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Burning Bridges As We Go

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*Authors Note: Short story characters, I've been told, should change in some fashion from the beginning of a story to the end. A progression of development or conflict that satisfies the reader's interest. I disagree. Some of my favorite characters in literature don't change. They stay as they are insisting the world change around them. Pete Dexter's Paris Trout is very much this way. Which, in my mind, sets up a better conflict. So when I started writing this story about an old man going about his day, I didn't want him to change. I wanted the him to stay the same – and use his steadiness to reflect the world changing around him. Which, in my mind, is the more interesting circumstance. Read on and let me know if you agree or not.*

## **The Long Road Taken Home**

As far as mirrors went, Ben considered the cheval mirror standing tall in the corner to be more thoughtful than his wife. Especially during the early morning hours when his image reflected a softer, younger version of himself. Which he rather liked.

"You waste half the morning standing there," his wife Martha would chastise, "especially considering how the blessings of old age are denied so many. Our own dear boy Owen being one. And two of my uncles on my mother's side during the war."

*Well, Ben thought, I suppose she's right – I should count my blessings. Because not all men are blessed with both a pragmatic wife AND a considerate mirror.*

Buttoning up his Carrington Tweed coat --- a recent gift from his daughter, Julie – and grabbing his favorite Donegal cap and wool scarf from the dresser, Ben brought to mind an old Georgian poem that went something like, "Take caution gazing in the mirror too

long lest such aspiration prove false, for your wickedly corrupted years.....” *Well, it sounds better in Petrizi’s original Russian, he thought, but Martha’s point is the same -- time passes, we decline, and those who appreciate the gift of life benefit best. So sorry Mr. Mirror, but I’ll defer to the wife. Though I do appreciate your efforts.*

Moving quietly into the kitchen, Ben found Martha standing straight backed at the sink, hands a blur shedding the skins from a crop of potatoes and carrots. She’d risen with the dawn, as was her custom, dressing in front of the same mirror, but Ben doubted the mirror spoke to her as it had him -- or even tried. Martha had no patience for such whimsy. Efficient function was her sigil of purpose -- hair pulled back, tichel on, dress unwrinkled, apron pressed, shoes free of scuff. The mirror there only to reflect what she’d taken pains to ensure – she was who she was, content to be so. And no *mirror, mirror on the wall* vanity was ever going to fool her otherwise.

Opening the refrigerator door, Ben quickly hid behind so he could drink direct from the Byrne’s chocolate milk bottle -- remembering how he did the same as a little lapochka in his own mamachka’s kitchen -- her laughing fit to be tied over his milk mustache. Ben once tried to tease Martha similarly when they were first married -- twirling his milk mustache like an evil henchman come to collect the rent. But Martha took no joy in such silliness. Going so far as to wonder, “Why does wasting milk make for comedy?” She could be quite provincial.

“Do you have to drink from the bottle when I’ve asked you not to?” Martha commented presciently, her back to him, still focused on her work. She was feeling pressed for time, he could tell, with Thanksgiving tomorrow and family and friends set to arrive early. “For heaven’s sake,” she continued, “the Egyptians went to all the trouble to invent the glass and cup, which has been made available to you in this very kitchen for some time, and *still* you drink from the bottle. You’d think a grown man would’ve figured out the hygienic practicality of such things by now. But apparently not.”

Without a word, Ben wiped his milk mustache on his sleeve, closed the refrigerator door, and walked over to his wife. Giving her shoulders an affectionate squeeze while kissing the back of her neck and whispering, "What would my world be without you reminding me I am cared for, my sweet little cornflower?"

"Don't try to butter me up," Martha replied a little flushed, trying not to smile, but secretly pleased. "It's a bad habit and you're a grown man. You should behave like one. Now be on your way! I've got lots of work to do and I don't want you in my way begging for something to eat when you get hungry later."

Ben laughed heading for the front door of their walk up apartment. He'd heard her of course. He *always* heard her. But if he'd developed any superpower during their long marriage, it was knowing when Martha was speaking rhetorically and when she really meant to dialogue with him.

"Be home by two, please," she called after him, her arms still flying. "No later! We're expecting Betty and Earl tonight, so you'll need to rest before. Your shirt will be stained when you get home so you'll also have to change and wash up." And then more to herself, "though God knows how you get so dirty. But still, grit and grime all over you like a kid playing in a barn -- leaving me to launder your shirts. Again."

He was almost to the front door when he heard her call, "Ben?"

"Yes, my little *pelchka*?"

"Can you stop by Julie's on your way home and pick up my large roasting pan? The silver one with the handles on the side. She borrowed it for Sukkot and has yet to return it. I'll need it to cook the turkey tonight."

"Can do."

"Thank you."

“Your welcome. Glad to be of service.”

Leaving their third floor apartment, Ben recalled a book he’d read -- The Princess Bride by S. Morgenstern. Well, it’d actually been written by a fella named William Goldman, but Goldman kept referring to Morgenstern as the author despite being the real writer. In the book, the parents of the beautiful *princess bride* were described as common folk who’d been waging a pitched battle of wills against each other over the entirety of their lengthy marriage -- counting coo each time one or the other landed an insult during the day’s progression.

*You really have to question the union, and psychology, of marriage,* Ben chuckled, *to write such things.*

Ben believed he knew a thing or two about marriage as well – how intimacy derived from tension was easier to sustain for some, rather than being openly vulnerable. He himself preferred gentle teasing and touch, but Susan had endless reserves of tension, along with a much sharper tongue, and needed outlets before she allowed herself to openly feel affection. It wasn’t her fault really – her own parents had pitched a much worse version during her youth. But he did wish she’d ease up a bit and just relax every now and then. Still, she was a good woman where it mattered. And Ben learned to keep the peace by falling silent and being patient. Like the submarines he once listened for manning his corner radar station aboard the USS Endeavor.

*“Ahh, well,”* Ben thought, *“patience can be a conquering spirit too. Did not Our Lord say patience was a virtue much better than pride?”*

Ben headed for the stairwell to descend three floors to the lobby below. He could’ve used the elevator like everyone else in the building, but preferred the quiet stairs. Along with the oddly symmetrical view of the open staircase winding down like a

carousel. It reminded him of the Guggenheim and the first time he'd seen a Degas painting.

*Amazing man, amazing talent*, Ben thought. He'd teared up staring at *L'Absinthe*, marveling how sad the people in the painting were. You could feel it. *They were so...LONELY!* And remembered wishing the man in the painting would turn to the woman seated next to him just to say, *Hello! Nice to meet you. How are you today?* Acknowledge her...connect....maybe fall in love. But they never did. Which, Ben suspected, was Degas' point. *We are all alone*, Ben thought, *but how much of that is due to pride? And fear? And how truly miraculous of Degas to evoke such longing with only a few brush strokes of colored paint on canvas! Amazing!*

Outside, on L Street, Ben turned left heading toward 14th Ave. Usually, he'd turn right and walk the two blocks over to Lincoln Park where he'd spend the morning playing chess with his friends and welcoming newcomers to the "Old Man Park Brigade." Their motto being, *Stale breadcrumbs and opinions offered freely*. But not today. Today was "bank day." Bank day being the one day each month he walked the five long city blocks downtown to the Republic Bank to deposit his retirement check. He could've arranged for direct deposit some time ago, as his daughter Julie often asked him to do, but Ben felt no inclination to "keep up with the times." He actually preferred walking his check in. It served as a pilgrimage of sorts. A monthly metronome marking the passage of time from which he could assess life's progression in relation to the world around him - - one retirement check at a time.

"Plus," he told his daughter, "Seeing the world change keeps old memories alive. I remember how things were and I see how things are. I even see you. Or the you growing up -- when you used to walk with me and we'd have our little 'adventures' exploring the city. Remember visiting the lions at the library -- the pair you named Laurel and Hardy -- whom you hoped one day would come alive so you could take

them home? And that little courtyard garden outside the Gardner Museum that bloomed so pretty in spring and smelled like lilacs? Or all those lunches at Katz deli, you with your egg cream and me coffee and toast? So many memories kept alive by the simple act of taking a walk. It's all very comforting, you know."

"Yes, Daddy, it was all great. But, I don't understand why you can't take the same walk without a five thousand dollar check in your pocket. I'm worried someone will rob you. It can still be dangerous out there, you know."

"Whose gonna mug some old schlemiel like me? I look like I'm worth anything?"

"Well," Julie smiled back, "You're worth a great deal to me."

"Ahh, you're so sweet. Apparently I didn't beat you enough as a kid."

"Daddy!" she laughed giving him a hug.

When Ben entered the downtown corridor, he immediately shifted closer to the building face to avoid the people rushing by on the open sidewalk. They were all so much younger and faster now. And acted like pedestrian undertow – creating dangerous torrents sweeping you further and further from your destination if you got caught up in their pull. Once, not so long ago, Ben did get caught and found himself carried all the way to the waterfront before he could break free. After which he'd hailed a taxi to the bank, feeling dejected the entire time over his physical strength no longer protecting him from the forces of this world. Once upon a time, he'd had plenty. And it'd served him well, both in the war and in his career building sets and hanging lights for the Barrymore, the Imperial, and all the other theaters along west forty-fifth. But, alas, no longer.

*I don't know if I'm ready to accept my age, Ben thought, Especially since aging is mind over matter, yes? So why can't I force my mind to accept what matters? That I've grown old.*

Ben remembered his own father's take on aging -- "There is no cure for the common birthday!" His father would bellow every time his mother brought out the birthday cake and signaled for the family to gather around so he could blow out the candles. "We must fight! Bravery is called for! Perseverance too! The fates challenge us and we must answer!" After blowing out the candles, his father would toss up his hands to the heavens and call out, "There! I have answered thee, oh fates of my life!" Then he'd make a show of kissing his wife and children on the cheeks while fiercely whispering, "You are my answer to the fates! I love you! May you live long and healthy!" Then he'd cut into the cake and give everyone a slice. Till his last cake at the age of fifty-five when the fates decided his three-pack a day Chesterfield habit had sufficiently weakened his lungs to let the cancer in -- which ended his life before the next year's candles could be lit.

*You were so right, Pop, Ben thought, at least as far as the fates go. Invest in your family and you'll live long knowing they carry the memory of you in their heart. God rest your brave soul.*

If pedestrian currents in the downtown corridor held power, the cross current of people coming and going from building storefronts were even more so. Each awning represented a challenge to cross -- not unlike a child checking for cars before crossing the street. Because city dwellers shot out fast, distracted from their intent merge to toward their next destination. With old men like him rarely considered. Especially in front of those new coffee places with the green logo, which seemed to have multiplied exponentially on just about every city block. People forcibly launched themselves in and out, caffeinated like supersonic jets, staring at their phones guiding them to their next target.

*When did the world become so busy? Ben wondered. When did everyone speed up beyond my ability to keep up? Ben thought.*

His mother, before her passing, looked at it this way. "People think busy makes them important. And being important makes them busy," she'd bemuse. "But one should never be so rushed as to not think of others." It was a quote from Mother Teresa oft repeated throughout Ben's youth. Which would come back to him as an adult when he occasionally wanted to skip his weekly visits to her Bowery apartment – usually after working a long week, or due to family demands, or just because he felt too tired to trudge out there. But he did anyway, week in and week out, because that's what a good son did for a mother after her husband passed away too soon.

*I actually miss those evenings with you, Mom. Especially when I took Julie with me. She got such a kick playing dress up with you. And swore you were an exiled princess -- like Princess Gayellette from the Frank Baum stories -- with your thick accent and penchant for beaded dresses and glittery jewelry. She never believed you were just some chorus girl from Old Vaudeville who couldn't throw away a costume or bracelet or head dress to save her life. God rest your loving soul.*

Ben knew to be careful crossing storefronts in the downtown corridor because he'd recently suffered a significant fall the previous month. A suit clad woman in high heels, busily leaving the coffee shop at 12<sup>th</sup> and L St, body checked him and spun him off his feet. Hitting his head as he fell to the ground.

"Hey lady!" yelled a nearby skateboarding teenager who'd seen the whole thing, "Like be careful! Watch where you're going!" The boy blocked the crowd from trampling Ben despite the woman never slowing or stopping -- ignoring both as she plunged back into the pedestrian river and raced away.

"Whoa, *brah*," the teenager commiserated, "that was a gnarly fall. She totally ollie'd your deck right out from under you. Tough spill, *dude*. But don't sweat it. I've like



totally crashed and burned dozens of times. You just gotta get back on your feet without thinking about it. Here let me help you stand up.”

“Ahh, thank you very much, young man,” Ben replied still a bit dazed.

“No problem, *brah*. There you go, all set to ride. God bless, dude.” The boy took off, cutting back into the crowd.

Had Ben not been so shaken, he would’ve thanked the boy proper. *Just when you think you’ve got people figured out, he marveled, someone comes along to defy expectations. God bless you too, my boy. Be safe on your journeys. May your...what’d you call it? ‘Deck?’ May your ‘deck’ always stay under your feet.*

Despite the boy’s help, Ben realized he was hurt. He had a lump growing on the back of his head, which already signaled a headache approaching, his lower back was cramping, and he realized he’d twisted his ankle. So, for the second time in as many months, he hailed a taxi to take him to the bank. Where the doorman, Eddie Alvarez, was surprised to find Ben emerging, looking a mess, when he opened the cab door.

“Hey there, Mr. Antonelli. You okay? Looks like you’ve torn your pants and might be bleeding a little. Let me grab the first aid kit from inside and patch you up, if you can wait a moment.”

“Thank you, Eddie, but I’m fine. Just a little unexpected tumble is all. My pride is probably more bruised than my knee. But I’m okay. I’m going to deposit my check and be on my way home. Would you mind holding the taxi for me till I return?”

“Of course, Mr. Jaffe. It’ll be here waiting for you. Are you sure I can’t get you that first aid kit? Bandage you up a bit before you go home?”

“Thank you Eddie, but I’m okay. No fuss needed.”

Ben didn't mind Eddie knowing about his fall – the man was a saint. But telling Martha would be a whole other consideration. Because if Martha knew, she'd take him right to the urgent care. And give him no peace about walking downtown if she learned how difficult it had become. So Ben lied saying he'd tripped getting into the elevator and simply skinned his knee. Martha would still make him go see the doctor – where he had to suffer a brief lecture on the perils of aging from an obviously too young doctor. Which Ben would tolerate, but only so he could continue his monthly journeys into the heart of downtown.

Today's walk to the bank had gone fine enough though, even if it had taken Ben longer than usual. Surprisingly, he was also a bit winded, and had a small headache from the effort. Which was unusual, but nothing he couldn't adjust to.

Eddie clocked Ben's approach and opened the glass door just in time, making sure to block any pedestrians from interfering with Ben's entry. "Good morning Mr. Jaffe. How was your walk?"

"Eddie, I don't know how you do it," Ben replied. "But you make me proud to know there are men like you around! Thank you for your courtesy. I come here, what, once a month, but you always remember."

"It's my honor, sir. My way of contributing to the great play that goes on, you know?"

"I do. Whitman was very wise. As are you. Thank you, Eddie."

"You're welcome, sir."

Once inside, Ben unfortunately had the opposite experience with the young teller he'd queued up in front of.

"How may I *help* you today, *sir*?" she mumbled in that raspy, lazy, growl-ish way some young people talked nowadays. Spoken with the right words, but always giving off a very "who gives a shit" vibe. Which Ben assumed was intentional.

*These young people, he thought, use cynicism to keep people at a distance, just like the Degas painting. Even though it makes them lonelier. And more disagreeable. No amount of politeness seems to help either.*

"Hello, Miss," Ben spoke politely, "I hope you're day is progressing well."

She refused to register his comment, growling in return, "What can I *DO* for you today, *sir*?"

Ben wished he could sit with this teller, listen to her tales of woe and offer her an empathetic ear. Maybe even a little advice. But he had no medium to entice her to do so. He wasn't a friend -- nor a counselor or parent or anyone related to her. Hell, she barely even acknowledged him as a human despite his standing not even three feet away.

*Do you not realize, young miss, Ben wanted to tell her, the words from your lips flow from the poison in your heart and destroy everything you hold dear? You must see to your heart before it's too late!*

Ben didn't fault the young teller if her words were poisonous and her life disaffected. But he did if she refused to do anything about it.

"I'd like to deposit this check into my account please," Ben replied, sliding his pre-signed retirement check across the counter along with his bank card and ID.

"Do you have an *account* with us, *sir*?"

"Wouldn't that be implied by the fact that I'm here?" he replied, growing a little exasperated with her.

*"Excuse me, sir. I'm not sure I understand. Do you have an account with us or not?"*

Sighing, he replied, "Yes, I do. Here is my bank card and my ID card right in front of you. And here is my check to deposit in my account. Thank you for your efforts."

"If you say so, sir."

He kept a smile on his face while she pulled up his account, processed the check, and returned the deposit receipt. But the whole time he was thinking, *Poor dear, I wish you could enjoy life, and your youth. Both will end much quicker than you realize.*

"Thank you for using Republic Bank," the teller recited in monotone, "We value your patronage. NEXT!"

Leaving the bank, Ben took time to offer a few thanksgivings to God. Because his life had been more blessed than discouraged. And he'd received far more than he'd ever given. And he loved God. He then spoke a prayer for the young teller, and for Eddie, before heading out for the door because he believed God heard best when His children were appreciative.

With the prayers refreshing him, Ben decided to walk all the way back to K St. where his daughter, Julie, and her husband, Joel, lived. They'd recently purchased a brownstone a block from his and Martha's place and were hoping to fill it with children. He hoped so too. Julie wouldn't be home from the university yet – she had office hours after class and usually stayed late grading papers. But Joel would be home. Joel was a staff writer for the Times currently on sabbatical trying to finish his first novel. Which Ben looked forward to reading. The boy was quite talented.

"Hi, Pops," Joel greeted Ben at the door. "Susan called a bit ago to say you'd be stopping by and that I should keep an eye out for you. That was pretty considerate of her, I think. Come on in."

Ben walked into the foyer shedding his hat, scarf, and coat before heading inside. He was feeling winded again, and the headache had worsen with the walk. But he was looking forward to this visit with Joel and didn't want to delay it just for a little discomfort.

"I put the kettle on a few minutes ago," Joel mentioned, "and have herbal tea bags at the ready if you're interested. Can you believe Julie's making me drink tea now? She says no more coffee because I drink too much and the caffeine keeps me up late when I should be in bed with her. How harsh is that? To deny a man a thing he loves for the sake of relational intimacy? Though she is making a very compelling case for going to bed early."

"Do you still have coffee in the house?"

"Well..."

"I would love a cup of coffee," Ben smiled. "And I certainly won't tell if you don't."

Joel smiled back. He liked his father-in-law immensely. Not just for his insightful nature, but because he was truly a caring man. Not all fathers-in-law, or fathers for that matter, were. "Oh, you know, I might've saved a little mountain roast for special occasions," Joel replied. "Seems like you visiting is grounds to declare it so. And I certainly couldn't let you drink coffee alone. As your host, that would be inconsiderate. I don't think Julie would ever forgive me if I were rude to her father when he was a guest in our home."

"You're a smart lad. I quite agree. I'll be in the recliner in the living room when you're ready. My dogs are a bit tired today."

"I'll brew a pot and join you shortly."

"I see you finished the new garden shed out back," Ben called out passing the rear glass doors that looked out over Joel and Julia's backyard. "It looks good. Professionally painted and everything."

"Thanks. It wasn't as hard to build as I thought." Joel replied, walking into the living room with two steaming cups of coffee. "Especially with the tools you let me borrow. Makes the job so much easier. And now Julie thinks I'm a virtual Tarzan handyman with the ability to build sheds and fix plumbing and do all those manly things around the house. I'm a little embarrassed to say she's been more, umm, *affectionate* because of it."

"Good for you. I'm glad you're getting good use out of them. The tools I mean. Not my daughter. Though I am happy you two are enjoying each other."

"You know, if she keeps this up, we may be giving you and Martha grandchildren earlier than planned."

"Mazel Tov."

"From your mouth to God's ears."

"How's the book coming along?"

"Oh, a little rough. I hit a dry patch and couldn't write for a while, which was why I built the shed. To distract myself. And it worked cause I've been writing up a storm ever since."

"Glad to hear. I look forward to reading your book."

"Oh, I'll definitely be giving you an advanced copy. Dedicated to my favorite father-in-law. I feel pretty confident it'll be done by the end of the year. And if my editor agrees, published by spring."

"That's exciting," Ben marveled blowing on the hot coffee, enjoying the aroma. He'd always dreamed about writing a book, but knew such talent had passed him by. Still he marveled at those who could. And did. "I'm looking forward to having our first published author in the family. For your sake, certainly, but it won't hurt that it'll take some of the wind out of Cousin Mildred's sail. That woman has been crowing about her "God's Children" editorial letter being accepted to a national woman's magazine going on forty years now -- and hasn't stopped crowing about it like it was gospel every Thanksgiving."

"Mildred?" Joel thought. "Mildred is Martha's cousin, right? The one who likes to wear those "Ladies Who Lunch" hats, right?"

"Yes. But enough about her. I need to change the subject. Sorry, my boy, but my visit has ulterior purposes."

"Oh, yes, of course. The roasting pan. I have it ready to go."

"No, not that. But thank you for having it ready. No, I'm curious how you're feeling about hosting your first Thanksgiving for the entire family tomorrow?"

"Honestly, pretty nervous. I don't feel like I've been with your family long enough to host such a big day. And you know Julie -- she's all thumbs at domesticity. Nor did Martha seem too happy giving up hosting duties even though Julie insisted it was time. I certainly can see where she gets her stubborn from, the way those two argued about it all last month."

"I know. Martha's hosted for a long time and something like that becomes a habit and a purpose, you know. And even though she won't admit it, and is resisting the change, she's tired and wants to pass it down. Honestly, it's time. Which is why I agreed with you and Julie. I love that you two want to host and are as committed to the family as we've been. Plus, I was thinking, now that you and Julie are well established, and

before any grandkids come along, I thought I might take Martha on a trip. A sea cruise or something like that back to the old country. If we did, we would need someone here to watch over our affairs while we're gone."

"That sounds exciting. Travelling would be good for you guys. Get out and see some of the world. And Julie and I, of course, would be more than glad to take care of what needs to be here at home."

"That's nice to hear you say. Thank you. Which means, I should ask, how's the Thanksgiving preparations coming along?"

"Not as terrible as I thought. There are a great deal of details, but not bad. I ordered a block of rooms at the Sheridan for the family and friends coming from out of town. And Julie is coordinating all the transportation. I also reserved a balcony along Herald Square for those who want to see the Thanksgiving Day parade downtown tomorrow. And a colleague of Julie's is letting us use his box seats at Carnegie Hall for the Rockette's Christmas performance on Saturday."

"Good. And the food?"

"The food is all set. I ordered most of the sides from Katz Deli down the block to cut down on prep time. They'll be delivered in the morning. And Julie's going to cook a turkey here while Martha cooks a second turkey at your place. All you have to do is come over, sit in your chair, and enjoy the burnt offerings."

"Well, speaking of burnt offerings, my boy, I would be remiss not to tell you it's long been the duty of the Thanksgiving host to give a formal toast to the family before carving the turkey. That tradition now passes to you."

"No, no, no. I wouldn't do that. I couldn't! You're the head of the family. It should still be you."



“Ah, sorry my boy, but that’s not how it works. Whoever hosts has the honor. It’s a rite of passage. The same happened to me and Martha when we began hosting. Boy did I think I was going to die standing in front of everyone, but Martha’s father paid me a visit the day before to reassure me. And give me this.”

Ben picked up a carefully wrapped bundle of cloth he’d been carrying for just this moment and unwrapped an ornate wooden box with a carving knife inside. “And now I’m proud to say this will be yours.”

“Oh no, Pops. That’s your family’s carving knife. I couldn’t possibly.”

“Son, of course you can and you will. Or you’ll hurt Martha and my feelings. And offend your family. Now hush and take it please. It’s yours and Julie’s now. Use it in good health. And, God willing, pass it down to your future children.”

“Thank you, Ben, really. You and Martha have been so great to me. Much better than my own parents, I’m sad to say. How can I ever thank you?”

“No need. We’re happy to have you. And you’ve made Julie very happy. What father can deny someone who loves his child and gives her joy? That said, I assume you know how to carve a turkey.”

“Well, no. Not really. Not much call for that in the writing game. I mean I guess I could research it or watch a tutorial video or something.”

“If you don’t mind indulging me, I can give you a few pointers.”

“Please.”

“Well, the main thing you need to do once everyone has gathered around the turkey is cut three, quarter inch slices from the right side of the breast – always cutting down in a diagonal with the grain of the muscle.” Ben pantomimed the cut.

"Okay," Joel replied intently watching. "Right side. Quarter inch slices. Got it."

"Then, once you've made your ceremonial cuts, you take the entire bird back into the kitchen and finish carving with this." Ben giggled as he pulled out the electric powered carving knife he'd been holding in reserve just for this joke.

Joel laughed. "You're kidding! Really?"

"No joke. On my honor. That's the way Martha's father showed me and that's the way I've been doing it ever since. And now I'm letting you in on the secret."

"I never knew. You sneaky bastard. I remember how impressed I was with your carving skills last year. I even told Julie I wish I could do what you do."

"Well now you know my secret and you'll have your chance. In the meantime, I've done my mitzvah for the day and will be adjourning home. Martha and I plan to join you and Julie early tomorrow morning to help greet the family. But in the meantime, I'm tired and intend to see myself home, along with Martha's good roasting pan, before she starts to worry and calls out the national guard. I'm a bit overdue."

"Thanks for coming over Ben, but don't walk. If you're tired, I can drive you home. It's no trouble."

"No, my boy. It's only a block more and I still need the exercise. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay. Seriously, thank you again. For the knife. And the secret. I mean it!"

"You're very welcome, my boy. Until tomorrow then."

Ben gathered himself together, put on his hat, coat, and scarf and headed out the door. Taking the few steps down to the sidewalk, while thinking, *My favorite kind of day. Cold and sunny. Too bad this headache won't leave me alone.* Walking under a light wind that

carried the fresh smell of early winter, Ben smiled in the moment. Till he reached the end of the block and realized how cold he felt despite his coat. And how sharp the pain at the back of his head.

*I must've pushed myself harder than I realized, he thought putting the roasting pan down on a nearby bench to press his hands to his temples for relief. The pain was growing. I think I might just need that nap today after all.*

Ben sat on the bench waiting for the pain to pass, but it didn't. The headache grew worse. Building until he realized he couldn't talk. Or stand. Or walk. Something was wrong with his mouth -- and his right arm and leg, his entire right side, felt heavy and stuck to the bench, no longer obeying his commands. Then some part of Ben realized -- *Am I having a stroke? Am I breathing my last few breathes? Living in my last few moments?* Ben accepted -- sitting back, looking up to the clear blue sky, and just appreciating. Letting a feeling of peace wash over him. *This is sooner than expected, he thought looking toward his home less than a block away, and very bad timing. Poor Martha! She'll still be in the kitchen working away, not realizing I won't be coming home like I promised. And, oh boy, is she gonna be upset! I'm sorry, my dear. For the first time in a long time, we won't be spending our evening together. But I'll miss you! And I want you to know I've loved all our days and nights together. It's been a great joy and adventure. Tell Julie and Joel I hope I didn't ruin their first Thanksgiving as hosts. And give my best to the rest of the family since I won't be there to say my goodbyes. But just know, I've always considered myself blessed by the long road God granted. And for the blessing of walking hand in hand with you along the way. Sorry, my dear, but I see my time has come and God is calling me home. Goodbye, my love."*

He knew. And so, in the spirit of a new adventure, Ben accepted the new journey -- no longer breathing or speaking or moving as the last of his life left his body. Mouth slightly ajar, eyes wide open, staring blankly up into the sky in prayer.

Joel discovered Ben less than an hour later after Martha called worried because Ben hadn't returned home yet. And found Ben sitting on the bench.

"Hey, Pops. Whatcha doing?" Joel asked walking up from behind before he realized. And understood. Then he just sat down next to Ben and cried. Which took a little time trying to compose himself so he could call for emergency services. Then call Julie.

Waiting for the ambulance, Joel realized, despite Ben's passing, the world still turned and people would go on living. As would he. As would Julie. And Martha. And most everyone else.

After Ben passed, Martha continued on much as she had before, though noticeably sadder, and much more gentle with others. She would eventually agree to move in with Joel and Julie after their first child was born, learning to find happiness in life again with the joys of being a grandmother. Joel and Julie would go on too. Joel would publish, Julie would gain tenure. And a year later give birth to Ben and Martha's second grandchild. A boy they named Ben. Who was gentle and sweet and loved to hear stories about the man he was named after. More children would come. As would family and friends, offering condolences, sharing well wishes, keeping up traditions, living and loving and promising to keep Ben's memory alive each year into the next. Every Thanksgiving, the family would come together, honoring all the family members who'd passed before them. Joel would carve the turkey, ceremonially as Ben instructed, chuckling to himself over the memory of Ben's joke every time.

At each Thanksgiving, once the entire family found seats, Joel would stand, raise his glass, and offer this blessing. "To all who are here, to all whom have gone before us, and to all of us who will continue on, I say thank you. Thank you for coming together in the name of family. Thank you for loving each other and being loved in return. And thank you for the memories we can all cherish together forever. But most of all, though

there will come a time we all must take our leave, not a single one of you will ever take leave from my heart."

Ben was laid to rest two weeks after his passing in the traditional way. Shiva was sat, family and friends gathered to mourn and miss him, and life went on. *Because that's the way of life, yes?* Ben would've said. *One life touches another, and in turn, touches another till who knows how far our lives extend into the future. And when it does, let us say a blessing for the long road taken home.*

The End.