# *Excerpts*

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# *Mister* B.

Living with a 98-year-old Rocket Scientist

1. Lynn Byk

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# MISTER B.

Living with a 98-year-old Rocket Scientist

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They are Mr. B’s personal mementos of his life and work.

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*THE* OL’ MAN

# *Memorial Day, 2013*

It’s four o’clock in the afternoon, time for us to visit Joseph John Byk. I climb into the passenger side of my husband Paul’s big boy Tonka truck. My hubster received this 1977 F˗150 industrial yellow pickup from his parents on his fiftieth birthday. Now, at age 58, he’s still a big toddler zooming about with a toy truck in hand. This time, however, he gets to ride inside of his Ford collector series. *Does sex make Paul as happy as his industrial yellow truck?* I wonder. He muscles it around hairpin curves in the mountains. He makes up chores just to drive the junkyard canister around town, and he limps it the three blocks to work and back when his legs are giving him fits. It isn’t that I haven’t enjoyed playing farm girl in his yellow truck, propelling it for construction or landscaping needs, yet it’s *waaaay* down on my list of “best consumer picks,” mostly because the roar of the engine always shocks me to life, and because the passenger’s side of the long cab seat slopes into Neverland. Of course normally, I am the passenger trying to hold onto my seat.

“We’re taking your dad’s car to dinner.” This, I pronounce as a flat humorless order as I work open the side vent. Even under the friendly puffy clouds, it feels like the heat of summer already; but that’s Colorado for you.

“I know,” my husband returns cheerfully. “He won’t mind. I just wanna unwind on the way over, okay?”

We’ve planned to take Mr. B ˗ Mr. B being the nickname his wife gave him ˗ to dinner at the garden club. This is his favorite restaurant, I surmise, because the cashier honors his senior coupons for all three of us or okay, because, he can top off his salad with as many bowls full of tapioca as he likes. He’s not used to being told “No.” The ol’ man has described his married life as “67 years of getting my own way.” He is not only the headwaters of the family, but he is what I call a brainiac, or more particularly, a retired aerospace engineer.

At the top of a curved suburban street, full of houses built in the '70s, my own father-in-law’s two story, reversed-gable home comes into view. It sports an exterior color of today’s unsure Colorado sky. I sigh. Pulling into the concrete drive, my soul quietly curses the appearance of the outmoded facade decorated with a giant X under both of the front bedroom windows. The X’s appear like a boxer’s puffy face after a match, with two widespread black eyes.

“X marks the spot!” Paul announces. The worn family joke gripes me. Paul’s father is waiting inside, seated in his favorite blue velvet rocker, arms crossed. Tonight he’s wearing a pink and teal plaid shirt, blanketed with the light blue fleece we gave him last year, decked on top of his navy blue dress pants. I’ve seen Mr. B’s muscles, sinewy thin. He is altogether on the petite size, but we never let on that he should wear less than a large shirt or coat.

When he sees us walk into his domain, he pulls up his pant leg and sticks out his bird ankle so that we can admire his colorful, striped, cotton knee sock. Thus, he continues to affirm my style choices. Nearing Christmas a year and a half ago, I determined to fulfill Mr. B’s meager solicitation for warm knee˗high socks. To my dismay, it became apparent that men’s knee˗highs were out of fashion. Shopping, admittedly, is not my forte, but I had finally located a couple pairs of Pippi Longstocking socks. After buying them, I stumbled upon a tuxedo store selling men’s silk knee-highs for a penny prettier that we could really afford. In the end,I stuffed three pairs of them into his Christmas package with the other two pairs of the riskier, striped, long-stockings. As a back door, if he hated them, I’d planned to tell him that they were a joke. To my relief, Mr. B was delighted with all of the socks, but mostly, he got the Christmas jollies from the colorful striped ones. He wears them fashionably under his blue dress pants or his summer Khakis.

“You still wearing those crazy things?” I tease. “Aren’t you hot?”

“No, ma’am,” Joe shakes his head quickly. “I keep it cool in here.”

I look at his thermostat which says “76” in bold letters.

# *June 20, 2013*

First, I must drag myself away from all the ongoing minutia to head over to Joe’s again. Paperwork swaddles my life like cloth on a mummy. I’ve been trying to get our silent and deflective insurance company to pay the damages promised in our umbrella policy. Paul’s been helping in hiccups, but he’s mainly been transplanting bushes to reestablish “curb appeal” at our war- weary house.

At Joe’s, I lay a card on the dining room table while explaining in a loud voice that we can all write something to his great-granddaughter who is away at camp.

“Oh, no. What do I say to a nine˗year˗old girl?” he asks behind a wrinkled brow. “I don’t think that asking her to write us a letter will help her penmanship. I think that she ought to be journaling in a diary all these things she gets to do, like horseback riding and acrobatics, and the dog training that she does.”

“Well then, why don’t you suggest that she begin a diary, Mr. B?”

“I’ll get around to it.” He sighs and pushes the card away from him over his dining room table.

Joe takes the dinner conversation way back to an old work project, explaining to us his analysis of the difference between titanium and steel bolts. Pauly and I look at each other impatiently, wondering once again how to respond to a rocket scientist.

He begins with the preface that at one point in his career, his stress engineer services were loaned out to McDonnell Aircraft for a rocket capsule project. “First, they asked me to figure out what was going wrong that their capsule kept separating from the rocket shaft. Then, they showed me the blueprints, and later they took me to the actual capsule itself. Well, I had to assess the drawing specifications to see if they were correctly engineered. Then, I had to compare the L˗brackets they had installed all the way around the shaft to hold the capsule and shaft together.” He explains this dilemma in detail as if we need to know such details for working in our world. He explains it visually, folding his table napkin into a two thirds angle like an L, thumping the base of it with his forefinger to show us where the bolt went in.

Though he quit smoking cigarettes cold turkey at age fifty, Joe still yams from the side of his mouth as if his lips are clenching that smoke.

“The L˗bracket was thick, see, as thick as the diameter of the bolt going through it. So, I examined the bolts themselves. They were made of the new titanium material because titanium was lighter weight and strong, and lightweight is what everyone wants of a flying machine, but see the drawing specifications called for steel. “Aha! I had the answer!” he exclaims, slapping the tabletop.

“Titanium may save weight on the rocket, but titanium is only strong when stress-tested vertically. In flight, the force of the projection of speed was forcing the L˗bracket to rise and the joint to straighten, forcing the bolt to flex.”

“Bolts can flex?” I doubt it.

“Yes, Ma’am. Steel bolts would have flexed with the L˗bracket’s force, but titanium bolts were popping their heads off rather than flexing. That, in turn, caused the capsule to break off of the rocket, and that was their problem. McDonnell had to accept a new weight factor by exchanging the titanium bolts for steel bolts if they wanted their rockets to hold together.”

“Um, that’s nice, Dad,” Paul clears his throat and pauses before changing the subject to what happened in his workday at the hospital.

Joe listens with interest, nodding. He seems to drink in anything his son wants to tell him. I’m assuming, since Joe has no personal friendships that he has made known, dinner with us is his only meaningful opportunity to use his voice and other social faculties of conversation each week.

In the early '90s, while he still wore large oval glasses, we teased Mr. B that he resembled the grim˗faced cartoon character, Mr. Magoo. He’d shrug with a smile and a leaning of his head, open palm raised, as if to imply, “What can ya do?”

# When he traveled without eyeglasses in the '90s, people stared at him for a religious reason. Some would approach him to ask if he might be the Pope. When Pope John Paul II visited Colorado, we got Paul’s dad a sweatshirt that proclaimed him, indeed, to be the Pope, so people didn’t have to embarrass themselves. Joe particularly liked this joke because he had spent an entire childhood of Sunday mornings sitting confused, as an illiterate second generation Pole, in an American Polish Catholic church. When it burned to the ground, he had an immediate excuse for swearing off religion. There are very few Polish Catholic churches left in America. The notoriety of looking like someone famous, however? He liked that. Occasionally, Joe would even invite the gawker to make his or her confession.

# *June 22, 2013*

Paul surprises his dad by delivering a new pair of fancy wool socks tonight. The souvenir socks are from a visit to an alpaca ranch, managed by a friend of his. They are brown wool, and Joe exclaims how rich he feels wearing them. “They are so soft!”

“Have you signed the card we brought last time, Mr. B?” I ask.

“No, no. I don’t think a nine-year-old girl wants to hear from an old man like me. I feel silly. Besides, I don’t write cursive anymore. I forgot how! And my printing is pretty nondescript too.”

“That’s all right, Chief,” Paul chimes in. “She’d love to know you are thinking about her. Just write about the journal idea. We all need to sign it and get it in the mail tomorrow.”

Joe sits down and studies the card like a student forced to write a book report. Finally, he proceeds with his suggestion, in his architectural box style printing, to his granddaughter. His thoughts take fifteen minutes to write and almost the whole inside of the card, both sides. Then Pauly writes down a joke, leaving me with an inch at the bottom.

“Hey!” I write. “Your grandpa confiscated the whole card. I’ll write more later. Love, Aunt Lynn.” Paul wonders if putting in a stick of gum like his aunt used to do in his birthday cards is still appropriate. Writing letters by snail mail is so outmoded, I’m thinking; it now takes a whole family to safely get one card into a stamped envelope. We are still wondering if we did it right.

Joe digs in his wallet. “This is what that card needs!” He shoves into the envelope a folded twenty dollar bill. “If I’m bold enough to suggest she write in a diary, at least she won’t have to cough up for it!”

This summer, the old man has decided to take on a new project. Sewing isn’t exactly new to him, because he’s made slipcovers and has mended pants, sewn a swimming suit and socks, even his wife’s old skirts, but he no longer has a sewing machine. He takes us outside to the back porch and shows us his aluminum glider. “The cushions are beginning to show their stuffing through these worn holes, here and here,” he points out with his hard and weathered middle finger. “I’ve done the upholstering of these cushions once before, you know, so I’m assuming I can do it again.”

I look at Paul carefully to hide a harried expression. I don’t have time to babysit him with this project! I’m wrapping up our lawsuit. I’m talking to realtors and construction guys, a stager for our house.

Paul looks away. Out of the side of his mouth he quietly sidesteps an argument, “Let’s just see how far he gets on his own.”

“I called Sandy,” Joe begins, “when I started thinking about this project, and she was kind enough to return my old Singer sewing machine to me this week.” Joe’s granddaughter lives north of Denver in the foothills with her husband and Joe’s nine\_year\_old great˗granddaughter, Christina, and his namesake toddler grandson, Joe˗Joe. He leads us into an upstairs bedroom where we see he has set up a card table, a pin cushion, and the old gray Singer. Sandy has indeed already managed to find the time to return Mr. B’s sewing machine to him. He smiles proudly.

Then, Mr. B gets a look as bashful as an old mountain goat when he asks us to go fabric shopping with him. “Look at me, a man wid an agenda!” He tells us, “Things are too expensive, and I can’t remember what kind of material to buy. So, I’m asking for your young folks’ opinion.” Then muttering, “The last place I went, I walked around and couldn’t find one person to show me where the sales were.”

Joe’s balance has been pretty bad these past two years. “They probably didn’t want to be liable if you toppled over, Mr. B!”

“Well, there’s that.” His head wobbles over his shoulders considering this possibility, but he refuses to use a walker or a cane because that would be giving in to the dictates of old age. He pins us in the corner. “Do you or don’t you have a few minutes to help me find some upholstery on sale?” We agree, and Mr. B excitedly reminds us how he prides himself on bargain hunting. “My aerospace pension is a case in point. The engineering firm set it up 36 years ago, but I don’t mind bragging that I won the bet they made against my longevity when they offered to pay me my retirement pension every month instead of disbursing it in one lump sum!” He turned 97 in January. He still smiles every time he reminds us, “Those buzzards still have to cough up a paycheck every month for me, yeah, huh!”

Based on his older brother Eddy’s advice in the early '70s, Mr. B once tried investing in the stock market just after he moved to Colorado, but after more research, he removed his money and continued in his usual savings course of measly bank deposits and government bonds. He chooses carefully what to spend his money on up front. When we asked him why he forfeits the larger stock market returns for the dwindling interest rates at the bank, he shrugs.

“Why would I pay a bunch of industry pricks to manage my hard\_earned money? They don’t have any loyalty to me. We have never looked each other in the eye. They only care about what’s gonna make a buck for them. No, I don’t trust 'em. I don’t trust 'em wid my money one bit.”

Mr. B has a softer side to his thriftiness, though. For each summer holiday we’ve ever hosted at our house, Joe would bring me his own bundle of flowers to grace our table. He grew them all himself in his backyard. He has typically busied himself through the hours of summer days with his favorite garden projects like cutting rose stems and cultivating new roses from them, or transplanting the two varieties of lilacs in his yard, forsythia alike, into the boundaries of his three˗quarter acre lawn. After the blooms die, Joe harvests the seeds from his poppies, snapdragons, zinnias and Johnny jump˗ups for propagating and sharing with others, namely us, his grandkids and neighbors.

We all traipse into the fabric store together and search out material. He thinks the regular upholstery material we show him is too expensive, so he chooses a black and white checked tablecloth material instead.

Paul and I shrug. At least it’ll keep him busy.

Back at home he tears apart the old cushions and begins struggling to sew together the back cover with the enlarged front cover. It is one of those things that is better made by following the pattern of the pieces he has ripped apart, than by trying to work out the mathematical science of the curve before sewing. I try to help him by pinning the front, carefully gathered, to the back. I tell him that some things cannot be figured out mathematically and must be taken on faith. “Use the pattern of the old ones, Mr. B.”

He attempts to sew “in faith,” as he says teasing me, but faith is diametrically opposed to his science and mathematician’s character, honed by decades in a structural engineering career.

# *June 24, 2013*

I’ve set up a dinner date for Mr. B with Betty, my 78˗year˗old book club partner. Betty’s house is located near Joe’s. So, we are taking him to meet her at the garden club for dinner.

“Lynn, you know Dad won’t approve.”

Mr. B is not what most people would call a gregarious person. We have photographs from many celebrations, including his own fiftieth wedding celebration, where he is looking at the camera with a pug Yoda face held in a parenthesis between fanning ears.

I shrug. “So, we simply don’t tell him she’ll be there.” He’s still a good˗looking man, I think. Joe’s full head of straight white hair is kept cropped at what his hairdresser calls a “one on top and a two on the sides.”

Joe has made us promise not to let him fall for another woman, but Betty is not that kind of date. They met each other at our Easter dinner, where they discovered that they had both lived in three of the same cities throughout the years. Betty’s late husband was also an engineer. And Betty worked for the *Betty Crocker* company when Joe’s late wife was teaching home economics to high schoolers.

Betty, who majored in the Spanish language, listened with good humor to Joe’s experience of learning Spanish in his sixties. When he and his wife decided their favorite vacation spot was Mexico, they both learned conversational Spanish, enough to read it and use the proper tenses. Joe seemed pleased with Betty’s attention. After she left our Easter gathering, Joe continued to comment, “That gal could sure keep up a conversation! Yeah. I found her to be a very interesting person.”

Now, on the way to the garden club to meet Betty for dinner, Joe dismisses us. I assume he is only pretending he doesn’t remember her. Nevertheless, we remind him about all the fun they had using Spanish together at Easter, then we remind him about all the other things they have in common. We don’t tell him that Betty has said, “If only he were twenty years younger!”

At dinner tonight, Mr. B's sense of etiquette rises to the occasion when he insists on paying for all of us even though the party now includes Betty’s forty-year-old engineer son, his wife and two children. Our guests were a complete surprise to him! Bigger than Hollywood, Joe waves paper in the air. “I have these coupons that need to be used or they will expire.” He holds them out to the cashier at the end of the buffet.

My eyebrows lift in merriment at Paul because we know Mr. B used to take the *Denver Post* and clip coupons in his sunny dining room til he said he “got fed up with having to pay for it.” Now, he clips coupons from the library’s newspaper copy. The man’s circumspect ways have of course kept him situated in his own home throughout the aging process, which he likes.

Mr. B carries Betty’s tray to the table for her, which seems to irritate her son. Betty pats her son’s hand and says encouragingly, “Don’t worry so much, dear.”

# *September 3, 2013*

Mr. B entertains my family, his company, at breakfast this morning by describing the way three astronauts died in their test flight capsule of the space shuttle, Apollo 1. Maybe it’s the breakfast burritos we’ve brought home as opposed to his boiled white egg and dry toast that inspires him.

**“**You’ll hear that astronauts Grissom, White, and Chaffee died in a cabin fire from undetermined causes, but they just don’t want to admit it was an engineer’s fault.See, the shuttle design called for an aluminum exterior, but some genius signed off on installing T˗shaped interior extrusions made of magnesium.” Joe’s forefinger makes the sign of a ‘T’ in the air. “The government bought it, even though any high school science teacher could tell you that magnesium flares are used under water because magnesium burns, even in water!”

He slurps the yolk out of his half shelled egg. “Magnesium was lighter weight than aluminum though, and NASA used it without bothering to isolate it from the electrical wires in the shuttle walls. Well, there was one hundred percent oxygen pumped into the inside of that test capsule, so when the three guys—nice guys by the way—latched themselves into their seats, it only took one spark of energy from all that wiring to create an instantaneous shock, which translated into a flash fire that spread throughout the capsule filled with oxygen into their lungs. It burned up their insides, can you guess why?”

“Because their lungs were also filled with oxygen?” I pipe up.

He winks and points his finger at his good pupil, “and fire follows oxygen. What a tragedy.”

My sister, who has been holding a bite of burrito for some time on her fork, clears her throat and asks, “They didn’t suffer, did they?”

“Oh no. There was only one of them who got a single word out. Neither of the other two even spoke. It only took a second. Oh, all that stuff is in the records.” He waves the story away and bites into his dry toast.

Tragedy must breed appetites. The breakfast dishes hardly require rinsing.

Ducking under the empty clothesline on the back porch later, I tentatively approach my new housemate˗cum-father˗in˗law, who is cleaning a paintbrush in his garage. Our cherry table sits fully expanded in the garage and happily appears to seat at least ten people. Its raw, shining wood appears silky naked after Joe’s steady sanding. Seeing the table shining in this small garage feels like an appeasement of our failed hospitality house, thankfully no longer my problem.

“Oh! You surprised me.” His blue eyes suddenly widen when he notices me standing there. Joe’s thin white T˗shirt has stains and sawdust on it.

Refocusing, my feeling of guilt for the prospect of mortally wounding someone I dearly love, my voice waivers.

“May I paint these colors upstairs, Mr. B, in the bedrooms?” I offer Joe a handful of the color cards. Pointing to one, I ask him, “And this pale blue in the den and dining room?” Tears well up and spill over my cheeks from the tension. I’m implying that his own choices are not good enough, but I have tried to mitigate the damage by choosing a steely hue because Joe loves light blues, and this modern color is something I can decorate with.

He pats me on the arm and says with such tenderness, “Only if you stop crying over it. Don’t worry about me, Sweet Pea. I’ll be fine.”

Outside, my father is helping Paul cut studs and screw together benches in his shed. When he realizes that my sister and I intend to makeover the den, he tells Joe emphatically that he particularly likes Joe’s “wood” paneling. “I hate the thought of painting wood white.” I study him in disbelief. He ignores me. Instead, dad supports what he sees as a frail willow of an old man about to be crushed in his daughter’s vigor. Mr. B looks at his distressed tennis shoes and then decides that maybe we should wait to paint this room until he’s gone, meaning *kicked the bucket*. Satisfied, my father turns to go.

Has my dad been waiting for just the right opportunity to return a decorating favor? A twenty-year-old image of my father’s kitchen splattered by the explosion of my experimental caramel sauce from a pressurized can drifts through my mind. He doesn’t turn around to see me studying his back as he carries his electrical bag up the stairs. Quickly, my skilled father remedies the ponderous heat inside our upstairs bedroom by installing a ceiling fan. I am numb for hours. “Thank you,” I manage without feeling or understanding.

Ann and I carefully tape down painting plastics to the dust boards. I open the first gallon of paint and set it on top of the stepladder. “Let’s pray first,” I suggest, feeling particularly unsteady. Gulping a breath, I thank God for my sister’s help and ask God for strength to paint the bedrooms in this heat, and finally, for carefulness so that we can avoid accidents.

Within a wild hair of the “amen,” I turn, my foot hits the ladder, and the can of paint topples onto the contoured old carpet well beyond the scope of our carefully laid tarp.

Astounded, my heart skips several beats, then pounding, pumps adrenalin. I grab up the can and start cupping the spilled paint into it in hopeless handfuls. I stifle a scream. I can’t cry. I can’t think, except to shudder at what Joe might think—that I spilled it on purpose! My sister gasps, shouts, and runs for cloths. We both stand there, searching each other’s stunned faces and to the streaks of paint, as if God himself had slapped it over in contravention of our prayer.

Why would the God of redemption and wholeness desire my *brokenness*? This has been my flattened soul’s whimper for the past six months!

While I’m freaking over the mystery, and dishing the paint back into the container with increasing panic, Ann quickly puts on some music. It begins to lift our spirits, up, up into a surreal “Curley-the-clumsy-Smurf” land.

Neither one of us dares to speak. My brain threatens a split.

I’ve been told God hates human pride, but *why*? Is He like the Greek god Apollo who dispels all human arrogance with arrows? Couldn’t be.

I’m guessing it must be that knots of pride are like knots found in inferior lumber. Knots look strong, but they cause problems with strength. Seems all my hard knots have fallen out and only the Redeemer’s presence, like putty or wood glue, will mend me. When spiritual strength is formed in me, I understand that I am whole only because of Him.

Because of my long desperation, I’m beginning to see the importance of integrated relationships. Thank God Ann is here! These family members practically flew to my aid. The movers, our friends, were also committed to help us, their friends.

I cut the paint into the 90˗degree corners of the room with a small brush, musing. It must be that when we feel bigger than life, independent, more successful than others, we see ourselves as separated from them, and thankful for the illusion. Friends have proven to be God’s hands and feet in our time of need, and good friends gave us good counsel: their love has been our saving grace.

We can, of course, dictate our own lives without messing with another’s disapproval. Opinions, I often reject as interference. I admit in my silent hour of tragedy that I would prefer to seek my own good, in my own manner, apart from the good of community, because I’m just that self-centered and impatient, but God is not me. He loves the world, invites us to rule with Him, slowly, allowing us all kinds of mistakes, and God glories in unity! He doesn’t love isolation. The tears come down now, rolling off my upturned face, wetting my shirt like sweat. It goes against the grain of my entire being. I don’t understand.

I’ve been learning, the hard way, that individuality is an oil well needing to be capped off so that the valuable oil can be guided away from a powerful blow out, into usefulness in a community. Arrogance, which separates me from others, only raises a self-sufficient barrier against relationships and ultimately against God. When we are broken, however, we are opened up spiritually to receive help from others and from Him. Internally wailing, I’m wrestling with these grandiose themes, when my father-in-law comes to inspect our progress with the bedroom painting. As if the accident calls out his name, he turns his eyes downward and then rotates his gaze to survey the extent of the obvious paint spill. The floor opens up, or maybe it doesn’t. Everything swirls while we apologize and explain what’s happened. He simply offers to clean it up himself. My face burns. I cannot let that happen. I say I will fix it. I have no idea how to fix it. The paint I bought is a specialty paint with *sand in the mix!* My energy ebbs at an all˗time low.

I end up calling a carpet cleaning business, but they cannot promise a good result.

Thankfully, mercifully, Paul unrolls the area rug we obtained in a trade last week for our reclining chair. That settles it. As far as we are concerned, the rug covers the paint on the carpet brilliantly. Our bedroom furniture is moved in. What will become of the paint spill at the end of our year with Mr. B? I shove that thought, along with the paint, under the rug.

# *October 3, 2013*

Biting into our creamy Braunschweiger sandwiches for dinner, I tell Mr. B that he has defied the entire market statistic for heart healthy dieters and food concerns.

Joe frowns. “What\_do\_you\_mean\_by\_that?” His placid voice rolls out the question like a lazy river, just before he takes a swig of cold milk.

“Well, most of the information I have been taught about healthy choices never include Braunschweiger, or salty pickles, green olives and blue cheese with crackers for dinner! Yet, here you are, the specimen of health.”

“Oh, well.” Joe bites his sandwich of pork pate wobbling his head from side to side thinking this over. “It’s probably because I don’t eat butter or mayonnaise.” With a push of his finger, he slips slivers of onion back into his sandwich. It’s true, this fact probably balances out his other distrust of fats. Mr. B will not eat a tuna sandwich with mayonnaise, or any other kind of sandwich or salad with dressing, including egg salad. When we go to a restaurant, we always order his food to come steamed without anything shiny on it. One time his steak came with a pad of butter on the top and we had to send it back.

“You also have 45 percent iron in your blood which makes you the original Iron Man.”

“Heh, heh, that’s true! I told you that story? They always like me to give blood. But, it’s probably because I eat so much Braunschweiger, and it’s full o’ iron.” Joe cuts through his side of salted tomato, but his thoughts drift.

“What’s on your mind, Mr. B?”

“You know that burial plot we have for Maudie at the church?” he begins.

“The columbarium?”

“Yes. That. Do you know that you put the name, ‘Joe’ on the stone beside Maudie’s name?”

“Yes, I know. You’ve told me already,” I admit nervously. “Your name is Joseph. Not Joe.”

“Well yeah, you know, if someone were ever to come looking for me, and I can’t imagine they would, but they might be confused. That’s all.”

“Dear Mr. B, I will change it. It’s just that Maudie always called you Joe, and that’s how I knew you. Now, I know you better.”

Mr. B chuckles. “Oh, no matter, Miss. I’m just teasing ya. What do I care whether it says Joe or Joseph? All of my engineering friends are gone, and my family is all gone. What does it matter?”

“Of course it matters how you wish to be remembered. I was just trying to fit in both of your names, you know, the whole thing of Maudie and you on that stone in the garden, and I made a mistake.”

“Well, don’t worry, kiddo. The main thing is that you can fit me into a jar beside my wife. Just don’t make it say I died from eating Braunschweiger after 97 years. I wouldn’t want to break a statistic.”

“You already have, Mr. B.” What would the food and health administration deduce from this healthy ol’ man’s diet of pickles, whole milk, smoked sausage and white bread? I stuff a pickled slab of Braunschweiger sandwich into my mouth with guilty pleasure.

***October 5, 2013***

“I only got laid off once, Miss. It was a political move, to save the company money. When I was rehired, they put me into the top secret division where nobody ever bothered me.”

“What did you do there?”

“You know, Sweet Pea, the space program had Lockheed working one part of their design, and some other companies working on other parts of their design, and everyone’s work was considered top secret to themselves, trade secrets, see? But when it came to modifications, they wanted me to sign off on them. I told them, I couldn’t sign off on a design, especially wid all of the new hidden electronics inside of little black boxes, without knowing what kind of gasses they were using, and what the maths were for the blueprints. Oh, they didn’t like that. They wanted me to sign off with a gentleman’s handshake. It was political. There was only one old timer I trusted. If he told me it was alright, *then* I’d do it.”

“So, what kind of modifications did you make yourself?”

“One time I recommended they install a honeycomb aluminum cover on one satellite because the radiation experts were saying that we were losing equipment due to radiation. I asked for half inch aluminum, and they came up with three quarters, so I had them split that thickness in one third for the interior and two thirds for the exterior cover, and I designed two covers, one inside of the other, with a blanket of air for insulation between them. Another time, I modified the capsule for the top rocket thruster on a two stage space shuttle. One company did the lower half, and another company designed the rocket, and I did the capsule. They put two tanks of solid burning gook in each level. The first design was fired by a liquid flammable, but then they went to solid.”

“Why was that?”

“Oh, because you know, if you pressurize something with a very thin skin, it gives it greater strength, but say someone were to shoot a hole in the skin, then the pressure would release, and the skin would lose its strength!

“Oh, you know those satellites in the atmosphere? They take pictures of everything? Well, they had three of ‘em. One rotated one way and was held by a truss system to the middle stationary one, and then the bottom one which also rotated, utilized the truss system. I removed the truss system. The satellites didn’t need all that exterior ribbing. I recommended they place all of the equipment inside the satellite and support the structure from the center, and also by four husky one inch bolts that would attach it to the space vehicle.”

“Are you talking about the Hubble Space Telescope, Joe?”

“Well, this was before that. What we were taking pictures of was all the things moving on the earth. We could see a submarine surface, and watch the war efforts from above.”

“Oh. You were the first Google Earth.”

# *November 10, 2013*

**“**When I accepted the terms of college, I had to sign on the dotted line that I would join the R.O.T.C., Reserve Officers’ Training Corps, before attending my first day of classes. Both Alabama schools were land grant schools, so I wasn’t getting out’a that either way. I accepted it. But, after my sophomore year, they took me to Fort Benning in Georgia for six weeks of boot camp wid all my buddies. There were some real military troops gettin’ trained, and we were trained to support them, or vise versa. We would plant bombs in the ground. When they’d go off, the holes they created provided them with foxholes, and we would build bridges through the rivers for them to blow up. The noise was horrific. The heat was so bad that my clothes were wet all the time. The officers thought they were the cat’s meow, but some of them were sadistic sons of bitches. They put us through ground chemicals to let us know what they felt like, and we would stream wid sweat and scratch ourselves to death. They put us through tear gas and we came out weeping. One officer lined us all up and told us to set up camp, but my tent was going to be right on top of a bunch of poison ivy! I told him to give me another place, but he refused. I thought if he didn’t care, then I didn’t care. We had these khaki pants that closed at the boot and laced up, but the next morning I had poison ivy on my lips and all over my legs and of course on my private parts. The next day I reported to sick bay where I was given a bottle of pink lotion to put all over myself. It was terrible. That guy was just plain mean.”

“Then, they put me on guard duty, night shift. I couldn’t stay awake, and I was terrified because the military guys were getting up through a trap door into our post–x, like our canteen, see, and stealing from us. So, I decided to carry a flashlight and a real bullet. When the dog robber met up wid me, I made sure I told ’em loud enough so that my voice would travel, what I was carrying for anybody who wanted to ambush me or if I would catch them under the post–x. You know, it was built on stilts, see.”

“What’s a dog robber, Mr. B?”

“Oh, that’s what they called the guys where were assigned to one major or one captain, higher up. They were that officer’s personal assistant.”

“So, then they’d put us into tanks wid light skins, very light. You’d think those tanks were tough, but anyone could put a hole in the skin wid a 50! I wasn’t happy wid the Army. I did it all, everything they ordered, but I determined to transfer to the Air Corps as soon as possible, and I did that.” Joe’s blue eyes are blazing, so that I feel his angst and determination personally. “I hated the Army!”

“They wanted to make it as much like real war as possible, and I believe they achieved their aim, at least wid me! One time, we were allotted rifles and my arms were short, so I couldn’t cock it all the way back. I laid there and tried to shoot it twice, and then I held my hand up for the training officer. Well, that guy came around and took my gun but he never looked down the hole! He just put the rifle in line and told me to get back into line, which I did.”

Something inside me sees the whole pathetic picture. “Next time my turn came ’round, I grabbed my rifle and hit the ground and the thing exploded, Oh! The noise! It scared me, I’ll tell ya, and the guys around me all jumped too. They were not happy wid me, so I kept getting guard duty, night shift.” He pauses in his excitement to swallow hard.

“One time, they sent us running across a field with guns firing at our head the whole way. We slid into foxhole at the other side. But what we didn’t know is that they had planted snipers at either end of the line to shoot blanks that ricocheted through the line of men who had just jumped into safety! If they woulda been real bullets, we’d all be dead, most of us. Oh, they knew how to scare the liven daylights outa ya, yes Ma’am.”

“So, when I graduated, I left for California, and it was there, working wid the designing of basic war planes, that the U.S. finally declared war. Just before declarin’ it, they sent me a packet of documents to fill out. I knew what was comin’, oh yeah. I knew. I told ’em I wanted a *transfer to the Air Corps*. Then, I quit Vultee and moved to Ferguson, Missouri. All my friends from school had been pulled into the Army, and they were afta me too! They were dyin’ right ’n left. Oh, sure, they went in as officers and all, but where did that benefit get ’em? Put right at the front of the action.” Joe sputters out and licks his lips. “Hu.”

“I was just plain lucky when the army came afta’ me in Oklahoma. I had just married Maudie. I had a new car and had saved $3900 in the bank during those four years of work. The military didn’t seem to care that I had put in a transfer to the naval Air Corps: I’d gone to that land grant college and they aimed to keep me.” He glances up at me from under his brow. “I considered joining the National Guard at that point, but since it came *after* my papers, I thought I’d get in trouble, and they can make a case outa *any*thing. So, there I was trying to figure out who to give that money to, my new wife or my old folks, but the Major, who was working across the street from the airport where I was working for Spartan, had connections. He was the one who got me a permanent deferment so that I could keep training pilots on how to fix their own airplanes.” I can almost feel his breathless panic, then relief. “It wasn’t too long after that, Alabama sent me my Ph.D in aerospace engineering and we moved to Bald’more, where I stayed for twenty years.”

“Which one were you, Mr. B? Tom, Jerry or the Roadrunner?” A chuckle bubbles up as I suck in the breath I’ve been holding on Joe’s behalf.

“What?!” He quits me with a wave of his hand.

***November 30, 2013***

Paul and I take our Chevy HHR, after dinner, to hunt down a nativity scene for our church foyer. The first store we find in the dark is an A.R.C. Thrift Store. There, in the window, a plastic baby Jesus is lying between his mother Mary and his father Joseph like an early Christmas present meant just for us, so we scoop up the two feet tall display and Paul swipes his credit card for them.

Paul makes sure Mary and Joseph are facing out the back window of our HHR so that they appear to be staring down at any unlucky driver following behind us. Enjoying our mischief, we collect Mr. B from his velvet swivel chair to walk him out to the back of the vehicle showing off our fortunate purchase.

Joe gasps. “What are ya gonna do wid those *idols*?!” he exclaims.

Hardly expecting that kind of reaction, Paul defends us. “Dad, they are Christmas figurines, not idols, for heaven’s sake.”

“Well, what are ya gonna do wid those idols anyway?” Joe insists.

“It’s a nativity scene, Mr. B!” Then I look around to make sure there aren’t any joggers passing by to overhear my militaristic response. “We got it at the A.R.C. Thrift Store to make a Christmas display at church! Only $44.16 to keep Christ in Christmas!” I’m cracking up. Paul ribs his father.

“It’s for church, for Christmas, Chief! But, we don’t know if it needs new light bulbs or if the wiring still works!” Now we’re both shouting.

Mr. B shrugs.

Feeling deflated at the failed joke, we steer him to the front door.

“I thought I raised you bettah than that.” He declares, watching his feet and pointing at his son.

“No, Dad. You didn’t.”

“Where did ya get those idols, did ya say?”

“We got ‘em at The A.R.C., down the street, Joe.” After three tries, I’m exasperated. Has he forgotten so quickly? Does he not understand? Or, is he being even naughtier than us?

“On Mount Ararat?”

“Oh. My. Goodness. How do you know about Mount Ararat?” We’ve all found our seats, and Joe has the television remote control in hand.

“I’ve seen a show or two about how they found that boat, that ark, in Turkey, and then there was an avalanche so that they weren’t able to dig it up after they found it. Or, they had made photographs of it, I guess.”

“Well yes, and also there’s no way one official religion is going to allow another religion to establish the truth it has buried within its boundaries, either.”

“If you put it that way, okay.”

Paul one ups both of us: “You’ve seen the Indiana Jones movie, haven’t you, Chief? The Raiders of the Lost Ark?”

Mr. B raises an eyebrow. “You slug ’em and I’ll kick’em.”

I’m up from my chair and spinning. “That’s a completely different ark, funny guy. I’m leaving both of you to go lock our Christmas idols safely in the car. Choose whatever you want to watch tonight.”

As I’m parking the car in the garage, the stunningly archaic term *idol* keeps circling through my thoughts. That’s not a term from my father-in-law’s Catholic upbringing. Joe knows the difference between idols and a nativity scene. Doesn’t he? What the heck is an *idol*, anyway? Into my dusky imaginings comes the visage of our large house with all its baggage. Maybe somebody’s Christmas present will become an idol of happiness only to finally disappoint. I suppose almost anything that we use to identify ourselves and serve, besides the one true God, could be deemed an idol.

# *December 23, 2013*

Joe shuffles carefully through the crowded Christmas parking lot. We’ve muddled through traffic in slush and ice to the bank, to the gas station and to the alterations boutique. “All this hullaballoo will be over soon, but I like to be prepared for the holidays. Just when you run outa gas or have an emergency, everything’ll be closed.--” Then, he suddenly runs sideways into me and apologizes, “Oh, excuse me. I seem to be walking sideways more and more these days.”

“Maybe you are turning into a crab?”

He’s quick on the uptake. “Eh. No.- I’m *already* a crab.”

(Note to self: Being loveable in misery wins empathy from others.) “I’ll make up a couple of those six bags of cranberries we bought for tonight’s dinner, Mr. B. That should cheer you up.”

“Oh, you are too good to me. Even though they were only a dollar per package last year. I’m not kidding when I say, you know how to make an ol’ man happy!”

# *December 18, 2013*

On our way to register his vehicle title into our names in our new county, freeze-dried snow squeaking beneath our tires, Mr. B takes his toothpick out of his mouth and offers, “My sista Lucy never learned to drive, same as my parents. I dunno. Maybe she was a bit backwards after she got sick and almost died, but my fathea took her out of school, and she was a little different after that, a little different in the head. So she didn’t drive. She began working as a housemaid for the Kimbals. She worked inside, and my fathea worked in their huge garden surrounding the lawn. Mr. Kimbal was on the board of the Woonsocket Association of Savings Bank. Oh, they were the ‘leaders of the Hoi Pallois’ you know, ‘had a nice house, a two-foot wall made of stone surrounded it, and it had a screened-in porch. Wow, was it nice! My sista Lucy made a name for herself, and they rented out her services to big shot dinners, because she learned how to arrange big vases of flowers, big flower arrangements, and how to set the silver on the table in decorative ways with all that fancy etiquette stuff, and she learned to bake really well, too. So, she liked to bake for our family after that. But then she found that she could make more money doing piecework at the rubber factory.”

“She traded in all her nice manners and sweet surroundings for factory piecework?”

“Some muckety muck from the rubber factory at one of those big dinners offered her a job there. She made so much money doing piecework! She was always working on tennis shoes after that. She could put together more soles in the shortest amount of time than anyone. She always made good money at that.”

“Was she sorry that she didn’t finish school?”

“I don’t think so. I couldn’t say for sure,” Joe begins slowly. “She never married, but she was a very good cook. And she loved her sweets. She could really bake. And she could knit, like Wanda, too. They kept boxes of it.”

“Chocolates?”

“Nah, well maybe. But, boxes of their embroidery and crochet.”

“I’ve discovered you like sweets too, Mr. B! I always thought you didn’t like them because after taking us out to dinner, Maudie would order dessert, but you never did. Now I know how much you love your ice cream and a nice piece of pie!”

Joe grins and nods sheepishly. “I just don’t like to pay for 'em. That’s all.” Yet, Joe has always been the perfect host, buying for everyone who ever came out with him and Maudie. “I wasn’t raised to order desserts at all, so it was always great to go out with you.”

“Mr. B? Does it bother you to give your Saturn to us?” He seems so businesslike, and I’m not sure whether to feel sad or relieved that he edits his activities himself, in all pragmatism, before we have to address a situation.

“Why, no ma’am.” His face opens up, surprised. “You two are doing all the driving! Why should I pay the taxes?”

# *December 19, 2013*

Joe has been duly warned that his quiet life is about to radically change. My relatives are coming for Christmas. He asks their names again and again and then writes them in his calendar for memory security. Joe relates a conversation about Tesla coils he had with my fifteen˗year˗old niece. He asserts, “I liked that young gal. She is particularly smart and also surprisingly humble about it.” His head wobbles to and fro thinking over his Christmas propositions. “I admit I am hoping your talented brother-in-law will fix the driveway’s overhead lights while he is staying here, but I don’t want to ask him directly.” I get the message.

# *December 20, 2013*

Early this morning, Pauly-the-birthday-boy, came down the stairs to the smell of something electrical burning on his father's old two-foot Christmas tree. By the time I joined him, he’d carefully removed all of the lights and ornaments. It was obvious that his father's ancient frosted snowmen were the culprit. A couple of their necks were melted through.

“Bring in the coffee, Honey, and come-n-help me. What I want for my birthday, today, is to redecorate the tree!”

The 97-year-old chief draws a grim face to spy the removal of his favorite string of lit snowmen from his tree. Spying this effect, Pauly has an idea. He gives his father a reconstruction job with the tin snips. The chief snips all the faulty wires above each snowman's head. Then, he re-attaches the snipped wires by tying them into loops to hang them as ornaments rather than the strand of lights. Now we have a few Freddy Krueger Christmas ornaments, but hey! It's a bit like some real life holiday memories, right?

*“HAPPY BIRHDAY!”* My sister’s voice carries from the phone at Paul’s ear, to where I’m sitting. He explains to her our exciting morning, eliminating the fire hazard of the ancient strand of holiday lights. He starts chuckling, then, as she relates an empathetic story back to him. When he hangs up the phone, he declares, “Your sister said her toilet seat caught on fire while she was sitting on it!”

“What? How could that happen?”

“Because she owns one of those fancy French bidets, and the last time she sat on it, the thing broke. It damaged the electrical wiring. Ha-ha-ha, so it caught on fire with her on the stool! What a funny birthday I’m having already.” He grins with all the amusement of a naughty elf.

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