as sharp as Roy and within four weeks was trusted by Mike to work as a full associate.

One evening at dinner, Marie said to Mike, “I know you’re too busy to notice but you should know that we have a new romance in the bud at the clinic.”

Mike laughed. “Who’s the lucky woman who caught Roy’s attention?”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s hard to miss, even for an overworked PT. I’ve watched the whole batch of females doing whatever to get his attention since day one. Who’s the lucky one?”

Actually, it is the one who has displayed the least interest. It’s Anja.”

“That seems like a good match. If I weren’t married, I’d have pursued her since the day we arrived.”

“Oh, you Romeo, but I can see why you would say that. She is exotic, with all the best features of an Arabic woman and a certain mystique that is bound to attract a male.”

Mike chortled. “You just made my point.”

She continued. “Barring an emergency, we are invited to join the two of them for dinner on Friday evening.”

Anja’s parents lived in a modest home about two miles from the hospital. The Bakrs were delighted to meet a few of their daughter’s co-workers from the hospital.

The six gathered around the ding room table with a sweetened lemon juice with a mint leaf and roasted eggplant chips with a dip.

Anja’s parents then assumed the role of waiters and disappeared from the conversation. After some tiny Shawara, Palestinian tacos, the couples enjoyed Kefya, spicy meat balls and Tabouli, bulgur and parsley salad.

Mike noticed that Roy could hardly take his eyes off Anja. He was sure that she was very aware of his focus. “I wonder if she deliberately planned this gathering so that her folks would meet the young man in whom she had a special interest.”

When the conversation turned to stories of their youth, Anja pressed Roy for a lot of detail.

The most fascinating story of the evening was Anja’s. She told them the story of her parents exodus from Palestine to the refugee camp in Palestine and then in Jordan.

“The beginning of our family problem was rooted in the anger of my two older brothers. It was a justified anger. I was not yet born when two teenagers lost their menial jobs because the Israelis created a ‘safety zone’ that required both of them to detour their travels around the zone and through two guard posts.

The sentries bullied my brothers and often delayed them so that they arrived late. That led to their being fired for which they could not blame their employer.

The high rate of unemployment outside Israel made it impossible for either to find work. Both boys joined a resistance group that frequently found someplace to throw rocks and bottles at Israeli citizens and soldiers.

My older brother was never caught but Bari, the younger, was nabbed and identified during one escapade. Although he was released because of his age, he was a marked rebel.

One of the elders in our community recommended to my father that we relocate and keep the boys from further resistance activity.

My father began planning for a move to Ramallah but before he was ready, Bari was apprehended once again. My family never heard another word from or about the younger son.

Father decided the family should get as far away as possible. He feared that the Israelis might seek out Bari's family for retribution.

My brother later told me that the trek was the most dangerous time of their lives. Gangs from the communities along the journey actually became highwaymen, robbing the travelers. My brother organized a gang of youth in the caravan to act as defenders of the families.

They stopped at the first refugee camp on the Jordan side of the border. It was a time during which the Jordanian government was making it possible for refugee families from Palestine to earn their citizenship.

I was born ten months after the family settled in the camp. My brother finished school, took special training and became a member of the national police. He lives about thirty miles from Amman.

Marie, who was spellbound as were the rest of the group, asked, "Where did you grow up? In the camp?"

"Yes, until I was seven. Mother said that it was too dangerous a place for a young girl. In a large camp, there was every sort of criminal from thieves to drug

peddlers to molesters. Father applied for and got a position as custodian in a bank in Amman

His boss took a shine to father and helped him find a small apartment in the city. Over the years, he went to school, got the equivalent of a diploma and is now the chief custodian at the new bank building with over sixty employees reporting to him.”

Marie prompted Anja. Tell us about your growing up.”

“My brother was fiercely protective of his little sister. I was told that only he took me for baby buggy rides and then walks in the park because he didn’t want anything to happen to me.

My parents insisted I wear traditional Middle East garb even though I went to English Language schools after the seventh grade. When going to a social affair I was accompanied by an older woman companion or my brother as the guardian of my virginity.

That wasn’t much fun. I finally found some freedom when I entered a community college and began working toward my PT assistant degree.”

Was that when you started wearing western type clothing?”

She laughed. “Yes and I went overboard. I changed at school after wearing traditional clothes from home. I guess I was a bit flamboyant.

A few days into the school year, I sensed someone following me on the way home. An older man, who worked near the school came up behind me and wrapped one arm around me and moved his hand over my mouth.

He whispered “There’s a vacant building around the corner. If you promise not to scream, I will remove my hand.”

I nodded but screamed the moment his hand moved. Four girls came out of nowhere screaming for help and tackled the man. Two men came by and sat on him until a policeman on the block came by.

There was a police report to be made and I was the witness. Now I had to face my family. Mohammed would be angry with me and want revenge on my assailant.

Stumbling and stammering I finally told the story to the three of them. I could see my brother steaming. They cuddled me, fed me and got me into bed.

Before my brother and I left for the police station, we received a phone call. "Please bring the western style clothing that you wear at school."

I knew I was in deep trouble as I stuffed the items in my tote bag.

The police sergeant said, "The man admitted he wanted to have sex but not to rape you. He thought you were a street walker and he wanted a free ride, figuring you would not resist even if he didn't have the money."

My brother, Mohammed, was indignant "How could he come to that conclusion?"

The sergeant asked, "May I see your western style clothing, dear?"

He had a hard time holding back his smile. He asked me, "Is this the first western clothes you have worn?"

I bowed my head and murmured a yes.

Who helped you choose?"

"No one. "

"May I suggest you get some advice before your next shopping trip? Most western women dress more conservatively."

"Thank you for coming. We will forgo a statement in this case since we have a confession."

Anja led the laughter that could not be held in check. She continued when the laughter quieted down.

“Mohammed was seething. On the way home he berated me for trying to fool my family and embarrassing my parents. “Another stupid trip like that and I will whip your hide. Say nothing .I will handle this with Mother and Dad and I will get their approval for your wearing different clothing.”

“With my parent’s blessing, Mohammed took me to a boutique for working women and put me in the hands of the owner who has prescribed each item of clothing I wear besides my hospital uniform.”

When it was time to leave, Marie and Mike walked out the door but Roy had been delayed. Waiting at the car, Marie whispered, “Looks like that light hug has turned into something more serious.”

Just then Roy came hustling out the door, his face flushed and his voice almost apologetic for the delay. Marie couldn’t help a little verbal poke with “She is beautiful, isn’t she, Roy?”

## Chapter 11.

A special class was being held for four new PT assistants on Monday morning. Mike had Peer conducting the class prior to their observing Peer deal with a patient.

The patient had a compound fracture of the tibia and was returning to the clinic for the first time after convalescence at home.

After describing the accident and the wounds received by the patient Peer said. "Now we are being asked to help with restoring normal function. After the cast has been removed, we start mobilizing the area around the fracture. You will see that in this case we still have to follow weight-bearing precautions or lifting restrictions at this point, so we will discuss the patient's limitations.

Each of you will help me make an evaluation and assessment. We will take measurements of the whole leg around the fracture site. This might include measurements of Range of motion, strength pain, flexibility, swelling and gait.

Only then do we start to devise a treatment strategy to help her recover fully. As you learned, physical therapy after a fracture often focuses on overcoming the negative effects of being immobilized by a cast or sling. Immobilization may cause loss of motion and strength and decreased functional mobility.

Our goal is to help her improve functional mobility and improve walking. We also help her to decide if she should walk with a walker, crutches, quad cane, or standard cane.

Later we can decide the use of physical agents which may be used to help with pain and swelling. Electrical stimulation may also be used to help improve muscle recruitment."

Mike had been observing the presentation and was impressed with the clarity and precision of Peer's words.

He was pleased. He felt that his team was in good hands with Roy and Peer ready to handle most of the patient needs. With the addition of four new PTA's, he felt. For the first time, that he would maintain normal hours.

There is an expression that says “Be careful what you wish for.”

A week later, he was asked to report to Henri, who had coffee and scones prepared for the visit. After the preliminaries Henri said, “Your last written report was full of good news, in spite of the increase in demand for PT services. Nice going, Mike.”

Mike laughed. “Henri, you are soft soaping me and that frightens me.”

Henri joined in the laughter. “I am and for good reason. “Mike, how would you like to shift directions in your career path?”

“I don’t know what you are asking, Henri? I love what I am doing.”

“I know you do and anyone who knows you would agree, but MSF has need of your growing talent in administration. We are planning a third clinic in the expanding refugee area and are short of administrators. Dr. McKeag, who has always asked about your progress, asked me if you had the makings of a good administrator and I said yes.”

“I’m flattered, Henri, but I’ve been at this for only a few months.”

“That’s the point. You’ve done marvels within such a short period. The only question in my mind is whether I should be asking you to make such a major switch in your calling.”

“If I were to say yes and qualify, where would I be serving? I am just beginning to feel comfortable with my limited Arabic”

“Dr. McKeag thinks that with an eight months crash course in hospital management, that you would be ready to manage our new smaller clinic. That clinic is planned to be about three fourths the size of this one with no major OR department. Surgery will be available for ER cases,”

“By the way, MSF is expanding because the big boys believe that tensions and conflict in the Middle East will increase as will the need for increasing medical service.”



“Wow. That is a strong call and I have to consider Marie.”

“We know and have considered that. Marie has helped Anja become a great senior PTA. The way you have organized things and made them virtual managers, needing very little administrative help from you. My interpretation is that we should also ask Marie to consider a similar change and if you decide on a yes, we want to send Marie along with you to the school.”

“When do you need a decision?”

“You may take your time but the next class begins in two weeks.”

Mike roared. “Translated, that means tomorrow.”

The big boys want the clinic underway within the year. That gives you about two months as my assistant here before the opening of the new clinic. That includes a month’s leave at the end of the class before you return.”

Marie became excited when Mike gave her the news. “I am not surprised to see Henri recognize your talent so quickly. Mike you are and have always been a quick study and worth your weight in gold. I’d be delighted to support you in any case but I am intrigued with the idea of being offered a new challenge.”

She wrapped her arms around Mike and said. “Let’s celebrate. I’ll get the snacks and defrost the steaks. You open the champagne.”

Mike laughed. “Aren’t you rushing the celebration? You have no idea what your office will be.”

“Mom always celebrated on the news. She said that its history by the time one signs the papers.”

Four days later they were flying Air France to Paris, reading material about their respective classes at the Sorbonne.

Six hours of classes five days a week and three hour classes on Saturday kept the couple with their noses to the grindstone. They napped on Saturday afternoons

and spent Sundays as gawking tourists at the Eiffel tower, the Louvre, the formal gardens, Notre Dame, boat rides on the Seine and walks on Mont Mart.

Marie's parents flew over to spend the Christmas Holiday with the children at a chalet above Lake Geneva.

Charles Andréas, Marie's dad, was extremely pleased with the honor given to Mike and Marie and announced a special Christmas gift to MSF for the new clinic in Jordan.

When they were leaving, he handed Mike a sizeable check. "This is a bit of expense money for your vacation at the end of your studies. Take Marie to some exotic places. She had some on her bucket list. You must also have some dreams of places you want to visit. It may be a long time before you can do this again."

The day after they completed their training at the Sorbonne, Marie and Mike flew to the south of France for two days before travelling to Copenhagen to start a twelve day northern Europe tour that took them to Bergen in Norway, cruises in the Fjords, a train trip across the mountains to Oslo, then to Sweden and Finland before heading to St. Petersburg to see and learn about the arts in Mother Russia.

Despite resistance from the Russian government officials, as staff members of MSF they were able to travel to Chechnya to visit MSF local headquarters. Together they had decided to see several working sites of MSF as part of their vacation.

The MSF work here was totally different from what they did in Jordan. Here the two serious issues MSF dealt with were coronary disease and Tuberculosis.

They learned that the rate of heart disease here was extremely high, but the quality and scale of medical services did not come near meeting the needs of people with coronary syndromes and related emergencies. MSF focused on improving patient services at the Republican Emergency Hospital, donating medicines and medical equipment and training staff to use the equipment. Training for ambulance staff who administer first aid was also initiated.

The director of the lung unit told them that drug-resistant TB is a life-threatening issue in Chechnya, resulting from years of poor TB diagnosis and interrupted

treatment. A comprehensive program, including diagnosis, treatment and counseling for TB and multidrug-resistance was under way

Marie nearly jumped out of her skin as the rapid fire of small weapons interrupted the conference. Marie and Mike were asked to lie flat on the floor and scoot under the desks just as their host did. Intermittent fire continued for almost an hour Marie was huddled against Mike's body but otherwise remained calm. Mike had turned so that his body was between Marie and the source of the gunfire.

The battle seemed to move directly toward their location. Marie pressed her body as tight to Mike's as was possible. She felt cold sweat running down her spine.

"Whoosh". Then the loud bang of the war head hitting something that exploded. Marie thought it might be a gasoline tank or barrel.

She shivered and then felt Mike's hand caressing her arm. She could feel her body beginning to lose some of its tension.

Ten minutes after it seemed safe to sit up; the meeting was interrupted by the arrival of two government officials. Addressing Marie and Mike, their message was direct. "We leave in fifteen minutes. Rebel forces are increasing pressure for independence and a serious battle might be forthcoming."

Their next stop was Bangkok, to drink in the tourist sights before visiting some of the MSF work in Thailand.

Dr. John Keynes met them at the Bangkok airport and took them to lunch before their flight to Chang Mai in the northern part of the country.

He apologized for changing their schedule. "We will provide time for some tourist sights after our visit to the north."

In his brief orientation he told them that MSF's longest-running mission started with the provision of assistance to Cambodian refugees fleeing the Khmer Regime in 1976.

In the 1980s, MSF supported refugees from Myanmar, and recently, it has played a key role in providing and advocating comprehensive care and treatment for people living with HIV

Thailand was one of the first countries to introduce free antiretroviral treatment for HIV patients. In the past decade, MSF has responded mainly to emergencies and offered health care to Hmong refugees from Laos.

From Chang Mai, they rode to the Myanmar border, where more than 50,000 vulnerable people had no access to health care.

In the Three Pagodas Pass area, MSF had been operating a mobile clinic, providing basic medical services. For three days, Mike assisted with consultations, referring pregnant women to Ministry of Health hospitals for delivery. Marie spent hours manipulating and massaging the club feet of four toddlers who were in the midst of changing ankle bracelets.

In Mae Hong Son, they observed the MSF staff training local staff to work as mobile medical teams in the Myanmar–Thailand border area.

Mike asked a thousand questions and made copious notes. He hoped to extend service in the refugee camps with mobile clinics.

It had been an exhausting but rewarding trip. They arrived in Amman two days early, checked into the hotel where they slept and relaxed in the sauna and spa.

## Chapter 12.

Henri was saying, “Marie, our plan is for you to be Mike’s executive assistant. So for the next week you two will be joined at the hip with me. You will be expected to be with me almost constantly for the next week or so. You will listen to my phone calls so we can discuss the implications after each call. You will attend each meeting with department heads or other staff members. You get the picture?”

“The first thing on the agenda is a visit to the new facility and then a discussion of what plans have already been made.”

Mike was surprised to see that the administrative offices were finished except for the furnishings. They were seated on rough benches and a plywood desk eating lunch which Henri had brought along.

Mike was impressed with what they had seen. Henri smiled. “Only the best and newest for my rising star.”

He distributed folders to Mike and Marie. “These are the organizational charts with the names of certain department heads. You will be getting some of my best to get the clinic off to a running start

You will have Roy and Anja for the PT department along with our current head of Internal Medicine, Radiology and Emergency Medicine. The others will be your choice but we do have a list of candidates for you to interview over the next few weeks

Most importantly, you will have on loan for six months our IT head. As you learned at the Sorbonne, as the healthcare facilities manager you must be closely collaborating with your IT manager as strategic business partners.

The roles between your position or mine and the IT manager are converging, becoming the pivotal point where infrastructure and information technology come together.”

He reached for another large binder. “Here is the bible of management for MSF facilities. Learning the contents is your homework for the next week. I will be available for questions and clarifications.”

Mike and Marie moved their possessions into the new furnished staff quarters.

“*Falafel, heal,*” Mike and Marie were awakened by the shouts of what seemed like thousands of voices yelling what sounded like these words .Whatever the words, anger was obvious. Mike jumped out of bed and ran to the window. Indeed, he was looking at a huge crowd demonstrating and shouting angrily.

A frightened Marie joined him and held onto his arm. He had no words to reassure her since he did not understand the angry words or read the Arabic letters on the placards.

“Why would they demonstrate against a clinic that will serve their medical needs?”

The shouts seemed to get louder and angrier. He did notice that the huge crowd was peaceful and not threatening to move into the facility. “What the hell is going on?”

Marie tried to read the words on the placards but the demonstrators were jerking the poorly drawn words so she had no success.

Mike could not decide how, or if, he should respond. Marie tightened her grip as the shouts continued to get louder. Mike pulled her into his arms but knew he was no match if the crowd decided to rush the facility.

They heard a knock on the door. “Who could that be? What did he or she want? Perhaps it was a representative of the group. The entire knock was rather gentle.”

Mike decided he had better greet whoever was there.

There was Josef, the custodian, who gave them a reassuring smile.

“Be not frightened. Doctor Mike. The crowds come every Monday morning to make a show to the government. One week, like today is for food. Next week it will be for more housing. They will stay for an hour and then go away.

Their desire is for you, the leader, to take notice and say something to the government leaders. It is true that there is little food to feed so many. Thousands are without shelter, with no place to escape the blazing sun of the desert or protect them from the cold wind at night. Many are not as lucky as I am.”

“Thank you, Josef. Is there one who is their leader?”

“Yes. His name is Adil. He recently came from Gaza. I think his home was destroyed during a fight with the Israelis.”

“Thank you. Do you think he would come to have tea if I invited him?”

“I don’t know but are you sure you want to do this. This will go away in a little while and gone for another week.”

Mike nodded his understanding but asked, “Would you be willing to ask him?”

Josef nodded and walked out to talk with Adil. Five minutes later, looking out the window, Mike saw the leader nodding and then inviting two others to join him, and they walked to the entrance.

Adil introduced two elders as Mr. Habat and Mr. Duan. “These gentlemen have been here since the day the camp opened and have witnessed the shortage of food almost from day one until now.”

Mike thought Adil was trying to contain himself but there was a bitter edge to his voice as he continued, “My family lives under a blanket that is stretched over four large sticks. Since we are a family of seven, some have no shelter. The blanket is only large enough to shade four persons.”

Mike was apprising Adil as he spoke. His clothing was tattered at the edges but was of fine cloth. Mike judged that his family had been well-to-do. He was well spoken with a good grasp of colloquial English.

Mike said, “I understand. Please join me as my wife serves tea and a few sweet breads. This is my wife Marie.”

Fifteen minutes later, Mike asked, “What may I do for your people? As you might guess, I have no power outside serving your people with the best medical attention that we can give.”

It took a long minute before he got a reply. “Your clinic is the nearest international organization where we can demonstrate. We don’t intend to be here to interfere once you are operating, but we want to make our point and hope you will tell your superiors about our concerns. They may have some influence with the international aid organizations.”

Mike waited, sensing that there was more to come.



“Now that you have engaged us, I have a request of you personally. I understand that Queen Rania will be here for the opening. You know that her family is Palestinian. I would be so grateful if you had the ability to mention our demonstrations to her, our need for more food and shelter. Out of respect for her we do not want to demonstrate on that day but we want her to know of our plight.”

Mike said, “That will be quite a challenge for me. I will do my best but protocol may forbid my doing any good.”

“I will take your word that you will try. Thank you. I will explain the meat of our conversation to the elders and the others. We will still show up on Mondays but you are not to worry.”

That was the way things continued until the opening.

The next nine weeks were intense, filled with days of learning, planning and interviewing... After twenty days of sixteen hours each, Marie called a halt. Sundays are for intimacy, physical and spiritual. I need my honey all to myself. Furthermore, we stop work at seven each evening so that we can eat a good meal at a leisurely pace. Agreed?”

“Yep.”

They held tight to the Sunday schedule and came close to the work days limits.

Ribbon-cutting day sneaked up while they weren't looking. Henri told Marie that she was to be hostess to Queen Rania who was coming to cut the ribbon.

“Marie, you may not know that she is Palestine by lineage although born in Kuwait. Her folks were among the earliest émigrés after the six day war. She is a beautiful woman and I want you to be just as beautiful. Now get yourself to a boutique in Amman so you can be dressed to the nines as our official hostess for the day. I

understand that she wears something sleeveless to brave the heat in an outdoor ceremony.”

The day was a smashing success. The Queen had arranged for an orchestra which played Jordanian music, along with the national anthems of France and the seven other nations represented on the staff at the hospital.

Rania made Marie feel at ease as they sat side by side at the luncheon table. They were engaged in the exchange of personal information.

Marie discovered the extensive work that Rania performed in various refugee camps and her devotion to the development and role of young women in Jordanian society.

Marie, as the expression goes, girded her loins and said, “If I may, your honor, I have a message that we promised some leaders of the refugees. May I continue?”

“Please.”

“Each Monday morning for months, a thousand or so demonstrators appear for an hour shouting and holding signs asking the government for more housing and more food.”

“They hold you in high esteem and want to make their point but would not demonstrate during your presence. They asked us simply to mention their concern.”

“Thank you Ms. Andreas. I know that took courage and I appreciate it. You may tell them that I have the message and will try my best to honor my extended family. They will understand.”

As the Queen was making her departure, she reminded Marie of her invitation to tea at the palace a month hence.

The demonstrators were back on the following Monday. Mike sent word with Josef to invite Adil for tea after the demonstration.

Adil thanked Mike for getting the message to the Queen. “How do you know we did that?”

Adil laughed. “She gave a little signal that told the crowd as she left. It’s a tribal secret. Thank you.”

“Adil, do you mind telling me a bit about your background?”

“I don’t mind. I am a little bitter about how life turned out. My family name is Nassai. I’m thirty, single, a graduate of American University in Cairo. I had a year of Medical school before I was called home because of the death of my father.

I am the oldest and therefore responsible for my family, mother, grandmother and five younger siblings. I was working as a technician in the hospital when our home was destroyed.

I won’t go into detail but we had no options except to leave Gaza. Work is hard to find now. My two younger brothers have menial jobs to supplement our government subsidies. I get frustrated with no job and no reading material to study.

What is called a library at the Community Center is a pitiful accumulating of fiction and dated texts from several universities.”

“Working on behalf of the residents of this camp is one way to make a contribution but we are powerless. We find ourselves always begging with no legal power to get real action.

The young people have little to do and end up in trouble, recruited by the gangs and criminals that make up part of any society.”

Mike said, “Each day must be a trial for you. A keen mind is atrophying.”

“There is that but my brothers are sharp and had dreams that seem unlikely to be fulfilled. I must find a way out. My family must not be one that spends a

generation or more in such surroundings as many have done. I met a family recently that has been in exile for almost thirty five years.”

Mike was deeply moved, his mind whirling with ideas of how he might offer a helping hand to Abdul. “Have you applied for work at either of our other clinics?”

“Yes. My resume is on file but I was told there was little hope for anything soon. I believe I am seen as overqualified for any positions.”

“Let’s see if I can help. I gather from your comments that you need work and will be willing to work at any reasonable level.”

“Sure. I’d be happy to be contributing instead of wasting time.”

Mike was surprised that no one had hired Adil at either clinic. He was a linguist, speaking multiple dialects of Arabic, French, English and Spanish. He had manual skills and could serve as a handyman and had served as a chauffeur while working his way through the university.

Three weeks later Adil was the official interpreter for the staff and taught four language classes a week. He got a glowing review from the facilities manager who always had more work than his regular crew could handle. “He can handle any tool and fix anything that I ask of him.”

It took six months before Mike felt that they had eliminated all the bugs in the system and had the staff working as an integrated team.

One Monday morning, Mike received a call from the receptionist at the main entrance. “Two official looking men just walked right by the desk, nodded and refused to sign in .They went through the side door in the direction of ER. Shall I call Security?”

“Hold off, Aziz. I’ll see to it.”

Five minutes later he spied their backs as they were engaging ER personnel in conversation. He smiled and returned to his office. Henri and Dr. McKeag were on a surprise inspection tour.

As he walked into his office, the phone rang. “This is Hana in ER. There are two official looking men talking with our doctors.”

“Thanks for notifying me, Hana. They are official.”

As planned in advance, the receptionist from each department notified Mike of the strangers talking with personnel. The system was working.

It was over an hour before he was welcoming them into his office.

Dr. McKeag said, “You don’t seem surprised to see us.”

Mike laughed. “That’s because my network has kept me informed of your every move. Welcome. Ready for some coffee?”

Henri smiled. “We still have some departments to visit but we need the coffee. So far, we are impressed.”

Dr. McKeag said, “What impresses me is the respect and loyalty that you have from all levels of staff, Mike. If the rest of our visit is this positive, you get a 4.0 rating from me.”

Thank you, sir. I hope you will join me for lunch.”

Henri said, “We were hoping for an invite. Dr. McKeag wants to discuss your idea of a mobile clinic.”

There was no way to restrain Mike's passion and enthusiasm for his idea. "I saw this in operation and discussed the details and results while in Thailand on the Myanmar border.

They use two large closed trailer vans. One houses dental chairs and x-ray equipment at one end and an ER set up at the other end. The other van is divided into consultation cubicles and a small lab.

In Thailand, I assisted the OBGYN while Marie worked PT with club footed toddlers.

There were some surprising unexpected outcomes. Either through fear or ignorance, people do not come to the regular clinics with certain problems but when families show up for other reasons, surprising discoveries are made. Two of the most frequent in Thailand were cases of HIV and club feet."

"If possible we could have a smaller truck loaded with supplies for the staff or to dispense as the need seems apparent."

Mike could see that Dr. McKeag was buying in. He paused, hoping for an early response and he got it. "That is a sound idea and well presented. I will contact the Thailand people for complete details and approach headquarters. We need approval and the funds to finance the purchase of trucks and related items"

"Sir, if I may? Marie says that several months ago when she had tea with Queen Rania, they discussed the idea of mobile clinics. She told Marie of such clinics in another refugee camp in Jordan. She wants to be informed if we choose to put the idea to work, saying that the King may desire to make a contribution."

Both men laughed. Henri said, "What did I tell you, Thomas? The two of them are something else."

Three months later. Mike was called to Dr. McKeag's office for a consultation on the design for the three vehicles that would make up the new mobile clinic.

He spent three days with the designers who were using the Thailand scheme and modifying with enhancements. One of the designers was a specialist sent by Queen Rania who now had a definite interest in this experiment.

## Chapter 13.

Mike was a happy traveller on the journey home. His reception only increased the happiness as he walked into the dining area to see a beautifully set table with an aroma of roast lamb sending him a message.

Marie opened her arms for her special welcome when her hero returned from the battle fields. What excited Mike even more, however, were the long legs emerging from a very short chemise that was a special communication in itself.

After a long loving embrace and a sensual kiss, he pulled his head back so that he could look into her eyes. He swore that her eyes were dancing as she answered the question she saw in his query.

“Just as we planned since I went off the pill. All indications are that this is the day we can make our first baby. I did not go to work today. My body is alive and demanding your intimate presence.”

Mike started to speak but she placed a finger over his lips. “The feast is planned for partaking when I’m fulfilled. Come, honey.”

The celebration was under way. They loved and feasted and loved for hours and discovered a few weeks later that they had made a baby.

At breakfast, Mike asked, “Honey, when our baby arrives, do you want to go home to deliver the baby?”

“Not unless you want to do that. I would be proud to have our child have dual citizenship. While you haven’t said so, I sense we shall be here longer than originally planned. Am I right?”



“I would like to, if that meets with your approval. Our career paths took a right turn when we moved into administration. As we have been discussing our futures in the past, the outside world has been intruding. There is much to be done here that will heal persons enough to enable them to escape this prison.”

“Of course I want to stay. We both will know when it is time to depart.”

He felt her hand caress his thigh. “Do you have enough energy left to make me sure that we create a baby?”

It took four months but the sight of two large forty-two foot vans and a one ton van drive into the area behind the clinic. Everyone who was not on duty ran out to see the phenomenon, the three white vehicles with the Arabic word “Doctors” painted on the side of the vans.

The two dentists and their assistants came as passengers accompanied by a truck with all their personal property.

Mike, Marie and Adil performed the inspection and verified the presence of the equipment and supplies before signing the receipt for the delivery.

Adil would be the mobile facility manager and serve in other ways. He and his co-worker, Bahi, would be the van drivers, be interpreters as needed and scouring the neighborhood when persons known to be in need but not attending the clinic.

Experience proved that such was often the case. Sometimes it was fear or, in some cases, the person was not mobile enough to leave the home or tent.

The other driver, Bahi Tahan, had come to Mike as another college grad who had experience quite similar to Adil. Bali was fluent in English and three Arabic dialects.

He was twenty five, unmarried with no family, all of whom had been killed during an exchange of missiles with the Israelis.

During the interview with Mike, Bahi told him that he had given up on the militancy of the rulers of Gaza and hoped to find a way to live his life in France. This was the first step, although he was not sure how to proceed.

Mike had specific instructions for Adil and Bahi. “Once you are on station and satisfied that the staff has access to all they need, I would like the two of you to start interviewing patients who are waiting in line. I need you to discover, if possible, whether anyone is aware of neighbors, particularly mothers, who are afraid to come to the clinic. Secondly, discover the identity of recent mothers who are not here today. Thirdly, ask if any have seen toddlers who show symptoms of club foot.”

“Afterwards, visit those families and discover what you can about the health of the family members. In the case of newborns, see if the mother will let you examine the feet of the child. Both of you know the signs of club foot. Try to identify the names of toddlers that were mentioned as having signs of club foot.”

“Let’s meet early the next morning to review your notes so that we can determine a course of action based on your findings.”

The caravan travelled to the point in the large camp, farthest from any clinic. Before the staff was ready, more than forty patients were standing in line, most for the dental van.

Bahi and Adil, set up the parking blocks, completed their inspections and started conversations with the people in line.

The lines kept expanding throughout the day, so many patients waiting who, eventually, were told to return in two days when the clinic would return.

Late morning, Bahi and Adil took off on their bicycles, visiting. Adil took the four young women who had recently given birth, all of whom were planning a visit to the north clinic within a short period. He encouraged them to come to the mobile clinic the day after tomorrow, saving the long walk to the North Clinic. His examination of the babies, produced one with a right clubbed foot.

The four older women, who had stayed away, were apparently healthy but were fearful of doctors because of some wives' tales that implied a visit to a doctor always caused some illness to befall the patient. Adil's attempt to assure them otherwise seemed to fall on deaf ears.

During his travels he saw a woman pushing a crude cart with a two year old boy who had two clubbed feet. He was able to get her name and the location of her tent.

His last stop was a sixty square foot shelter where the mother of several toddlers was lying on the ground in the shade. A touch of his hand to her forehead said "High temperature." She was gripping her stomach while trying to hush the children.

Adil promised to get her a doctor, the news of which seemed to bring her some relief. He cut short his tour and headed back to the caravan.

An hour later, he returned with a physician.in their combination ambulance, storage truck. Within ten minutes, the two of them were loading the woman into the vehicle. Adil stayed with the two other children until a neighbor agreed to tend to them.

That evening, Adil found out that woman had been hospitalized with a provisional diagnosis of stomach ulcer.

At the morning meeting, Adil made his report. Mike promised to send a doctor to visit with the toddler with the clubbed feet.

Bahi reported one recent newborn with a club foot, whose mother could not leave the other children. Mike said he would arrange for a visit today.

Mike scheduled the same physician to visit two elderly women who had been too sick to leave their bed today.

Based on the numbers attending the mobile clinic and the reports from Adil and Bahi, the clinics were scheduled for three times weekly.

Meanwhile Mike's load got a bit heavier, not because of additional duties but because of the mornings off by Marie who was suffering severe morning sickness. The budget provided no backup for Marie, thus putting a burden on the boss, namely Mike.

Over a ten week period, Adil and Bahi identified six women who were afraid of coming to the clinic but whose condition was severe enough to bring out a physician. Five of the cases turned out to be some form of cancer.

Twice, Bahi noticed seriously club-footed toddlers, boys, who were simply accompanying their mothers. He handed a note to the woman, to be given to the examining doctor.

At the next morning meeting, Bahi asked Mike, "Boss, it seems to me that while you are always pleased with our reports, you exhibit a special gratitude when we report cases of club foot or seriously ill women who we found in their shelters."

Mike responded with, "I didn't think it showed but there is a reason. I was born with two club feet. A generous doctor and an unknown generous member of our church made it possible for my correction. It was particularly special because my folks had no funds to pay for the kind of care that I needed."

“Wow. I can see your interest in club foot. How about the other?”

“Well, since you brought it up, my mother was a financially poor woman who would not spend money for a doctor when she hardly had money for our food. She died when I was seven. She put my health ahead of hers and paid a dear price for that sacrifice.”

“I guess you could say that every woman you find and is saved and every child whose chance at a full life is improved is a bit of a payback.”

Their silence seemed enough of a thank you.

“Hello, Mike. This is Henri. Are you free to talk?”

“Yep.”

“We just received a unique grant from an unidentified Arab foundation, granting the funds for eight scholarships to young men in this camp to continue their educations.”

“The boys upstairs decided they would like to provide opportunities for two or three dozen young men to compete for the scholarships. The decision is to have competition among current graduates so that they can obtain higher degrees and three others for a chance to pursue their bachelor degrees.”

“You’ve spoken so highly of two young men on your staff that you might want to have them apply.”

“Wow. I certainly will urge them to apply. I also have a younger man who I believe could compete successfully. Where do we get the forms?”

“On line at our Jordan website. The password is “msfscholar.”

The office was filled with excitement when Adil, Bahi and Maris, Adil’s younger brother were notified that they had qualified for the exams in which they would compete for scholarships.

Thirty one candidates competed. Seventeen were taking the exams that would win scholarships to pursue their bachelor degrees. Fourteen were competing for graduate study scholarships.

Joy was rampant when the results were announced. Maris wept for joy as he announced that he would head for Cairo. Adil was applying for admission to the Medical School at London University while Bahi was headed for the same to seek a degree in hospital management.”

Mike asked Adil, “What provision have you made for your family?”

“Mayau, who is only a year younger than I, will be the head of the family. He has a nice income from his position at the North Clinic, thanks to you.

The young men had no way of knowing that there was a masked sadness in Mike’s attitude that afternoon.

Actually, Adil had noticed but waited until everyone had gone. “Mike, there is a sadness in your eyes even though you shared our joy. Care to talk?”

Mike gulped and tried to control his voice. He finally was able to say. “Yesterday, Marie and I learned that the lump in her breast is cancerous. The chief oncologist from the hospital in Amman is meeting us at the South Clinic tomorrow. Marie also has some slight bleeding and cramping that may affect her pregnancy It is very disconcerting, to say the least.”

Of course, that was an understatement. The couple had been awake all of the previous night.

Dr. McCormick, Marie's Obstetrician, had explained that bleeding after twenty weeks was a serious matter and required frequent checkups.

"We need to stay alert to the possibility of preterm labor in which vaginal bleeding is accompanied by cramping or contractions or other symptoms. This could have serious repercussions for the baby, if not managed."

"Bottom line is that no matter when it occurs, any bleeding during pregnancy can be serious."

No sleep arrived that night.

Adil put his arm around his friend and boss. "Our family will pray to Allah for a speedy recovery for your Marie. We admire and honor her for all the things she does for us, in her quiet manner. Please let us know the prognosis and let me know what I can do for you. I owe you so much. "

"Thank you, Adil. You owe me nothing. You have more than repaid me for the small gift of giving you a job."

Adil smiled to himself. "My patron and friend always underplays the effect he has on others." Mike and Marie spent most of the night talking. Actually, they were asking questions that neither could answer. They lay in each other's arm and dampened the pillow with their tears.

Mike could not shake the picture of his mother in the hospital, the last time he saw her.

After a lengthy exam and review of the x-ray and MRI scans, Dr. Franche called Mike to join him.

“It appears to be straight forward and contained, but I want to keep Marie under close observation. She is now in her third trimester and is fatigued as well. We must dig for more information regarding the light bleeding.”

“Dr. McKeag has informed me of her importance at the clinic but I believe we need to put her health above her vocational importance.”

“Are you saying that you want Marie to be hospitalized in Amman?”

“Yes.”

Marie started to protest. “But I feel good enough”

Mike interrupted. “Honey, your health and that of the baby are what are important. I will find a way at the clinic. Your staff will break their necks for us and I will call upon Adil to be my dogsbody.”

Marie reached for his hand and smiled a thank you.

Dr. Franche said. “Good. I will arrange for an ambulance to make the long drive to Amman.”

After a tearful goodbye, Mike had no time for self-pity. With Marie gone, the demand for his time more than doubled. Her staff had no specific idea of Marie’s condition, only that she had gone to Amman for a special checkup. Thus, there was no recognition of the deep emotional state in which Mike found himself.

He had never experienced such emotion as he did when the last staff person had departed for the evening. He placed his head in his folded arms on the desk and spilled a ton of tears. Only when the tears dried up was he able to have a brief conversation with God asking for Marie’s return to good health.



He had no idea how much time had passed when there was a light tap on the door. “Mike, may I come in?”

It was Adil’s voice that was asking and signaling concern.

“Yes, please.”

Adil took a seat and waited for his friend to initiate conversation.

Finally, Mike said, “My friend, I need your help. Please arrange for your duties to be handed over to your co-workers. I would like you to come to sit in Marie’s chair. I am not sure what all your duties may be but you are a quick learner. Mata, Marie’s assistant, will take care of the routine and come to you for counsel when needed. If you feel unsure, I will make myself available.”

Adil grinned. “I will be there for you, boss.”

Two days later, Mike had a phone call from his boss, Henri. “Mike, the hospital in Amman is sending a plane for you. It seems that Marie is having a premature delivery and things do not look bright.”

“I will take over your responsibilities for the interim. My prayers are with you, dear friend.”

Mike worked hard to calm himself. He understood the risks of premies being born this early. Danger was present for mother and child. There was no way to keep his mind off the complications.

He knew that most of these babies are born at extremely low birth weight, less than two pounds. Their baby would require treatment with oxygen, surfactant, and mechanical assistance to help him breathe.

He was aware that, generally, such babies are too immature to suck, swallow, and breathe at the same time, so they must be fed through a vein until they develop these skills. They often can't yet cry

His attempt to sleep on the plane was a total failure.

He tried to visualize Baby Michael's features because babies born at this time look very different than full-term babies

"His skin will be wrinkled and reddish-purple in color and is so thin that I will be seeing the blood vessels underneath."

He didn't want to think about the statistics, such as most babies born after about 26 weeks' gestation do survive to one year but a lesser chance if born earlier.

He recalled reading that about twenty five percent of these very premature babies develop serious lasting disabilities, and up to half may have milder problems, such as learning and behavioral problems.

He was a total mess emotionally when the plane touched down

Mike arrived an hour after Marie's delivery of a still born. She was heavily sedated and seemed like a corpse rather than his sleeping beloved. He sat beside her, weeping, with one hand holding hers and the other drying his flowing tears.

"Dr. Polski, she will be asleep for six more hours. The attending obstetrician would like to answer your questions and explain what happened, as soon as your feel up to it."

"I'll come now." He squeezed Marie's hand as if to say "I'll be right back."

"Dr. Mueller rose from his chair and gripped Mile's hand. "I am so sorry, Dr. Polski."

Mike nodded his understanding.

“The baby died as a result of placenta insufficiency. About two thirds of babies who die in the womb are thought to be lost because of placental insufficiency. We still do not know the full reasons why the placenta did not work properly, but we do know that if the placenta isn't working well, the blood vessels that connect a mother to her baby become constricted. This results in a drop in nutrients and oxygen to a baby, causing growth problems.”

“Many babies who are stillborn are premature thus small for their stage of pregnancy. This was the case for baby Michael.

He suffered from reduced blood flow via the placenta.

There was heavy bleeding and cramping shortly after her arrival at the hospital, which was a contributing factor.”

Mike interrupted. “Thank you, Doctor. Was she in great pain?”

“Briefly, but, yes, I am sorry to say.”

“What is her prognosis?”

“Based on my examination and conversation when she was admitted, I would say she is a strong woman both physically and emotionally. She is weak at the moment as a result of heavy blood loss and energy expended during her ordeal.”

“Dr. Franche and I are in agreement. She should remain hospitalized until she is at full strength.”

“What about her emotional and spiritual side?”

“Our psychologist will need to spend time with her. I have a feeling that the woman I interviewed will handle whatever comes her way. In fact, she confided to me that she was prepared for the possibility of losing her baby.”

Mike asked, “Is there anything more you can tell me?”

“Only that you try to be present when she awakens, which should be about five hours from now.”

Mike was nodding off when her soft voice called. “Mike, I am so glad you are with me. I need a hug and a sweet kiss.”

The combination of their tears was dampening the pillow case beneath Marie’s head as they clung to each other.

Tears were rolling down the cheeks of the nurse who was waiting to raise the bed so that Marie could be in a half sitting position.

“Excuse me for a moment while I check her BP.” She was gone in a minute, leaving the lovers to their privacy.

Marie was gripping Mike’s hand. Both were crying. With a choked voice she finally was able to say, “Mike, dear, I am so sorry I could not bring our baby Michael to be part of our life.”

“I know but you also understand that you had no control.”

“I know but I so wanted a little Mikey to round out our family. Now, that will not be possible.”

Mike got excited. “Did the doctor say that?”

“Not intentionally. He was silent when one of the nurses asked him the question just as I was falling asleep after the delivery. Don’t get upset, Mike. We will find a way.”

“Of course, we will.”

She said, “Dr. France and I were talking when I started to cramp and bleed. We had set a date for the breast operation for two weeks hence. Now that will have to wait until I am stronger.”

Mike’s voice was rough as he said, “Let’s not talk about that now.”

“Why not? I am eager to get this over with so I can do two things. I want to be your ever-present wife and Assistant Director again.”

“Woman, you are something unbelievable. I do love you and can’t wait to have you home again.”

Embalming and cremation are forbidden in Muslim tradition so neither was available for little Michael. His washed body was buried in the cemetery just outside the camp in northern Jordan with his parents and two dozen close friends and staff present.

Marie sent a long email to her parents, explaining the sudden turn of events. She had no idea where they might be. The last word she had was that they were beginning a world tour, starting with Alaska.

After two weeks in the hospital and about ten days of rest at home, Marie insisted on putting in hours at the office. In the mail delivery of her second day back, there was an extra sized envelope with a return address of Aunt Mary’s address.

She took the envelope when she left to have lunch with Mike. When she handed him the envelope, he was surprised. “Why the large envelope? My family members usually spare the words”

He was right. Aunt Mary wrote a “Dear Mike. How are you? We are doing reasonably well. This letter came for you. Aunt Mary”

Marie watched Mike’s reaction as he pulled out the perfumed envelope.

“Dear Mike, We both seem to be lax regarding our promise to write at least once a year. I hope your family will send along this note. “I’m working at the Ross Foundation offices in Manhattan. My husband, Pat, is finishing his residency in Pediatric Surgery at the New York Medical Center. Please write to let me know where and what. Sincerely, Janet Ross (Anderson).”

Mike read the letter to Marie.

She said, in her teasing voice, “I thought I knew every detail of your life but I never heard about any Janet.”

A slight tinge of red touched his cheeks. “It was so long ago. Janet and I literally bumped into each other on the first day of high school. We became and stayed good friends for all four years. We dated but never went steady. We studied together and graduated as co-valedictorians.”

“On graduation night, we promised to write each other at least once a year. Both of us failed on occasion and I forgot my promise once you were in my life.”

“And?”

“And what”

Marie grinned. “You were in love with her when you separated. Weren’t you?””

Mike burst into a full blush. “You’re too smart. I was for most of those years but masked my feelings, since friendship not love was paramount.”

“Janet came from old money, lots of money. I didn’t. That was the elephant in our relationship.”

“Well, her loss is my gain.” Marie reached across the table to take his hands in hers and blew him a kiss.

Four weeks after the funeral, Marie and Mike were driven to Amman for a checkup prior to the scheduled date for the operation. As she sat in the waiting room she had a premonition that the schedule was going to change. She didn’t want another delay.

She dismissed the thought and let her mind focus on the plans for the near future.

The sense of foreboding increased as she gazed into the surgeon’s eyes. His expression was neutral, a sign that he was hiding something or dreading to share what he knew.

She became aware of another presence in the room, her oncologist, whose smile seemed stiff and formal to Marie. Her feelings were right.

“Marie, there is no easy way to give you the news. I am sorry to say that it is too late to perform an operation. The cancer has metastasized, spreading to surrounding organs, including the lungs and stomach.

Silence filled the room as Marie felt that her heart had dropped to the floor. Mike felt a cold chill take over his body. “This can’t be happening. I can’t lose my Marie, my love, my support.”

He moved toward Marie who had turned to him. They fell in to each other’s arm and burst into tears.

Much later, her oncologist broke the silence. “It seems that the premature delivery with all the accompanying problems, played havoc with your immune system. I have never seen such a rapid change in a person’s body as occurred within yours.”

Marie had no voice but Mike, in a choked voice, asked, “What is your prognosis?”-

The doctor, obviously trying to mask his own emotions, swallowed, and then looked directly into Marie’s eyes. “Based on my experience and some extended research, my guess is that you will feel no change for six to eight weeks.

After that period, you probably will experience a decrease in energy. It may be another six to eight weeks before you will not have the strength to rise from your bed.”

Marie had calmed her racing mind. She turned toward the surgeon. “Would an operation extend my time?”

He shook his head. “More than likely, it would give you less time. All the medical associations have thousands of documented cases, worldwide, to substantiate our belief.”

Mike released his embrace of Marie and shook the hands of both physicians. The oncologist said, “I am sending all your records to Dr. Swensen with my



recommendations to minimize your pain. You should follow his instructions so that you suffer as little as possible.”

Marie was able to squeak out, “Thank you”

The long drive back was made mostly in silence. Mike cuddled Marie into the crook of his right arm, on the left side of the back seat. Her head rested on his breast and her tears dampened his shirt while his dampened her hair, causing series of tiny ringlets to change her coiffure.

No words were required to transmit their feelings to each other. Their bodies simply talked to each other in compassionate and loving terms.

Marie insisted on no changes in their routines at home. “At least let me participate for as long as I have the energy.”

At home, she whipped up an omelet while Mike made the coffee and prepared the toast. After dinner, they lay on the sofa together reminiscing through laughter and tears.

She was saying, “I must have fallen in love with you before I knew it. On the day I met you at school, you seemed different from all the boys I had known up to then. I began planning a way to spend time alone with you.”

Mike gave a half laugh. “And seduced me at poolside on the marvelous weekend.”

“You were a great tutor for our classmates. Some of those kids provided a real challenge and would never have made the grade without your help. You gave so much of yourself, especially time while finishing three years of studies in 24 months.”

He was silent for a moment and then said, “You were always there for me, supporting and encouraging me, even before I thought of you as my girl.”

She kissed him on the forehead, saying, “I was helplessly in love. See the power you have. Now I want you to make love with me tonight.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. I want to be close to you. It has always been in these intimate moments that our spirits have been molded into one just as our bodies were one. I need that oneness now to strengthen me for the rough seas ahead.”

The next morning she sent an email to her folks. Four hours later she had a response, “We are flying to Amman. How can I reach your oncologist? I want to fly you to the Mayo clinic for a second opinion. How do I reach you by phone? We love you. Dad and Mom.”

Late the next evening, she received the call. Her dad’s strained voice told her that he had understood the gravity of her condition. Before he hung up the phone, he said, “We have a driver who says we will arrive in time for a late lunch.”

The reunion was emotional, especially given the fact that such displays had been rare in their family. Mike was surprised with the strong embrace he received from Marie’s mom. He felt the compassion of a mother for a suffering son.

He found an excuse to leave the family alone for a few hours. He went to the office to handle some important decisions that were pending.

At dinner, Charles, Marie’s dad, said, “Marie insists that she feels relatively well at the moment and that we should return to our tour.”

Frances said, “She promised a daily update so that we can return when she needs us.”

The news did not surprise Mike. It fit with the pattern of their lives as he learned those years ago.

They spent the evening bringing each other up to date, Mike about the progress with their clinic and Charles telling of their travels since leaving home on this tour.

## Chapter 14.

Marie and Mike decided to have a going away party for the young men who would be leaving soon for their respective universities. The guest list was large since every member of the clinic and the mobile clinics were invited to participate in a Palestinian form of pot luck.

Outside guests included were Henri, Dr. McKeag and spouses and the families of Adil and Bahi. That included five Nassai's and Bahi's aunt and uncle.

Dr. McKeag flew in with enough vanilla ice cream for the party goers. Adil led the group singing and Bahi's aunt, Ana, recited poetry. The entertainment hit of the evening was young Maris' three love songs.

Before the evening came to an end, Dr. McKeag announced the arrival soon of two more vans for the mobile clinics. "I understand the vans are a gift from several Kuwaiti families and have been given for a specific new program I would like Dr. Mike to tell you about the intent. "

A grinning Dr. Mike stood and said, "I will give that honor to the Assistant Director, who conceived the idea in consultation with Ana Wasan, our own Bahi's aunt, Duha."

Marie beamed as she stood to make the announcement.

"Several months ago, Dr. Mike told me about a group of older women in the States who formed an organization and called themselves "The Gray Ladies."

They were volunteers who worked in American hospitals and other medical facilities, and private homes, notably during World War II. They provided friendly, personal, non-medical services to sick, injured or disabled patients. They wrote

letters, read, tutored and shopped for patients, and served as guides to visitors and as hostesses in hospital recreation rooms and at information desks.

Bahi's aunt Duha, who has been volunteering at the clinic and I have been having coffee on occasion. She walks about a mile and half to and from the clinic four days a week. In response to my question she told me that it gave a purpose to her life as opposed to whiling away the day gossiping with others in her neighborhood."

"There was eagerness in her voice when I told her the story of the Gray Ladies. She told me, "I could get some women together and perform services for needy families. Of course, we would need training."

"That was the beginning of a series of planning meetings which have culminated in a new program to be launched. I took her idea to Henri who took it upstairs and here we are."

I asked Duha to give you the details. Since she speaks limited English and no French, she will speak in Arabic, a language most of us either know or are studying."

A shy but determined Duha was concise and clear in her presentation.

"The Green Ladies will be identified by these dark green hijab. We are now thirty six strong and well trained.

Our focus is pregnant women or recent mothers and their babies. We have been trained to look for factors in pregnant women that may produce birth defects, such as smoking habits in the household, drug abuse, alcohol usage, overall diet of the mother, specifically.

We will attempt to have each expectant mother submit to an ultrasound scanning. We may even have to overcome some objections due to fears instilled by old wives' tales or fear for whatever reason."

“If the expectant mother shows a lack of confidence in our suggestions or refuses our offers of vitamins and folic acid, our job is to convince her that a visit with our doctors in the clinic would help assure the birth of a sound baby.”

“The other focus is on mothers and babies where the recent birth was conducted by a midwife, most of whom in the camps have experience but little or no formal medical knowledge.

We will be looking for physical defects of the baby, such as lazy eyes, club feet, malformed digits or other signs of abnormalities that a new mother may be overlooking. In such cases, we will recommend a visit to the clinic and make a report to the clinic.”

The room was abuzz as she ended her presentation. Needless to say, the party was a success.

Marie spent most of the following week training her replacement. She hosted a small luncheon farewell for the departing students. That was her last public appearance.

She had ten days at home before being assigned to a bed in the clinic so that she could have full time care.

Her folks arrived from Singapore just before she was hospitalized. She was not alone for even a minute as her three loved ones sat at her side around the clock.

Obviously, Marie was unable to be present for the launching ceremony of the new program. The nurses arranged for her bed to be placed strategically so that she had a view of the parking lot. At nine thirty, the first van parked within her view.

With Mike and Charles holding up her back, she saw the staff team standing beside the van for a picture. The photographer turned and took a picture of Marie in the window. She was participating in the ceremony in her own way.

There were some minutes of tension between Charles and Mike. The subject was the interment of Marie's remains.

"Mike, we have a crypt where the ashes of both can be placed and eventually yours and ours."

"Charles, I expect to stay here to complete my contract. That will be for another nine months. I don't want to be totally separated from my loved ones."

He paused to swallow. In a tight voice, he said, "I need to visit them on a regular basis. You wouldn't want to take that away from me, would you?"

Charles was just as choked up as Mike. "No way. My Marie has frequently told me of your great love and treatment of her, but returning to visit their graves will be difficult."

"That is my dilemma. Furthermore, I have no idea where I will end up after my return to the States."

"Mike, I have an idea. Why don't we have both bodies put into sealed containers, which we can have transported to the location of your choice or our family crypt when you return? In the meantime I would like to help you find your future vocation, hopefully something in Southern California."

Mike nodded and relaxed now that the matter was settled. He had been dreading the conversation.

Mike took his turns in the evening with Marie. They lay close and reminisced and shared their inmost feelings. Marie tired quickly so the conversations were of short duration

On the last evening before she slipped into a coma, she was apologizing to Mike. "I am so sorry I could not leave the gift of a son, my love."

He puts his index finger gently to her lips, but she pushed it aside.

"I wanted to walk the Great Wall by your side, explore the Pyramids in the moonlight holding hands, make love every night in our cabin on a cruise to the Greek Islands and most of all, bear a son and a daughter."

She paused. Mike was too choked to say a word, but through their hands, caressing each other's cheeks, love was being communicated.

As someone once said, the silence was deafening.

"Mike, I need one of your loving kisses, then hold me in your arms until I sleep. I said goodbye to Dad and Mom when they were with me. I am so tired. My time has come."

Marie was interred beside baby Michael the next day. Her folks left immediately for Amman.

When Mike returned to the empty apartment, he sat looking out the window in the direction of the cemetery. Twilight came and went but Mike stayed in the dark, shedding tears until the reservoir ran dry.

He rose and went to his office. At this moment, the only thing left for Mike was his work.



Most evenings, he drove to the grave site for a visit and conversation with his Marie. He kept her abreast of the results from the field and the acceptance of the new service by young mothers and mothers to be.

“Duha has shown great leadership with Green Ladies. They are now forty five strong with four more in training.”

“Ana Wasam is working in the office and doing a splendid job.”

During each visit, he had a bit of news to share as well as a prayer and a reminder of his continuing love for her.

Henri dropped in for a surprise visit one Saturday afternoon. Typical of Henri, he came right to the point.

“I’ve come to check up on you. On the surface, the clinic is running smoothly and the feedback indicates our people are happy. How are you doing, Mike?”

“I’d say things are going well.”

“Is your counselor helping?”

“She’s great, Henri, and really helping me deal with the losses. I’m not falling apart but memories of our short time together occasionally break through at unexpected moments”

“I’m glad to hear that, Mike. Are you ready for a change in your work life?”

“That question sounds like you don’t believe me.”

“Oh, no. This has to do with a need I have. I am in overload and need better support from my staff. I want you to come to work directly as my associate, to be my number two.”

“Why me? I’ve finally smoothed out our operation with Marie’s replacement and have time to visit Marie and Michael.”

“I know. I have a replacement for you who will be well served by your staff. My offer has a benefit and a challenge for you to consider.”

“First, the benefit. You will be ready for a position as a top hospital administrator with this new position on your resume.”

“The challenge is limiting the number of visits to the grave site with the heavy load and the greater distance for the drive.”

Mike hesitated to respond. There was much to consider.

Henri filled in the silence. “Dr. McKeag wants you to have great credentials when your contract expires in nine months. You may want to renew your contract, but we think you should take a break. If you decide to return, we will welcome you with open arms.”

Mike’s mind was in conversation with Marie. “It feels like deserting you to say yes to Henri. Do you have a wish or a suggestion?”

Of course, he was answered with silence. He knew it was his decision.

Henri waited, knowing that Mike would have a struggle.

“All right, Henri. I’ll give it my best.”

Henri walked to Mike and bear hugged him, allowing silence for Mike's expressing regret to Marie for longer periods of absence.

“Your replacement, James Seaman, will be at my office on the day after tomorrow. Come at noon for lunch and an introduction. I want your evaluation. We think he is the right one but you have the final say.”

Seaman was the right man. The two of them spent three hours in conversation after lunch with Henri. They agreed on a two week learning period starting two days hence.

Mike began sorting our things on his desk at home. He would be moving to smaller quarters nearer the clinic. “What a mess. Throwing out things will be difficult but I better get started.”

It was near midnight when he finished with Marie's personal items. He now was sorting the last of the notes and papers on his desk.

He discovered the note from Janet. He decided to answer before going to bed.

“Dear Janet. It was good to hear from you. I'm sorry I let you down on my promise. I'm with DWB as a clinic administrator, serving in a refugee camp in Jordan. I will be here another nine months and have no idea where I'll land. Sincerely, Mike.”

Two weeks later, he was settled into his new apartment and ready to meet his new staff.

Maria Torino, age thirty five, beautiful dark haired woman was his executive assistant. She was married to a surgeon at the clinic and well trained and experienced in medical administration.

Naima Nasser was a Palestinian from Ramallah who had spent all but two years of her life in refugee camps. She was a well-trained twenty three years old who lived with her parents about a half mile from the clinic She was the record and file keeper who took dictation and typed at seventy words per minute.

Three weeks into his new position, Mike was invited to dinner with Henri and his wife in his apartment. Henri explained. "Here we can have champagne or wine, your choice, celebrating my new freedom from overwork and the gratitude of a loving wife."

Dodo Chirac gave Mike a thank you kiss as she handed him a flute of champagne.

They partook of roast lamb, a special rice preparation and carrots, stuffing themselves to the gills, so to speak

Dodo said, "I prepared this huge feast to put some weight back onto you two scarecrows. Michael, you are invited to Thursday dinner each week. You will be expected unless you notify me in advance. Understood?"

Mike grinned. "Yes, Ma'am."

Three months later, Henri walked into Mike's office holding a large envelope that had been forwarded from Dr. McKeag's office.

"Mike, this is an official envelope from Citibank in New York. It is addressed to Doctors without Borders, c/o Michael Polski."

Mike zipped open the envelope to find a bank draft to DWB for a hundred thousand dollars. Attached was a note from a City bank official in the trust department. “This gift from the Ross Foundation is in honor of the late Patrick Anderson. The use of the funds for your service is at the discretion of Dr. Michael Polski.”

The enveloped also contained a smaller envelope addressed to Mike. “Patrick died of a heart attack after completing a complex surgery that saved the life of a little boy. Signed J.”

Mike’s face turned pale. “Mike, are you all right? What is it?”

Mike handed him the checks and the letters.

Seeing Mike’s ashen face, Henri read the note from Janet. A quick read told him volumes, a close friend had suffered the same fate as had Mike. He put his hand on Mike’s shoulder, watching for any danger signs.

Mike eventually was able to say. “She was my best friend all through high school.”

“Come into my office, Mike. You can use a shot of brandy.”

Henri insisted that Mike take the day off. He figured that Mike could find some solace in a visit to Marie and baby Michael.

A week later, Mike dropped into Henri’s office. “What do you think is our primary need, Henri? We need to make a decision about the gift from my friend Janet.”

“You know the list as well as I, Mike. And it’s your decision.”

“Perhaps, but not without consultation. I have talked with many others and now I am asking you.”

Henri evaded the question. “What does most of the staff say?”

“Most say that a new lab here with some updated equipment.”

“I would agree. How do you feel?”

I think the same. If we make that choice, do you think the big boys will agree and if so it will be possible to name it “The Patrick Anderson Laboratory?”

“I am sure the answer to both questions is a big yes.”

## Chapter 15.

“Dearest Marie. I know you will be sorry to hear that my good friend Janet has now lost her young husband. She had even less time with her beloved than we had with each other.

Work is going well but the nights are hell. I miss you so, especially on days that I can get here to chat with you. I am beginning to look forward to the end of my work here. When I leave, I will have to desert you for a while until I find myself. I am hoping to find a position in Southern California so we can take you and little Michael close to your family.

I know that yours was not a close family but they love you so. I could feel it, particularly in Charles, during my last hours with him.

I think I will lie here under the parasol, even if the heat is oppressive.”

Most weeks, Mike managed two visits to the grave site. His work life settled into a routine He was thrilled to see the results of the caravan activities. He took time to travel with each caravan, at least quarterly

He was always delighted when a letter arrived from one of his protégés giving him an update on their studies and life abroad.

A month before his contract end date, he asked Jim Seaman, his replacement for permission to hold a special ceremony to honor the Green Ladies for their tremendous contribution to the health of the refugees across the entire camp.

At the event, he took time to name each volunteer as an equal contributor, regardless of the position each filled.

On the day of Mike's departure, the entire staff of both clinics, except for those on in urgent position, turned out for a huge ice cream party hosted by Dr. McKeag.

Tears and laughter were interspersed during the brief story time, brief so that the ice cream didn't melt.

An hour into the flight to Rome, Mike gave his attention to his personal mail which had not been opened for three days

The very top letter was from Anne Waleski Debussy. Dear Michael, "With thanks for your counsel and friendship, I am delighted to tell you of my marriage to Michel, chief surgeon at the North Clinic. I am a happy and fulfilled mother-to-be, news that will warm your heart. I just heard that your Marie died last year. I am so sorry. Warmest regards. Anne."

Mike took a ten day stopover in Italy, doing the tourist tour in Rome and then the balance of the time in a small coastal village in the south of France, where he and Marie had spent two days and one night.

When he landed at LAX, Los Angeles, Charles, his father-in-law, met him at the departure ramp and wrapped him in a bear hug while their eyes were stinging with salty tears.

His mother-in-law, Frances, met Mike with open arms just as he stepped out of the car. She took his arm to lead him into the house, where he was enveloped in the aroma of roast beef and garlic, an All American ambience.

Over drinks, he brought them up to date of the progress that the caravans had made, the fun departure ceremony and his stop in Rome He didn't mention southern France.



Seated in the den with the second cup of coffee after dinner, Mike answered their questions about his plans.

“This is Friday so I plan to rest and adjust to the time change. On Monday, I hope to start researching openings at hospitals or clinics in the area.”

The sigh of relief from his audience was almost audible.

Charles said. “That’s great. I’ve been doing a bit of research that may be of help.” He handed Mike a list of five hospitals with openings for administrative positions.

Mike was pleased but not surprised. He thought he knew Charles and his desire to make things easy for Mike to stay somewhere in the area.

“Thanks, Charles. That should be helpful. I should tell you that I won’t be available for at least thirty days. Starting next Sunday I will be travelling to six locations. I will be meeting with potential donors in three small groups and three large groups, telling of our work in Jordan. I will be accompanied by another spokesman who will be speaking on the world wide work of MSF.”

In their bedroom later, Frances said, “It looks like we will have Mike and Marie with us, Charles.”

“It does look that way. We can only hope that some offer doesn’t come along to take him to New Orleans or Philadelphia.”

Mike’s first engagement was New Orleans where he made his presentation to an audience of two hundred plus potential donors. He found himself with a bit of stage fright and stumbled a bit at the beginning but straightened out and finished strong.

There was a resounding applause and more than two dozen questions before the moderator cut off discussion and said that Mike would be available for individual questions after the meeting.

Sure enough, one of the supporters that stayed afterwards handed Mike his card, saying, “Call me at this hospital phone when your tour is completed. We have an opening that may suit you.”

The meetings in Miami and Atlanta were just as successful as the one in New Orleans. The audience in Atlanta was in excess of four hundred.

Mike was impressed with the small group of fifteen in Pittsburg. He was more comfortable in the more intimate group. He cut some of his remarks and opened himself to more questions. The give and take was stimulating. He walked away with a good feeling.

At his hotel, he received a call asking him for a date to return for another small group session when his current tour was completed.

He had similar experiences in Philadelphia and Boston, including requests for additional dates.

Despite his request to have the tour manager make it clear that he was not free to meet individually with any prospective donors, the pressure in Philadelphia came from a wealthy widow, one of MSF's largest donors.

He finally agreed but only if another couple was present. His intuition had been right. The widow was disappointed when he arrived with the tour manager and the travelling secretary.

The widow showed her disappointment and then laughed it off when she discovered that Mike was not to be seduced to a private get together.

He had been surprised to find that New York was not on the list.

Just before his presentation to the second group in Pittsburgh, the manager said, “If you can do it, Mike, we have a request from a very small group in New York to meet for dinner at the Waldorf.”

I’m awfully tired but I’ll give it my best.”

Because he had an idea that his audience would be somewhat larger, he was surprised to meet only two gentlemen in a small dining area, off the main dining room. They introduced themselves by name and said that the third party was on the way.

Thirty seconds later the familiar fragrance of her perfume arrived simultaneously with her entry

“James.”

He stood there dumbfounded, rooted in place as though nailed to the floor. She was as beautiful as he had imagined. Her tailored Armani business suit did not hide her femininity.

“Mike. Haven’t you a welcome hug for an old friend?”

Her words unfroze the surprised Mike, who moved like a flash to embrace his friend. In the midst of the embrace, his tears dampened Janet’s hair. There was no way to determine if the tears were for the joy of a reunion or the memory of the losses both had suffered.

When Janet stepped back, she said, “I’m sorry I wet your shirt and tie, Mike. I was overwhelmed, although I was ready. She reached into her hand bag for a hankie and wiped both sets of tears.

Her companions were astounded. They had never seen the boss display her emotions and definitely did not understand the relationship with the representative of MSF.

Janet turned her attention to the two, “Dr. Polski and I were close friends during our high school years. We have not seen each other since graduation day.”

She moved toward the table, a signal that Mike was to start his presentation. She introduced John Forax, COO of the Ross Foundation and Marti Miller, Treasurer, while the waiter took their drink orders.

When his presentation was complete, the waiter began dinner service and Mike was ready for questions. Most of the questions were asked by Mr. Forax. When Mike gave examples of their caravans, Mr. Miller wanted to know if Mike had any idea of the specific costs of each operation. He was astounded when Mike gave him a breakdown for each operation.

Mike didn't see any signal but both men rose together to say their good-byes before dessert was served.

When they were gone, Janet laughed, “They are very bright, Mike. I never said a word but they could see that I was saving my questions for after the official part of the gathering.”

“We can have our dessert and coffee by the window, overlooking the city.”

“Would you like to start? I want as much detail as you can give me, just like we shared in those teen years. I promise to do the same.”

He did as requested, sharing his thinking, the influence that carried forward from his grandmother and parochial school experience.

He talked of his strong drive to serve giving Janet examples. He was totally honest, not leaving out his relationship with Anne, the rape victim, the fellow marines in the hospital and storytelling with the children.

Janet pressed him for details of his life in Jordan and his working relationship with Marie and the way they worked together in the refugee camp.

Mike seemed to choke, then swallowed but was able to say, “It was a great partnership as well as a love affair. I could not have asked for more over that time. She was my support when times were rough and my biggest fan when things went well. We were truly one in spirit.”

“Oh, Mike I am so happy to hear that you found love and fulfillment while you have made the world just a bit better to live in for a lot of dislocated persons.”

Mike then spoke at length regarding the mobile clinics and the measured results. He brought tears to her eyes when he told her of the choosing the name for the new laboratory she had funded.

“Would you like an after dinner drink?”

“Just more coffee will be fine.”

After pouring the coffee, she leaned forward in her chair. “I had a great experience at Vassar. I majored in Economics and Finance to give me a start on what I would need to eventually perform the job I now have. That part of my life has been proscribed since I was a little girl

I also managed a great social life and managed to graduate Summa Com Laude. My mother would not have allowed anything less, of course.”

“After graduation, life was a bit of a bore. I was working at the Foundation, as planned, being groomed for future leadership. Being a quick study, I was bored. I talked Mom into a couple of field trips to visit sites where the Foundation was considering investing funds, such as Southeast Asia, including an MSF operation in Cambodia.”

Dad died unexpectedly during that trip so that the remainder of the excursion was aborted. I was devastated. He was my anchor since Mother carried the weight of our estate on her shoulders.

“Life suddenly took a right turn. I met Patrick at Fund Raiser for the Medical Center and fell in love almost at first sight. Patrick felt the same.”

Due to illness on the Foundation staff, I had to assume the position of Assistant Treasurer Mother, who had assumed leadership the year prior, was seeing a doctor, unbeknownst to me. She put the pressure on me to speed up my learning process by moving me to the executive office where I became her Executive Assistant.

She kept the seriousness of her illness a secret from me as well as the staff, except for Mr. Forax. It was only a month before her death that I became aware of depth of her illness.

I spent hours each of those last weeks with Mom. When he had a few hours for me, Patrick spent most of them sitting with me and Mom. His willingness to spend hours doing that, told me how deeply he loved me.

I often think that without his support I might not have gotten through those weeks.”

“Mom continued to tutor me in the fine points of leadership. During the morning of the day that she breathed her last, she said to me, “Darling, I hope I have

given you the knowledge and nurtured in you the strength to take this mantle onto your shoulders.”

Janet paused to take a breath. “Mike, how about joining me in a cup of Irish coffee?”

The two of them sat mostly in silence until the waiter departed. Janet picked up her story.

“Patrick and I were married a month later at his family home in the Hamptons. We had only a week because of his schedule. We spent the week right there. We sailed in the mornings and during the afternoons and spent the rest of the time getting to know each other in depth.”

We rented an apartment on the East Side, just a brief walk from the hospital. I worked from home as much as my work allowed, wanting to spend every moment I could with Patrick.”

Janet’s voice was getting weaker, Mike asked her to pause but she went on.

In a choked voice, she said, “I thank God for those few years I had with Patrick. We truly became one, each a part of the other’s spirit.”

Janet broke into tears and Mike was quick to take her in his arms and found his tears mingling with hers.

“Thank you, Mike. You are the only person with whom I have shared this story and my feelings. I lost my mom so soon after we finally connected and then I lost my love at such a young age. I am thankful that my work has been so demanding. It has been my outlet for dealing with my feelings.”

Mike said, “Thank you, too, for pressing me for details about Marie. I needed to talk to someone.”

Janet asked, “When do you fly out, Mike?”

“I leave JFK at two.”

“I need to hear about your plans but I need some rest. Would you care to join me for brunch? We have a small dining room at the headquarters.”

He nodded. Janet handed him her card with the address and phone number.

She gave Mike a warm embrace. “See you about ten. I’m looking forward to hearing your plans for the future.”

The brunch leftovers and place settings were removed except for coffee cups and coffee.

“If you feel free to tell me, I would like to hear your plans, short range and longer, if you’ve had time to consider.”

“I want to find a solid position in hospital administration. If that isn’t possible then I will fall back to Physical Therapy. My doctorate and a refresher course should provide the right credentials.”

“How about ten years down the road? How do you see yourself?”

“I haven’t been able to think about that. I want to be near the place where Marie and Baby Michael are interred, which means Southern California. Right now, they are still in Jordan. Red tape is holding up their transfer.”



“How often do you visit Patrick?”

“As per his wishes and my agreement, Patrick was cremated. I have my nightly visit and conversation before I sleep.”

“I have been doing the same. After all this time without a trip to the gravesite, I’m beginning to feel that the fight for transfer isn’t as necessary as I first thought. I’ve been told that it could take a year before I even get a decision.”

I’m sorry to hear that. It must be painful.”

Mike nodded.

Janet said, “I spent a long period before sleeping last night, thinking about your situation. Mike, are you determined to initiate your new career in California?”

“I hadn’t considered any other possibility. Why do you ask?”

“It was your description of the mobile clinics that put an idea in my head. We, at the foundation, have been consulting with Columbia University about revitalizing a program of mobile clinics for Harlem. Poor planning and poor leadership has brought previous attempts to disastrous endings.

Right now, the group is looking for a potential operating head of the project, one who can make significant contribution to the planning. They seem to be struggling.

Based on your history, you might be the man. If you are interested, I can put you in touch with the committee chair.”

“That sounds fascinating. What makes you think I might qualify?”

Janet laughed. “Mike, you are qualified. You have medical management expertise. Your focus had been a large population of underserved and needy people. You have been able to integrate the locals into your work force and enabled them to accept direction from peoples of all color from all over the world.”

“I think you would be perfect. The problem is how you feel about taking on such a task and on the east coast.”

“Wow. That came out of nowhere and is something to think about.”

Janet poured more coffee while Mike considered the idea. His mind ran through a myriad of questions, the biggest of which was living in Manhattan, the opposite of any experience he ever had. What about the burial crypt and his in-laws?

He asked himself, “Have I the skill to convince blacks to accept our services?”

Aloud, he said, “It can’t hurt to find out, Janet.” He didn’t notice that she let out her breath, which she was holding while hoping.

Calmly, she asked, “Will you want to meet before you return to the coast or think about it a little longer?”

“I may as well find out as soon as possible. Is this something we can do today or tomorrow?”

Janet headed for the phone. Two minutes later, she said, “Tomorrow at ten at the Columbia Business School Library.”

“I need to change flights and book a hotel room.”

“You can stay at my apartment, Mike. There are four bedrooms and four baths. I’ve often had guests.”

Mike was hesitant, but Janet acted as if it was agreed, so he accepted.

Mike was nervous as he stepped out of the cab. Janet had given him a rundown of the committee. There was the Vice President of the University, a finance lawyer from Wall Street, a well-known lawyer from Harlem, Mr. Forax of the Ross Foundation and a city councilman and a lawyer from Harlem as well as the Deputy Mayor of New York City. These were power hitters

Janet had sent messengers with Mike's resume to each during the previous afternoon. The group was in session and kept Mike waiting about ten minutes. It seemed to Mike that they had already been discussing the resume.

The meeting began with name introductions, no titles. He sensed this was a ploy by the chair to measure his grasp of titles as the discussion progressed. He knew the game and suddenly felt a calm descend over his mind.

He knew it was the lawyer who asked in a challenging voice. "Why do you think you can handle this position?"

"I have no way of knowing until I learn more of how you operate, what are your goals and tentative strategy, whether you plan to have standards of measurement for success or failure."

"May I ask if you are the governing committee or board of directors?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I see only two black members; one or both of whom probably do not reside in Harlem."

The silence in the room was deafening. Mike thought, "I just blew it."

The lawyer from Harlem, James Jones, said, “That is an excellent guess and I see your point. It may be wise politically to have the community better represented.”

Mike said, “Not only politically but also practically. Such members will be necessary to guide us around the stumbling blocks that are not even visible to nonresidents.”

The Wall Street lawyer, Frank Rosen, was the chairperson of the group.

He said, “Well put, Dr. Polski. Please fill us in with some detail of the operations you conducted in Jordan.”

Within minutes he had them spellbound with the methods he had used, the results achieved. They were really moved when he described the volunteer Green Ladies and their results.

Jones asked, “Did they actually form their own group or did your staff do the organization?”

“My wife told the story of the Gray Ladies to one of the volunteers who gathered some friends and brought the idea to my wife.”

Questions, answers and conversation continued for another half hour.

Mr. Rosen interrupted the proceedings. “Dr. Polski, would you mind waiting for a few minutes in the anteroom?”

Mike nodded and exited.

Fifteen minutes later he was listening to Mr. Rosen explain. “You’ve given us much to consider. We need to reorganize. We are prepared to ask you to be the

acting chief executive, sitting as a member of this committee to help us reorganize the governance and to plan the operation. Would you consider that request?"

"Certainly, but you should know that I wasn't expecting such a request. When would you need my response?"

Rosen laughed. "Five minutes ago, but you need to take whatever time you need as long as the answer is a yes."

The entire croup burst into laughter.

## Chapter 16

He had promised Janet to return for lunch so that he could tell her about the interview. He walked over to the Broadway subway station and took the local to Seventy Second Street

He found the bus stop for the crosstown to the Eastside where the bus would stop a half block from Janet's office. Since he was early for lunch, he decided to sit on a bench in the small park not far from the bus stop.

He removed his laptop from the case and opened to his email. The top of the list showed one from Henri, his friend and former boss. The news was not good and brought tears to his eyes.

A lovely young woman, who was passing by, stopped. "May I help, sir?"

Startled, Mike nodded. "Thank you. It is just a short disappointing email. Thank you for offering."

Henri wrote that the grave yard commissioner has refused the request because "Baby Mike is a Jordan citizen who must remain and it is right for his mother to lie beside him. You may move Marie's remains since she is strictly an American citizen.

It is strange logic but he is adamant. I am so sorry. Henri."

His heart was heavy as he sat there and pondered the implications of that message.

He could not mask his feelings from Janet, who had the truth from him within minutes. She walked him to the sofa where she held him and let the tears flow.

When the tears were gone, she ordered some tea to help him recover and then slowly turned the subject toward the morning activity.

When he finished, she suggested a light lunch and a nap on the sofa while she kept an appointment across town. “I’ll come by and take you to the apartment where you can continue pondering your decision. I may be able to answer some questions that arise.

Mike was actually sleeping when she returned. She worked at her desk until he stirred. “Welcome back, sleepyhead.”

They decided to walk to the apartment, a distance of four city blocks. Janet thought the walk might help clear the cobwebs after the long nap

Janet tucked her arm into the crook of his left arm. Did the nap help?”

“I think so but only after I quit fighting with the Jordanian commissioner. I have been offered a life time visa for any and all purposes. I never got around to thinking about this morning’ offer.”

“If you’re up to it, we can talk about it during cocktails.”

After he finished his tale of the meeting, Janet laughed. “Some things never change. That’s how you were during our high school years, directly to the point. If I know Rosen, h probably decided you were his man after your opening comment about not knowing if you were right for the job.”

“I think they were abashed when I pointed out the weakness in the makeup of the governing committee. For a moment, I thought this meeting would be aborted right then.

Janet said, "I don't think so. These men are very busy men who are looking for a strong Chief of Staff. You were a good choice. What does surprise me is the suddenness of their decision. They haven't had much time to interview may others? You must have been terrific."

Mike said, "The VP of the university seemed almost anxious during the meeting. Any idea why?"

"Only a guess. Columbia has been expanding into West Harlan and facing resistance and demonstrations. The university has the most to gain by a successful revitalizing of the failed project."

They both turned silent. Janet waited, sensing that Mike had been making a decision.

"Janet, given the news I received today and the eagerness of the committee to start as the temporary chief, I am willing. What do you think?"

"Whatever your mind and heart say, Mike. I sent you there, knowing and feeling that it was right for you. Besides, I like the idea of your being around. I feel like I found an anchor when you showed up."

Mike helped Janet by setting up the barbecue and grilling the steaks. Her apartment was the penthouse on the twenty sixth floor of the building. They had dinner on the screened in balcony, hearing the faint sounds of commuter traffic and the occasional jet headed out or La Guardia.

"I need to start searching for an apartment."

"Why not stay here as you have the last few days? We can have dinner the few evenings I am home. I am gone a good many nights and out for dinner many



evenings. You have complete privacy. Your suite has office space as well as a small room for a visitor.”

I couldn't do that. Besides, what happens when you have out of town guests?”

“There is the other suite. If you're worried about charity, we can set up a reasonable rental using Manhattan apartment standards for comparison.

Mike, you would be doing me a great favor. Knowing you are nearby to lend an ear would be worth a rental fee. There are times when I need to talk over an idea outside the bounds of the Foundation.”

Her voice was almost a pleading one.

In the end, Mike agreed, “At least for a trial.”

Mike was disappointed to find Janet out for the evening after his first day on the job. He wanted to tell her of his new office on the campus of the New York Presbyterian Hospital just off West 168th Street.

His executive assistant was a beautiful young black woman, mother of three year old twins, a graduate of Vassar (Harvard) where she studied hospital management.

Together they had read the files of the failed program, Alisha, making copious notes.

During lunch, at his request, she told him of growing up on west 129<sup>th</sup> Street, in a single family dwelling that housed two families, eleven persons, with one bath.

Because he was truly interested, she told him of the horror of fighting off gangs who wanted to recruit her, she, finding circuitous ways of getting to school every day, despite attempts to keep her from doing so.

He deduced that her dedication and two strong male teachers provided the backbone to overcome her restraints.

She wanted to know about his early years and was surprised to learn of his poverty but the sacrifices his family had made to provide Mike a good education.

He felt a kinship with Alisha from that first day, one that made for good leadership in the weeks and months to come.

It was almost a week later that Janet and he had dinner together. By that time, the excitement of the first day was surpassed by other news.

Janet left a note the next evening. "Flying to Chicago. Return is open ended."

At work, he asked Alisha to research the involvement in community affairs of Harlem pastors and a serious strong young community leader, "perhaps a strong leader of protests."

She guessed his reasons and had a short list two days later.

He took the list to add to whatever names the others proposed.

The entire committee agreed on the two pastors preened by Mr. Jones No other names were proposed. Mike said, "I believe we have one more category to consider, someone that has gained a reputation with a large group of Harlem citizens. I think we ought to invite Allen White into membership."

An immediate negative response came from several voices. “Rabble rouser, trouble maker.”

Mike said, “I understand that while his demonstrations were large and loud that there was never any trouble or any arrests. Am I correct?”

“Yes, but he would be difficult to work with and probably be an obstructionist on the board, that is, if he even agreed.”

Frank Rosen called for order. “Mike, tell us why you believe his presence would be helpful.”

“Our research shows that one of the reasons for failure was the refusal of residents to take advantage of the mobiles. Their distrust of white programs was too much to overcome and apparently not understood by the operating teams.”

“If the people trust his leadership, they can be convinced to use our services. If we can convince Mr. White to help us, we will have overcome the biggest obstacle to success.”

After more mumbling the board, rather grudgingly, gave Mike permission to recruit Mr. White.

Two weeks went by without any real progress. Mr. White remained elusive.

Mike needed someone outside the office to lend an ear and maybe offer an insight about reaching Mr. White. Janet would be perfect but she was just as elusive. They hadn’t had dinner together for weeks.

During the second and third weeks after he had agreed to rent the rooms from Janet, the two of them enjoyed the dinner hour and often watched television or talked about the struggles of their day's work.

Janet seemed to benefit from sharing her office problems with Mike and digging into his mind for ideas.

Then she was gone for days at a time. On two occasions she appeared immediately after Mike had finished his dinner. He missed those times together and wondered if Janet was having second thoughts.

One evening, he heard male laughter coming from the dining room as he came through the main entry. He moved to his room, making not a sound

Janet was taking a last sip of coffee the next morning when Mike appeared in the kitchen.

"I'm running late, Mike. I'm sorry I, won't be home for dinner. It's been a while. I hope we can have dinner the day after tomorrow."

She hardly took a breath and didn't wait for an answer. She dashed for the front door. A few minutes later, he watched from the window as she was waving for a passing yellow cab.

Two evenings later, when Mike returned, Janet was all smiles. "I have pot roast on the stove. It will be ready by the time we finish cocktails."

Janet pressed for an update and shared two stories from her work at the Foundation. They played scrabble and laughed as each tried to use unacceptable words. It was part of their usual behavior carried over from remembrance of their high school years.

It was Alisha who convinced Allen White to meet with Mike. She told Mike, “He is very reluctant and has agreed only because I am asking. Don’t be surprised if he is cool at the start of your meeting.”

The meeting consisted of the councilman, John Alexander, the Harlem attorney, Julian Haley, Mike, Allen White and Alisha to take notes, as requested by White.

The air was blue with tension. Mike was the only relaxed person in the back room of the café on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, This was White’s territory. Mike could see that White trusted the councilman and Alisha but was wary when addressing the attorney and Mike.

His body was as stiff as a board but he listened politely as Mike made his case. His posture began to ease as Mike got deeper into his reasoning and pointed to the value to the community that might accrue with White’s role as a leader of the project.

He was to tell Mike later, that he suddenly knew that Alisha had been right. “I knew I could trust you.”

At this moment, however, he had many questions for Mike and Mr. Alexander. His grammar and speech was impeccable, making Mike realize that he was well educated, not the street talking leader that appeared on television newscasts.

In the end, he said he would take the proposal under consideration, nodding but not offering a handshake.

Four days later, Alisha buzzed Mike on the intercom. “Mr. Allen White is here.”

Twenty minutes later, they were shaking hands.

Mike had dinner with Janet three times during the past two weeks. Much of the conversation was about Mike's project, as she now called it. She applauded his recruiting Allen White, who still showed up on the news about once a week.

Yesterday evening, while they were clearing the table, she said, "I think about you and the project while sitting on a plane returning to New York. I look forward to having dinner and these chats. They help relax me after one of those grueling trips."

"The stories of your days bring a new excitement into my life. Having meals with you is stimulating and a far cry from the lonely evenings since Patrick died."

Two days later, when Mike arrived at the apartment, he found a message. "Off to Africa for a week or more. Steaks and roast in the freezer. Think of me and pray for my mission while you have your evening wine. J."

Once Allen was accepted by all the board members, the project zoomed ahead. Mike used the purchasing department of the university to order the mobile units and the medical equipment for future delivery.

The board agreed that it was time to begin a search for the Chief Operating Officer. Mike was now the permanent CEO but still functioning as the operating officer.

It took two weeks for the headhunters to find a short list of candidates but only two days to know they did not have their officer. They started over again.

Mike and Alisha had sandwiches and a soft drink for lunch a couple of times each week. Just as they were finishing on this day, he asked, "Alisha, do you know Allen, personally?"

“Not well. We met at Harvard when I was at Vassar. We sat next to each other in a business management class. We also attended an Econ class one semester. He was a campus activist just as he has continued since he returned home. His dad is a professor at Hunter College and he isn’t married.”

“Thank you. Do you think you can locate him? I would like to have a chat with him, if he is willing.”

“Possibly, but I may have to leave the office for a while.”

“Fine. I can hold down the fort.”

At a few minutes before three, Mike answered the phone since Alisha was still out. “Dr. Polski, this is Allen White. I hear that you wanted to speak to me.”

“Yes. Would you feel free to meet me at the office?”

“Certainly, but not for a couple of hours. I hope to make the evening news. Would five thirty be acceptable?”

“Of course. I’ll be here. Would you like a beer?”

“That sounds good.”

Mike called Alisha on her cell and asked her to bring a six pack.

Within ten minutes of Allen’s arrival, Mike and Allen were swapping stories about their university years. Allen asked Mike how he ended up in medicine. “Nothing you’ve said so far would indicate a trail to this place.”

Mike told him about how he made choices after being injured and how his friend and boss, Henri, turned him from managing mobile clinics to heading his own clinic.

“Fascinating. It seems you were the right choice for this job.”

“Allen, what are your long range plans?”

“Not clear. I will probably set up a business here in Harlem. I am committed to help my friends and neighbors in all the ways I can. Right now, I am having small successes with the pressure I put on the city fathers and the university, our long time enemy.”

“Would you consider working for us as well as continuing on the board?”

Allen raised his eyebrows. “Doing what?”

“I would like to see you apply for the position as Chief Operating Officer.”

Allen said, “I’d love to work as your number two but what the hell do I know about medicine or running clinics?”

“You’ve studied business management and Economics, according to Alisha This position is about management, not medicine, about leading and training people.”

“I’m betting that you will be able to show the underserved in Harlem that coming to the mobile clinics will be a good thing for their families.”

“I believe it is right up your alley.”

A deep frown crossed Allen’s face “I can’t believe the personnel committee would view my resume as fitting their requirements”



“True, but if you want a shot at it and I hope you do, I will ask the board to suspend the interviews and ask them permission to hire you as my assistant in training for the position.

One problem does offer itself. There will be little time for your extracurricular activities, as important as they are.”

“You mean you would put yourself on the line for me?”

“That’s not how I see it. I feel like a very bright man, who can serve his people through this project, would be one hell of a teammate.”

“Mike, you make one hell of a salesman. I would love working with you if that is what you are asking.” He stood and wrapped his arms around Mike.

It took a mighty sales job, mostly because of the resistance by some of the black members on the board.

Janet was gone for three weeks, sending an occasional email saying that she was working hard but doing well.

Mike missed having dinner and the evenings with Janet. He buried himself in more planning and some light fiction. More than once he said aloud, “Dammit, Janet, how much longer will you be gone? This wonderful apartment is so damned cold without you. I miss you.”

He wrote emails to Henri, telling him of his project and asking about the mobile clinics and their successes or failures. Janet’s emails always arrived about seven or eight each evening, giving him a nice jolt of pleasure.

One Friday evening, he arrived home later than usual. To his surprise the front door was unlocked. “Janet”, he called. No answer. He frowned. “She must be in the shower and can’t hear me.”

He walked to her side of the apartment. There was Janet, sprawled half on and half off the sofa, reeking with alcohol and an open bottle of gin spilling its contents onto the rug

He started to call her name but realized that she was out, stone cold. He began to lift her to lie on the sofa but realized she should be in bed. He carried her to her bedroom, held her in one arm as he pulled back the bed spread, and then gently placed her in bed.

“I can’t leave her fully dressed. Her clothes will be a mess, especially if she gets sick.”

He decided to make her comfortable. He removed her shoes and her panty hose. Then he took off her jewelry. She still hadn’t stirred. He turned her on her side and unzipped the back of her dress then struggled to take off the dress.

He was folding the dress when she mumbled. “Hi, Mike. I’m too drunk to make love right now.” Her head flopped and she was sound asleep.

He removed her half-slip and placed the spread over the bottom half of her body. He wondered if she might be more comfortable with her bra removed. He remembered that Marie always sighed with relief when she removed hers, so he lifted Janet’s torso and removed the bra.

For a minute he let his eyes admire the beautiful naked woman who presented herself to him, but with a tinge of guilt he covered her body

He went to the kitchen, fixed a plate of cold cuts and cheese and poured himself a glass of wine. He went into Janet's den, next to her bedroom, sat on the sofa, turned on the TV and waited. The image of her body kept interfering with the picture on the screen.

He must have fallen asleep. He heard the shower running, looked at the clock. Three o'clock.

Ten minutes later, Janet walked into the room wrapped in a large towel with a smaller one around her head.

She sat down beside him. "I'm sorry you found me that way, Mike. I haven't been sloshed that way since a sorority party at Yale, years ago."

Mike said, "I'm sorry I wasn't home to help you after what must have been a grueling experience of some sort."

"It was but we can discuss that later in the morning. Right now what I want is your arms around me and you telling me that I'm safe."

She moved closer, pulled his arm around her shoulders and snuggled. She lay there in silence, her head in the crook of his arm "Thank you. This is my safe place. I dreamed of this all the way from South Africa."

Mike didn't know how to respond except to pull her closer.

Her head drooped a bit. "I'm getting sleepy again. Take me to bed, Mike."

He carried her and gently laid her on the bed. As he moved away, she said "Mike, stay with me. I need you close I don't want to be alone. I want your hand in mine so that I know you are with me."

“Are you sure, Janet?”

“I am and I’ll explain later.”

Janet was asleep in minutes but sleep eluded Mike. He was remembering the thoughts running through his head recently while Janet was absent for so long.

He missed the sound of her presence, the conversation at dinner, the bumping of hips in the kitchen. He found himself thinking of Janet and what was happening someplace in Africa, wishing her success and hoping she would be free to share.

Twice, recently, he had awakened from a dream of events during their high school years. He had loved her but he knew she did not love him.

“Wake, you sleepy head. Do you have to work today?” Janet, dressed in a short cotton robe, was standing over the bed with a big grin. “Breakfast is ready.”

“I can take the day off.”

“I’d like that. I have so much to talk about and a few things to ask of you. Have a shower while I finish making breakfast.”

Seated side by side on the balcony, having more coffee, Janet tried to explain the events leading to her actions at home.

“After weeks of negotiations, our talks with a coalition of African governments failed to produce agreement. I was downhearted and couldn’t wait to get on the plane which was scheduled to leave the next day.

That evening, after dinner, one of the host delegates called to ask if he could come up to discuss a separate proposal.

Within ten minutes, he switched subjects and was pressing me to have sex.

Of course, I refused, but he began to get forceful. I was shaking with fear and anger, especially as he pushed forward. I was backing away and bumped into the vanity next to my bed. I remembered putting my mace spray in the top drawer. I reached and pulled out the spray and pointed it at my predator.

Without a word, he turned and rushed out of the room and I, with my knees giving way, fell back onto the bed, shaking and crying.”

“Did you report the incident?”

“No. He is a senior official in this government and I did not want to get into any delay. I wanted to get home.”

“I slept very little on those long flights. My mind was stirred with a thousand thoughts. I cried for my Patrick, whose life ended too soon. I cried for your loss of Marie.”

“I kept cursing that official and his brazen idea of having sex with me. I was really into self-pity.”

“I realized that some of the travel and late business dinner dates were ways to keep me busy, keep me from facing the fact that I was lonely.

With Patrick, I had a partner who was available, if not in person, then by phone, a partner who would listen to my problems and help me work through to some solution.”

“The more thoughts that floated through my head, the more upset I became. I was overly tense. I tried belly breathing to relax but the good effect was short lived.”

“I began thinking about the two weeks prior to my departure. I started wondering if you might be the answer to my problems. The very thought of that seemed like a betrayal to my love for Patrick.

I was afraid of how you might react to a discussion of my feelings, fearful that such a conversation might bring a break in our friendship.

I didn’t know what to do. I had, intentionally, stayed away many evenings, hoping that my feelings might change, but to no avail.”

“I had a couple of martinis during the last half hour of my flight. In the cab from Kennedy, I was focused on you. “Mike will be there to listen to my woes and to comfort me. I was feeling good.”

“What a letdown to walk into an empty apartment when expecting to be welcomed home by my close friend. I cursed. I was angry with you for not meeting my expectations. Damn, damn, damn.”

“I found a gin bottle and didn’t bother with vermouth. The last thing I remember was walking across the living room floor, really angry with you.”

“When I awakened with a headache, it took me forever to figure out the chain of events. My heart warmed when I reckoned that it had to be you who cared for drunken me and got me to bed.

In the shower, I came to understand that I needed you to be in my life.” She reached over to take his hand in hers.

Mike was dumbstruck with her statement. He started to say something but she cut him off. She laughed and said “This is my soliloquy”

“Dearest Mike. All those years ago when we were seniors, I was sorry that I could not return your love. You could not mask your love for me but I was being trained for “something greater”, according to my mom. She liked you but she had other plans for me, plans that never worked out.”

“I have been fighting an idea which snuck into my heart and brain that evening at the Waldorf.

Subtly, I found myself growing fonder of you each evening that we had dinner or spent time chatting. You were breathing life into a lonely body.

During the several evenings just before this trip, I found myself thinking of you, only steps away, hoping we could find a way to take our friendship to a different level”.

“At first, I was glad to be leaving on this long trip so I could focus on other matters and forget this silly idea. Within hours, I realized that I was looking forward to the return, to telling you what was happening.”

“Listen to me rambling. Mike, I have to ask. Do you think that you might find some way to love me again? It won't be the way you loved Marie or the way I loved Patrick, but I have feelings for you. I have to ask, even at the risk of losing a friend.”

She realized that she was gripping his hands, subconsciously trying to will a yes response from Mike.

He pulled her hands to his lips, then said, “I am so glad you found the will to tell me and ask me. I have spent nights wishing for a way to tell you that I needed

something more between us, but could not shake the memory of my young love and did not want to risk losing the friendship we have now.”

Janet rose. “What welcome words from your lips!” She moved to his lap and placed her head on his breast. His arms automatically enfolded her and his lips buried into her head. Then, slowly, she lifted her face so that his lips could find hers and taste the sweetness that she offered.

He lifted her into his arms and carried her toward the sofa in the living room. He placed her so that he could sit and have her lie with her head in his lap.

Janet said, “Come lie down beside me. Remember how we lay beside each other on our sofa while making out. We pressed our bodies so tightly, arousing each other until I was gooey and you were about to explode.”

Janet giggled, sure that this time there would be a different ending to their making out.

Mike said, “I remember, only too well. Lordy, How I missed you. Afterwards, I often went to sleep reliving that special time at the NemaColon Country Club when we made love to each other.”

Janet was silent but pulled Mike closer. When she spoke, her voice was just a whisper.

“I didn’t truly appreciate you, Mike, until I began dating guys at Harvard. Somehow, they seemed to fall short of what I was hoping for. I remember that was true about other boys during those high school years but I was sure things would change once I was away.”

Mike said, “That’s a surprise. I imagined a glamorous belle of the ball social life with few memories of the teen years.”



“Oh, I had fun with a very busy social life but there was that recurring image of my Mike. Of course, all that changed when Patrick came into my life. How about you before you met Marie?”

I dated very little until my senior year, when I fell in love. I was engaged but was jilted when my fiancée realized that I was going on active duty. She did not want to face the risks that I might confront.”

“During my stay in the San Diego hospital, I had a couple brief affairs during a five month period. I must admit, that like you, a whole new world opened for me when Marie came into my life. The fact that we both wanted to use our talents on behalf of others was a special bonus.”

In the silence that followed, two restless bodies began some intense communication .Lips without words were conveying a message of passion while their bodies were shouting desire.

Janet moved her lips and nibbled. “I am totally gooey and I can tell you are ready but I don’t want to rush. So many wonderful memories are coming to mind.”

Mike asked, “Why don’t we continue with the way we started that first time?”

“What a wonderful idea!” She immediately pulled away and started to undress Mike. In less than a minute two beautiful naked bodies were holding hands on the way to the shower where they initiated the same ritual as they performed so many years ago.

It was a joyous moment, the sadness and seriousness that pervaded their lives recently was washed away as they splashed water at each other, recalled the ticklish spots of the other’s body and ending as they melted as one.

Much later, Janet was attempting to regain her breath and holding onto Mike as though he might escape.

Mike had no intention of being any place else.

## Chapter 17.

Allen, whose title was “Special Assistant to the CEO”, was the quick study that Mike had foreseen. He was making huge strides and within a month negotiating the final purchases and with the chief medical officer was organizing the layout of the trailers.

He had an excellent inventory control system set up. He had asked for help from the Business School at Columbia, much to the pleasure of the board. This was a good step toward bridging the large gap between Harlem and the university.

Six weeks later, The New York Times business section, headlined the story of his promotion, the main story of the day’s issue. The Wall Street Journal also published a story of the event.

A few weeks later, on a Saturday morning, Janet snuggled her body tight to Mike. “Honey, if you recall, the day after my return from Africa, I mentioned the idea of wanting a child with you as the father. Do you remember and, if so, have you given it any thought?”

Mike grinned. “I have and wondered if you have decided that it was a whim.”

Janet laughed. “Why do you think I’ve kept us practicing so often?”

Mike pulled her to lie on top of him. “I love you, Janet Ross. Will you be willing to be my wedded wife?”

“I am more than willing, Michael Polski.”

“I dislike bringing up the subject of money but this is a must. You do promise that all your financial assets will be set up as a trust for our child. I am not marrying you for your money.”

“That is ridiculous. I will adhere to your request but there will be only the three of us. If I were to go before you, I need you to manage our wealth on behalf of our offspring.

You can’t avoid being a wealthy person, Mike. As long as we live, you are part of me as I am of you. The money is a responsibility that has been given to us.”

“I don’t want nor expect anything to change. These last weeks have been all I can ask of life, thanks to you, Mike.”

He nodded his understanding. Of course, she was correct. He switched subjects. “Janet, how big a wedding will this be?”

“Honey, I have no close relatives. I also don’t want to make this a public spectacle. What do you want?”

“Something quiet would be great.”

“Let’s elope to Maryland. If we apply for a license in New York, it will be instant news. The elopement will be old news by the time it gets here from Maryland.”

“I’d love to spend a short honeymoon in D.C. doing the tourist things and having pictures of a happy couple in front of places like the Lincoln Memorial, Arlington Cemetery, the White House and other sites.”

“I like that.”

She pinned his arms to the bed and wiggled. “That, Mike, was the cleverest seduction, any woman could experience.”

Brunch was served much later.

While having the last of the coffee on the balcony, Janet said, “I’m off the pill as of now. Can you take a week off, starting the third Friday from today?”

“Sure. Allen is on top of the project.”

“I’ll set up reservations. Would you like to spend a day doing the sites in Philadelphia??”

“Great. Let’s do that. How do we travel? Do you want me to rent a car or shall be go by train?”

“Would you mind I hire a limo? We can view the scenery by taking some side roads instead of the interstate.” She giggled. “If we don’t like the scenery, we can make out in the back seat.”

Mike and Allen performed a last minute inspection of the trailers and crews on Monday at eight A.M. Allen had two locations arranged in West Harlem.

Allen had arranged for one of his friends to drive them to the first location at Lexington and 158<sup>th</sup>. Mike gasped when they arrived and saw a double line of patients standing in line for most of a city block.

Allen laughed “This is the morning shift. There should be a larger crowd for the afternoon shift.”

Mike was in the office at six thirty when Allen came in to verbally repost the day’s action. He finished a glowing report with, “We had to tell fourteen families to come two days from now. We worked over time for two late arrivals with emergencies. One case we sent to the hospital in a cab, because it was more than we could handle.”

Mike took Allen for a celebratory drink but it was Allen who was thanking Mike for giving him the opportunity to find a career in which he could help his neighbors.

The blissful couple opted for a small community outside of Baltimore. The wedding was short, performed by a Justice of the Peace and two witnesses who were next in line for their own ceremony

Wrapped in each other's arms, they saw nothing of the scenery during the thirty mile drive to Washington.

Charles, their driver, braked a bit roughly, not like his usual stop. He thought it better to warn his passengers that a bellman at the Watergate Hotel would be rushing to open the limo door.

Fifteen minutes later, Mike was hanging the privacy card on the door handle.

The week was all they hoped for, including visits to the House and Senate proceedings as well as the White House. They walked so many miles through the museums of the Smithsonian that a foot soaking was the order of the day. They sat on the edge of the tub teasing each other until Janet pushed Mike into the deep warm water and rolled in on top of him, both sputtering and then laughing.

The next day was more of the same at a string of art galleries, and museums, ending at the National Gallery. The foot soaking ended as it had the day before.

One would think that these were two kids on a weekend romp instead of high powered executives.

The drive home included an overnight stop in Princeton. Janet suggested a visit to the university a possible place for their offspring to get a topnotch education.

When they had checked into the Inn, Janet said, “Honey, I believe this is the day. According to the calendar and a slight rise in temperature, and your seed, we are about to conceive”

Weeks later, she was able to confirm her guess.

“Welcome home, boss. Did you enjoy your visit to D.C.?” Allen and Alisha were standing in the doorway of his office.

I did. I wore out a pair of shoes but enjoyed every step. I didn’t meet the president but I caught a glimpse of him at the White House. What’s happening here? Are we still in business?”

Allen laughed. “We have more customers than we can handle. We need another mobile unit or even two. I had a visit from two of the community activists in East Harlem, asking me how they could get a share of the pie.”

“Really?”

“Yep, although I believe they may have ulterior motives. I said that I would put their request through channels and indicated that red tape might delay action. I figured we need time to investigate these two to determine if they have the right credentials.”

“Good move, Allen. Meanwhile, have you gone to the board with a request for more mobiles?”

“I talked to Frank, our chairman, who said he would present the request at the next meeting. He reminded me to have all the statistics ready for a cross examination.”

“Are you ready?”

“I think so. If you have the time, I would like you to double check the presentation and the pictures of the waiting lines.”

“Good. First, take me to one or two locations for today’s operations and after lunch you can put on the dog and pony show.”

Mike was impressed with the staff work and the smiles of satisfaction on the faces of the patients. He also witnessed the orderly waiting lines, mothers with crying babies and neighbors relieving the mothers with a babe in arms.

Mike was more than impressed with Allen’s data and pictures. He also learned that the stimulus provided by the care from the mobile clinics had caused a heavier load at the emergency department of the Presbyterian hospital on 168<sup>th</sup> Street.

“Great job, Allen. The board will have a hard time denying your request. They will be particularly pleased that you have recruited some retired physicians and nurses to complement your paid staff. I hope you included some kind of bonus for those volunteers.”

“Meanwhile, I will concentrate on the East Harlem request, starting with my favorite firm of investigators and some of the police precinct captains, who should know your two visitors. Let me have their names.”

Two weeks later, Mike watched Allen make his pitch to the board. Half way through the presentation, Mike knew that Allen would get one unit now and a promise for another within six months.



Janet could hear the excitement in Mike's voice as he gave her a full report that evening. She was feeling a bit of satisfaction that she had recommended to Mike her thoughts of his making a bid for the job.

"Mike, it looks like you are working your way out of a job."

"I thought about that on the way home. Allen has the right stuff and is a natural. He certainly has the entire board pleased with the results. I am sure that they are aware of reduced tension in West Harlem, a year of fewer demonstrations and nonviolence brought on by a more trusting community."

Janet asked, "Have you mentioned our marriage to Allen or others?"

"Nope. Someone will bring it up soon."

"Honey, how do you really feel about my retaining my maiden name just as I did when I married Patrick?"

"As I said earlier, I think that is a great idea. The world knows you by that name. Besides, we already agreed that the baby will be \_\_\_\_\_ Ross Polski."

It would be weeks before they agreed that the name would be Michael Ross Polski.

In the meantime, Mike was prepping Allen to apply to the board as Mike's successor. He had given early notice to the chairman and notified Frank Rosen that he was recommending Allen for the CEO position.

One evening as he lay on the sofa, his head in Janet's lap, she asked, "When do you plan to offer your resignation?"

"At the next board meeting, tomorrow."

“Are you having any second thoughts about your new job?”

Mike laughed. “No way. It’s the best of all worlds. I get to seduce my boss on any given evening without fear of breaking company rules. All my associates will be jealous.”

Janet laughed as she leaned over for a kiss. “I like my position better. My new chief executive has no place to go for relief from sexual harassment. Speaking of sex, I hope you are not getting a headache tonight.”

Mike grinned, pulled her down to lie with him as a prelude to their acting out their mutual desire.

At breakfast, Janet asked, “I decided on one last trip. I want to be on the safe side. If you approve I want to make this trip to provide a bonus for you. I have an invite from the queen of Jordan to help fund one of her new educational projects.”

“I thought that after our business with the queen, you might want to visit Marie and Baby Michael. You will also have time to see some friends from your past.”

Mike gasped and choked. He was speechless and his face formed into a frozen grin. Janet gave him a long warm hug. She needed no words to tell her the joy that she brought to Mike.”

Mike was a bit player in the court of the Queen Rania during the negotiations, but he was a keen observer of the negotiating skills of the queen and Janet.

The following day his driver took him north for a visit with Dr. McKeag and Henri, his first boss at Doctors without Borders (MSF). The surprise of that visit was the presence of Adil who had been Mike’s protégé and closest associate in those days and now was a medical intern at the new MSF hospital in Amman.

It was an emotional gathering at dinner that evening at the home of Henri and his wife and a surprise guest. Seated in the living room when Mike arrived was Janet who had been flown from Amman in the queen's plane.

Just after daybreak the next day, Mike was driven to the grave site for a conversation with Marie. He chatted for about twenty minutes. He closed the conversation with, "This is good bye Marie. I think you would approve of Janet, whose love for Patrick was like ours. For some reason God gave me a second chance, another chance to be loved and to love another."

"Our son will also be Michael. Good night sweet princess. I am certain you are in a good place."

Mike and Janet flew to Cairo to see the sights and to set up two annual scholarships at the American University, in the name of two Michaels, scholarships for Palestinian refugee boys, to be administered by Henri and Adil.

Little Michel made his grand entrance at 5:30 A.M. on the anniversary date of his father's birth.

The end.