



The Eighth Page
“A Christmas Journey”

Craig D. Lounsborough, M.Div., LPC

Chapter 8

A Whisper

The world is an enormous cache of muted whispers, drifting silently but not sullenly all around us. Sadly, they seem all too absent or we see them as the stuff of vivid imaginations driven by escapist ruminations. The world indeed is thick with the very things that give us life and sustenance in a manner that is always sufficient and ever adequate despite our inadequacy to believe in them.

Hope waits to be discovered, begging it seems that we believe in its existence sufficiently to pursue it in order to find it to be real in the pursuing. However, we don't see it, leaving us to believe in the totality of its absence and therefore living out shrunken lives based on such an errant premise. Yet, whispers not apprehended leave the reality of those whispers entirely unaltered.

It seems that of all places, a forgotten root cellar is entirely absent of any voices at all, much less those spoken in muted whispers. It seemed to be the place of perpetually emptying silence, with any whispers having been spoken long ago and irrevocably concluded the moment that they were uttered. The root cellar seemed to be a place that stored the dead, broken and disjointed shards of yesterday, rendering it a vacant mausoleum permeated by the death of what was and nothing more.

David preferred that it remain just that... a mausoleum. His ascending fear generated by all the many bizarre events of the past several weeks was the fear that what was dead might jump to life if it be engaged yet again. That some muted whisper of something past might actually be heard. Some things are better left stone-cold dead and

evermore locked in the dank catacombs of the past rather than retrieved and thrust brazenly alive into the present.

He knew that when Thanksgiving turned and headed toward the Christmas season. His dread was embracing a holiday that appeared to be outwardly bright. Because it was, he feared that he might begin to believe that it might actually be bright, only to find that the brightness was darkness in cruel disguise. Such was the story of 'his' life, and therefore it was assumed that such was the story 'of' life.

Life had turned for him in manner that suggested that it was all dark all the time. 'Good,' as he had defined it, lived it and presumed it to be had shown itself as nothing more than an ideal and anything but a reality. 'Good' was nothing more than a wily fictional concept crafted solely by the panicked need to believe that evil was not the single and sole option of our existence. The concept of 'good' was certainly admirable and actually rather ingenious. However, naively assuming 'good' as a reality that would actually have the breath of life breathed into it if it was acted upon proved to be nothing of the sort. In the end, 'good' never took a breath despite David's efforts to breathe life into it. And if 'good' never breathes on its own, hope had to be a concept just as lifeless.

Life, it seemed, was an empty assortment of ideals and hopes that duped people into thinking that it was all worthwhile. Christmas seemed to be one of those things. Sprightly brilliant, it teased the onlooker by feigning of the hope of hope. But David found it to be just that... a tease.

We are fearful people, and fear erects imposing obstacles against opportunity, regardless of how grand the opportunity might be. Rather, we relegate life to the lifeless notions borne of our inherent pessimism and fed fat by fear. David's pessimism was not borne of anything other than reality. He had deliberately invested in all that was good

believing that all that was good would handily offset all that was bad. He had loved another out of the greatest good he could conceive, only to see that 'good' was not good enough. Ideals perish in the face of realities. Ethics are wantonly expendable. Values vanish. Selfish agendas implode marriages in plumes of asphyxiating ash and leave families wandering lost among the cinders. David saw hope in just such a way.

All the mementoes of this questionable good and this spurious hope lay in the root cellar, boxed and silent. They were connected to dreams dashed and relationships lost. They screamed that what he thought love could do, in reality it could not do. That what life should have been, wasn't. That in the end, even hope was not enough. Far from it. And so, they all laid buried in this dank mausoleum.

The mementos however were not mementos of his life. They were the various shards and thin slivers of his kin; of ancestors mostly unknown to him. These people now laid in various cemeteries in places where their journeys had pulled in the reins and ended.

One particular cemetery down in Belpre nudged up to a small white church adorned with a pristine steeple and hemmed in by a short diminutive fence. Another over in Elyria had fallen to time and inattention, itself having aged in unison with the headstones that littered its uneven rows. Several others rested in a sweeping cemetery whose manicured vistas rolled off to a forested edge that tip-toed along the border between Michigan and Ohio. Headstones in each were moss-embossed, canted by the press of time, and sporting dates of an era unrecognizable from the vantage point of the 21st century.

The remnants of these kin long past sat collected in a damp root cellar. Each artifact had been present at some living event now long past. They had beautifully and rather

marvelously attached that time and those events to themselves, carrying something of that time and those events undiminished across time. They lay packed in the present full of something of the past. The old root cellar was a storehouse, which is quite the opposite of a cemetery.

As a storehouse, it tenderly held the mementos of someone else, someplace else. Yet, sometimes things that are not ours are in reality a part of us as much as anything might be. Nothing in the root cellar was of David, yet it was everything of David.

He wished not to stir any of the boxes or their contents any more, particularly the old chest or its contents. The outcome of doing that before was anything but good. The exact fear of such an action was entirely unidentifiable to him other than the fear was embarrassingly real. David was not typically a fearful man, yet for all his efforts to do so, fear of this place was a fear he could not calm. And when we cannot calm fear despite the heroics of mind and heart to do so, we will press through despite the fear, or we will flee from it. David was caught in a colossal pull between the two. Calls like the one from aunt Mabel stirred those fears even more, sometimes raising them to a frenzy and rubbing him up against the edge of panic itself.

Yet something whispered to him out of that place of dead and decaying memories. Something that held out something more than black memories smeared in the cold pain of loss. Something said that there was something more. David had stood facing the boxes and heard a voice of sorts, the kind of voice that's completely undefinable, yet entirely familiar. A voice that we doubt with the fullest of our fears, but yet believe with the fullest of our hopes. In such a terse conundrum, we are tantalized by the very hope that we doubt. And our lives turn on the choices we make at just such moments.

Indeed, once upon a time David had been a dreamer; a vitally expansive and explosive dreamer filled with robust ideas and a hope that seemed at times irreverent in the way that they challenged life. The whispers reminded him of that because at one time, in a place now far away he had responded to them without question, thought or fear. Those earliest hash marks scrawled on the old river-rock fence just across the road were marks of a hardy journey infused with ravenous hope. He had been bursting with hope in those early days to the point that he was gladly swept up and swept away in it. But no more. That part of him had died in the flames of a divorce and a family fallen into cinders and ash.

Pondering this inner prompting, he recalled a gentler time when such voices would have seized his imagination and sent him on a journey seeking out the voices. Without question, he would have set off running after them in wild pursuit of whatever crumpled boxes they might have been hidden in. As the memories burst open from some hidden spring within him and filled the expanse of his entire being he found himself passionately longing for what he used to be. What he thought he was. What he wanted to be again. The longing itself reached a manic-like intensity that, for the first time since his wife walked away with distraught children in tow, he found himself willing to once again risk that life might be good.

For the first time there was in it all a violent grieving that ignited a fiery desire to return to the something and someone of hope, adventure and challenge. His soul had gone gray. His heart had become listless. He had devolved into a netherworld where all was black and deathly still, causing him to become the same. He stood realizing that his heart had altogether stopped beating a decade ago, and his lungs were filled with the stale air of a breath not taken in ten long years.

Over the years, the root cellar seemed to develop a voice of its own. There had always been something. It had called him over and over, or so it seemed as he now pondered it all. Up until this point, such musing had been written off to imagination or the manifestation of grief. Only now however had he heard something of its voice, a tattered phrase, a fragmented sentence. And laced in it all he heard something of his own voice from long ago mixed in the calling.

The root cellar had been the one place that he was desperate to avoid, yet it became the one place that began to become irresistible. He was nothing of a weak man, yet he was caught in the bottomless chasm between the man he once was, and the man he had become. Each of those two people responded entirely differently to the voices emanating from the root cellar. One part of him found himself desperately desperate to believe that something more existed to which the voices spoke. The other part of him mercilessly chided himself for believing in such nonsense and setting himself up to be disappointed in hope and fooled by love.

One of the reasons he had never moved into the old farmhouse was the root cellar, as immature as he thought that sounded. Instead, he had opted for a comfortable home in a tidy neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. If he were to be vulnerably honest with himself, David would have confessed that the root cellar was the single reason he had made that choice. Sure, living in the old farmhouse would have represented a rather long commute, but that excuse was always insufficient. The house itself was largely empty; having a few sordid remnants of discarded furniture and wall decor hanging canted and dusty. Bits of wallpaper hung faded, peeling and curled at various edges. It always seemed a place entirely abandoned, but entirely alive in some way that defied logic or explanation. With some tender loving care, it could have been a marvelous

home and David knew it. But to know something and to be assaulted by fear in the knowing leaves ‘doing’ abandoned.

The root cellar was the single room, something like a sacred catacomb that had remained intact and untouched over the sprawling decades. Most everything else had at some point been moved out or sold or rearranged. Yet the root cellar went oddly unnoticed and unaltered. If we leave something alone it is either out of a deep reverence or paralyzing fear. There are things that adamantly refuse to touch our lives without transforming us in the touching. David knew that the root cellar was full of just such things. And so, he avoided it out of the ever-accelerating fear that passion might someday rise sufficiently to offset fear. And with fear abated, he knew that he could no longer avoid touching and being touched in the touching. And that day was coalescing at that very moment.

Aside from the deep dust of inattention, it was exactly as it had been at the very moment his grandfather had been moved from the farmhouse to the nursing home on that December morning in 1957. What David was to learn was that sometimes in life things fall into a shrouded state of inattention so that their treasures might be held in the fullest state of preservation for another time.

Suddenly David’s cell phone angrily vibrated yet again, demanding his immediate attention. Yanking it out of his pocket he read the caller ID.

“Aunt Mabel again,” he muttered.

The date read December 11th.

“That’s going to voicemail,” he said with a voice laced tight with irritation. “I’m not in the mood for another ‘pages’ conversation, whatever that is. Why don’t they medicate her for that?” As soon as the thought passed through his head he felt a tug of regret that was instantly followed by a swell of regret. *Ugh*, he thought. *I’ll call her back in a minute.*

David found himself increasingly conflicted, ever angrier, and yet ever more curious at the same time, all of which was projected onto aunt Mabel and her call. For it was not the call of aunt Mabel. It was, in fact, the call of life. The ascending anxiety within him was accelerated by the guilt of hurting her as she had no part in the feelings that churned within him. Suddenly, pain rendered him soft instead of casting him hard.

As with so many moments that thrust us out of the smallest of ourselves into the greatness of great things, he found himself driven to a restored softness that tenderized him sufficiently around the edges. Yet, such tenderness stood against the whole of his will. David battled with himself for the entire hour it took to drive back to the old farm. He found himself engaged in a draining seesaw battle of being grounded by all things practical but being unable to shun the voice of something greater that invited him to places that the practical would never dare to tread or think to exist. And so, he once again returned to the farm of fence, field and forest, driving the road of Indians, horse and heavy wagon after a long day at work.

Entering the engulfing vacancy of the farmhouse, he reflexively stopped, turned and walked back out onto the yawning front porch. Standing on its vast expanse, he scanned the rolling vista of slumbering fields and quietly napping forest as darkness began pulling a veil over the day. Piecemeal flocks of birds rose and dropped into the field's growth of winter stubble. The shrill call of mischievous blue-jays rolled out from dense stands of maple and ash. Far down the field a handful of deer skirted wood's edge, feeding on a bounty of acorns dropped from the muscular oaks that flanked the woods. Sporadically the deer anxiously scanned the open fields, fearing to wander too far from the safety of the wood's primitive tangle. A lone hawk circled high on generous updrafts, soon joined by a second as both danced on the wings of the wind.

Sighing, David took a step to the railing, put his hands on its wooden surface, leaned forward and drew in a breath of sweet country air. And suddenly, this battle began to lift. Everything began to orient itself alive with color, wildly fragrant scents and the soothing sound of a world at peace with itself. Nature sets things right when the nature of our minds throws them into disarray.

At some point every person who has ever lived has a moment when everything that they are suddenly comes face to face with everything that they should be. Every person has a seminal moment when this gentle collision leaves them aghast with who they've been, fearful of how much they've missed, and cautiously electrified with what they could be. Decisions made at these moments will soundly dictate every other moment that will transpire for every moment of life that one has yet to live.

It suddenly dawned on David that he had relegated the farm to a lifeless piece of stale real estate, and he therefore had inhumanly compartmentalized it as a sterilized commodity. He had thoughtlessly ripped the beating heart of history out of it, except for a few piecemeal stories whose origins and authenticity he had seen as fictionalized to the point that fact was entirely indiscernible. All of that was about to change.

Again, standing on the very precipice of transformation, he froze as he realized that he had done the same to himself. And it was here that the change that had begun in the old root cellar began to crystalize. Tentatively, but surely. David was far too hurt and interminably too wounded to be transformed in this single moment, or any single moment. Yet, drawing in the quiet glory of field and forest it began in a manner sufficiently strong that it would not be stopped. He drew another breath, and in the breath realized that something was changing and that he need not yet understand the change for it do to its work. He then turned and stepped into the farmhouse.

Closing and thoughtfully latching the door behind him, he walked across the kitchen and descended the rough-hewn oak stairs to the basement. Apparently, the root cellar light had been left on again, extending an invitation to a moment beyond the moment. Turning, he walked up to the old chest and stood in front of it. This was for him the ridiculousness of it all. It was a chest. Just a chest. An inanimate object. The logical side of himself that he had so meticulously constructed after the divorce had kept him emotionally safe and sufficiently distant from every calamity and injustice that had been perpetrated on him since. It had even shielded him from the barbs and attacks that populated the divorce.

But here, in front of an antique chest, everything logical within him went completely limp. The change that had been put into gentle forward momentum in the root cellar and was roused on the front porch finally, and quite mercifully, gave all of this a meaning that logic could not and need not make reasonable. He had faced far more than this on roads both personal and professional, but here he stood trembling and afraid in front of a chest full of relics.

We certainly feel some element of fear when life attacks us. But real fear is felt when life calls us out beyond our safe confines and points us to great things that don't feel all that safe. That's when we feel real fear. So, with real fear pounding at his chest, David reached into the old chest and prayed.

Nothing occurred this time, as was the same each time he had engaged things a second time. He pulled back a bit and tentatively reached in again. Nothing happened. Nothing at all. No passing out. No blurring. Nothing. With the logical side of himself being gradually reassured that this was simply a mismatched collection of relics and nothing more, he reached into the chest.

As he did, he was drawn to the old family Bible. It had a coal black leather cover that was cracked along its curling edges. The words “Holy Bible” were imprinted in a simple flowing script across the upper third of the front cover. It was a bit stiff all about. Its binding appeared stiff as well, with its pages having been embossed by a gold trim that was slightly faded at points and places. It was thick and robust, much like the message inside. Someone had applied a touch of glue on the binding at the top of the book and had run a slight bead down a fraying edge. Pulling it out, he turned it back and forth as if determining how he was going to engage it or how it might engage him.

As he did, he found six crisp, new pages that had obviously been tucked in its pages at some point in history.

“Pages,” David blurted. “What?” He counted them. Six. “Oh my... are these...? Are these?” David’s mind spun. *Are you kidding*, he thought. *This can’t be... can it?* Holding the Bible at arm’s length and canting his head as if in some sort of catatonic disbelief, he said, “There are pages. There actually are pages. They’re for real. Really real.”

He drew the Bible to himself, took out the pages and counted them again. Six. Recalling, he remembered that aunt Mabel had said seven. She was adamant about that number for some reason. Very adamant. But, dementia does strange things. It messes with minds and it screws up numbers. So, it didn’t much matter... until it would. But for now, there were pages. Six of them.

With curiosity consuming him, he pulled out the first page. Squinting, he walked under one of the bare bulbs just outside the root cellar. It appeared that the writing had been done in pencil and was somewhat crude. Yet, it seemed entirely fresh, as if it had only been written but a moment ago. Its message was short, something more like the meandering of someone who was waxing a bit

philosophical or trying to figure oneself out in the writing. Taking it and holding it under the light, it read:

“The fire burnt down the farmhouse ten years ago today. Seems that it was only yesterday, but time does that to you. It always amazed me that it takes a man so long to face his fires, much less believe that he can rebuild something out of them. I went back to the farm today. I’ve driven by it here and there over the past ten years out a kind of itching curiosity, but I never drove up the driveway.”

“Hmm. Sounds like me,” David mused. “Just like me.”

He continued:

“Never walked through what was left of the farmhouse. Couldn’t bring myself to do that. I couldn’t because all I saw was destruction and ash and cinders and such. Couldn’t see nothing good rising out of any of it. Just thought that when something is destroyed, it’s destroyed for good. Move on is what I thought. So, after ten years I came back and spent most of the day today just walking around it. Looking at it and thinking about it and praying some. Remembering that day for the first time in a long time. Thinking about Nellie and frozen pumps and all.”

This must be my grandfather, David thought, finding himself irresistibly drawn into the emotions of an event long past and a man long dead. “This is him!” David blurted out loud. Immediately, he started reading again. However, the writing was slightly different, as if his grandfather had paused or written the last part of the letter after some subtle shift in thought, much like David’s shift. It read:

“But something’s come over me, telling me that it’s not over, only if I want it to be. It’s burnt down, but it isn’t done. Something says I need to rebuild it. Raise it back up. Make it kind of a symbol that genuine hope will withstand any fire, and in the middle of the cinders and ashes hope

always has the power to make all things new. Hope says things aren't done. What got burnt up don't need to be lost, even though we think it's gone. It don't need to be gone. Fires don't kill hope. Hope's fireproof. I'm not sure why, but I believe that hope can redeem anything, so I'm gonna start right here with this house.

David Morris

December 12, 1938”

“This was after the fire,” David mumbled. “Ten years after. This is when he decided to come back here and rebuild it,” he muttered looking up at the flooring overhead and scanning the basement. *This is what made him do all of this*, he thought. David was completely unfamiliar with the kind of hope that would allow a single man to take on such a daunting task. *Wouldn't it just be easier to walk away*, he thought to himself.

David's mind suddenly stepped outside itself into a space entirely unknown. His mind began to fashion the emerging reality that false hope, regardless of how craftily it might be constructed, could not have the power or force to compel a man to give himself over to his ashes in order to rise above those ashes. So, this must be...

His cell phone suddenly buzzed. As he reflexively reached it for, the page slipped out of the Bible and fell toward the floor. David turned and quickly reached for it, grabbing it in its spiraled descent. As he did, he fell to the floor... again.

Suddenly David came to, finding himself sitting on the basement floor in front of the old chest with page in hand.

“Again?” he said. “Again?” he said a second time, chiding himself a bit while rubbing his forehead.

Drawing himself up from the root cellar floor and summarily collecting himself, he turned to see a young man standing in the doorway of the old root cellar.

“Howdy,” the man said staring directly at him with a clear softness and a hint of tease.

Squinting, David sharply said, “Who or what are you? And what are you doing in my house?” Looking beyond the young man, sunshine poured into the basement windows, pulling his attention away from the young man to embrace night having instantly turned to day. *Wasn't it night*, he thought to himself.

In the pause of the conversation he thought he heard the soft neighing of horses off in the distance, and the more pronounced sound of chickens that seemed somewhat closer although they were a bit off as well. The sounds completely disoriented him as they were never part of the farm as he had known it. Clearly, the presence of the young man became secondary to all the misplaced things that David was hearing and seeing and even smelling.

Suddenly, upstairs he could hear the soft sound of someone walking.

“Who you takin' to?” came a voice from upstairs.

“Just talking to myself Nel,” the young man shouted at the basement ceiling, “You know full well that I do that quite a bit.”

“Well, pumps froze again,” came a delicate but strong female voice. “Can't do supper without water,” she continued.

“Things do tend to get froze in December, don't they?” the young man replied, casting a winking eye toward David. “Be right up,” he said, projecting his voice toward the stairway. With that, the footsteps walked away from the door.

Nel? David thought, Who's Nel? There's two of them in my house!

The young man's attention turned back to David, scanning him up and down rather quizzically. “I always

wondered how this moment would go,” he said with an air of curiosity mingled with an electric tingle of excitement. “Always wondered, but wondering’s over ‘cause, well here we are. Here you are! Come on over here,” the young man motioned vigorously as David stood to confused feet and weak knees.

He could not have been much more than thirty, maybe thirty-five if that. His features were sharply chiseled with his skin seasoned deep and rubbed golden by the Mid-Western sun. His clothes were simple, earthy and not pretentious in any way. He sported a worn pair of hardworking overalls and a stained t-shirt that bespoke the labor and life of simple farm-folk. Leather work boots caked with dried mud and framed with meaty soles peered out from under turned up denim cuffs that themselves sported threadbare holes in variant places. His clothing had been worn thin by the kind of full-bodied labor that grants a man a stalwart sense of purpose, while filling him with the unalterable peace that the day was well lived instead of wholly squandered.

Light blue eyes were set as deep pools against his richly tanned skin. Locks of tussled brown hair fell in short, uncombed clusters across the breadth of his forehead. His hands were broad and sturdy. Thick callouses lent a sense of adversity overcome by leaning into the hardships of life and bending them backwards against themselves.

He had a slow, drawl-like mannerism about him that outwardly seemed a lot like stupidity and slog of mental slowness. Yet the more David watched him the more it seemed that the slowness was about a fallowed maturity and a seasoned wisdom that allowed this young man to simply be comfortable just being. It was something that had eluded David all of his life, yet this simple person has grasped it in a way most masterful.

Collecting himself as much as he could, David said, “What are you doing in my house?” He found himself caught between looking around the basement in order to orient himself to something that was not quite his basement, while confronting what he thought be an intruder.

“Funny thing ‘bout that,” the young man replied, “Life sometimes doesn’t go like we think it should or like it’s always gone before. Seems to me that sometimes life kinda interrupts and, well, we don’t know what to do with the interruption ‘cause we didn’t plan for it. But I’ll tell ya what, I’ve learned that if life interrupts us, it’s ‘cause it’s got somethin’ good and right to say to us.”

“What? What does that mean?” David responded critically, not really knowing what to say, but having to say something. Still looking around he said, “Look, I don’t need a lesson in philosophy or pop-psychology. Who are you and what are you doing in my house?” David again asserted. “Are you one of the neighbors, or some sort of homeless person... or who are you?” he said. With a pause that was the continuation of David’s attempt collect himself, he then said, “And who’s that upstairs?” pointing upward.

The young man’s calm comfort and molasses ease was uncanny, as if he were home and David was not.

“Well, which one of those questions to you want me to answer first?” the young man replied. “That a passel of ‘em fer sure. But, they make sense... given where ya’ve come from.”

Pulling a rag out of his back pocket and contemplatively wiping something off his hands, he held up the rag as if to lend weight to his words and said, “Well, here, let me answer ‘em in the best order. Sometimes you youngsters don’t really understand the order of things,” he said while tucking the rag back into his back pocket. “I

suppose you couldn't in this situation anyway. Most folks couldn't." Shaking his head, with a bit of a drawl and looking back up at David he said, "I reckon I couldn't if I was in yer shoes either."

Youngster? David thought, *I've got this guy by at least twenty years, at least! Probably more.* "What did you mean by that?" David shot back in a mix of anger and confusion. "Are you one of those mental patients or something?" he said stammering and now evermore lost.

"Let me see... let's start with what am I doin' in your house and see where we go from there," the young man replied stepping back, leaning against the basement wall and completely ignoring David's last comment.

Looking at the man, David's attention was suddenly drawn away from the young man as he realized that there was supposed to be a utility sink on the wall to the young man's right, with an old, black sump pump to his left. Neither was there. Turning to his left, he saw that the steps were there in the right place, and the windows were where they were supposed to be. But the washer and dryer were gone, as was the large gray fuse box that was supposed to be above the dryer. Spinning around, the furnace was likewise gone with something that looked cast iron coal burner of some sort sitting in its place. For some illogical reason that David couldn't understand things weren't in their right place, or they weren't there at all. It all just wasn't...

The young man silently watched David's confusion mount, doing so with an entirely assured calm that gave rise to the notion that somehow, the events were entirely known to him. Sometimes we anticipate something for so long that when it actually happens it's strikingly different than we could have ever imagined it to be. At other times, particularly when life is afoot, it's everything that we thought and more. Such was the young man's experience.

“Well,” said the young man, interrupting David’s accelerating thoughts, “Some things are darn right easy to explain and fer a farmer like me, some things ain’t quite as easy... kind of like plowing a field straight. Sometimes you get the furrow a little crooked, you know. Kinda depends on you and kinda depends on the horses... its working as a team.” Pausing and casting a rather longing glance out of the basement window next to David, he said, “Seems to me that great things in life happen ‘cause there’s a team that’s working together and sacrificin’ together. Ya know, cuttin’ the furrows together. Makes great things happen, ya know. Like plowin’ a field or plowin’ a future.” He looked down and wiped his hands on the rag once again.

“Okay,” David said now trying to be calm, “I have no interest in mind games or philosophical mush or home-spun farm stories.” With his voice developing a bit of an edge, he said, “What are you doing in my house,” half asking the question and half looking around trying to make sense of things missing and things out of place and things different.

“David,” the young man said with a striking softness and a tenderness, something like a gentle father, “This ain’t your house... not yet, but in half a century or there bout’s it’ll be yours; not this house exactly, but one a whole lot like it.” Waving his arm across the basement while scanning it, he said “This here is about a day away from burnin’ down. All of this right here, where you and I are standin’. And it’s about another ten years from being rebuilt... a long ten years. Mighty long.” Pausing, the young continued, “That there’s the fact of the matter.”

“What?” David bumbled.

The young man replied, “Let me answer the second question,” he said as he pushed himself off the wall and stepped toward David. The young man stared at the floor as if formulating something unthinkably profound. He then

shifted his gaze directly into David's eyes. Drawing in a deep breath he said, "David... David, what day is it... today, what day is this?"

"It's Tuesday" David snapped.

"Let me rephrase that," the young man said.
"What's the date?"

"December 11th," David replied.

"Yup" said the young man, pausing as if something life-altering was about to happen. "Yup, yer got that right. But here's the next question that's worth some ponderin'. What year is this?" the young man asked, "what year son?"

With anger and confusion building simultaneously within him, David said, "I'm calling the sheriff!" With that he thrust his hand into his pocket to retrieve his cell phone. He found his pocket empty of everything but a bit of fluffy lint. Rummaging through his pocket, he frantically began going through all of his other pockets. "I don't have my phone," he said out loud. "My wallet, that's gone too!" he said with a mixture of confusion and anger. "What's this about?" he said looking at the young man and left going back to rummage through his pockets. "You've stolen my wallet and phone!"

The young man said, "Well David, ya don't have any such contraption 'cause, well, how do I say this right... ya don't exist yet. Neither does the stuff that yer scratching 'round in yer pockets for. It'll be invented, created and all, but not fer a while."

"Of course I exist," David retorted while continuing to rummage through his pockets with a mounting anxiety and somewhat comical confusion.

Snapping out of some sort of fog, David became erect and said, "Wait. How did you know my name? How did you know that? Did you get that from my wallet?" Continuing to frantically look around to see if he might

have dropped his wallet, he then blurted out, “Did you go through my phone?”

Pausing, the young man repeated, “What year is it?”

“I don’t know! What year is it? You tell me” David said out of escalating anger and a developing sarcasm while continuing to rummage through his pockets and repeatedly checking the ground around him.

At times we’re faced with realities that are genuine realities but are realities that far too great for us to embrace. We would be wise to live life cognizant of life’s realities, but we’d be even wiser to be equally cognizant that sometimes greater realities exist that shun our logic and circumvent the best of our mind. Such openness gives life ample space to work out wondrous things. Such openness creates room for hope.

Staring David in the eyes, the young man said, “David, its 1928. December 11th, 1928.”

Chapter 9

Grandpa and 1928

“David,” a delicate but stout female voice called from the basement door a second time. “David, do I need to come down there; who ya talkin’ to?”

“Jest muttering to myself honey” the young man shouted up the stairs. “Jest a conversation in my head,” he said, winking at David. “No need to come down, I’ll be up shortly.”

“Days a wastin’ and pumps still froze solid as can be,” came the female voice as David heard footsteps move away from the basement door and out the back of the house.

Not that recent events weren’t more than enough to thrust one’s mind to some improbable precipice of insanity. Yet, the voice from upstairs abruptly pressed David further toward the cliff’s edge. Confounded, he pensively asked, “Is your name David?” looking directly at the young man. “My name’s David,” he muttered to himself. “And... your name’s David,” he said pointing a quivering finger at the young man.

David stepped back and walked aimless circles in the basement as the young man resumed his position leaning against the wall. “1928, or so you say anyway. Your name is David. Her name is... Nel. Nellie? The sink’s not there, and the sump pump is missing, and this isn’t our furnace, I’m not even certain what this is,” David continued as he did a mental inventorying of what was there and what was not. “And farm animals... out there,” he said pointing. “Chickens. Horses, I think. Daylight when it should be night. What is all of this?” Abruptly turning to his left, he rushed to the basement window that faced the driveway, pulled his chin up to the sill and peered out. Rapidly scanning back and forth, there was no garage; no garage

where it should have been. No car parked. “Am I looking out the right window?” David thought looking around the basement, attempting to reorient himself to whatever all of this was. “Is this the right window? Or...”

Obstructing his view was a horse-drawn plow unhitched, caked with black mid-Western loam which sat patiently and somewhat sleepily as it awaited the turn to spring. To the right of that at some distance there stood an old, tired wagon sitting somewhat canted on a slight berm. Despite the weariness of its frame, it seemed doggedly ready for a call to duty. Horses milling about in a sweeping pasture out beyond the wagon peacefully meandered about in December’s tranquil white. It seemed as if they drew in the gentle solitude that enfolded itself upon them, somehow liberally exuding it back into the scene through the power of their calm.

“Those things weren’t there when I drove up” David thought to himself out loud. “Those things aren’t there at all. They’ve never been there... at all,” he half mumbled, staring at the ground and then back up and out the window. “At all.”

“No, they weren’t there when ya drove up, but ninety or so years before ya drove up they were there, right there where they are right now.” Despite his seemingly simple appearance, the young man seemed intimately acquainted with the ways of the earth. And it seemed that farming the earth had forged a deep camaraderie within which he had come to understand the ways of life as well. However, the words to enfold such a rich understanding and deliver it to another were slight and meager. But, great things lie in the poverty of a few scant words.

Pausing, the young man formulated his meager choice of words and said, “It’s 1928 David. That’s what this is,” he said slowly motioning back and forth. “At least, that’s what part of this is,” the young man said. “1928, and,

well, you ain't born yet, but yer here anyway, if that makes any kinda sense."

Pointing upstairs, he said, "That woman upstairs... that woman up there, that's your Grandma." he said, choking on some unexpected surge of emotion. "You, you never met her, never had the chance, I know. Sad, but ya won't get the chance this time 'round either, even though she's right up there. That's fer another time, in another kinda way. Purpose of her in all of this fer ya isn't for now." He paused, stared out the window and continued. "But I think ya know, 'cause ya know the history, ya know, ya know that she's gonna die David," the young man said with an increasing catch in his voice.

Clearing his throat, he paused and drew a breath that went soul deep and said, "Tomorrow she's going die in a fire that's gonna happen right here," pointing all around him. With a troubling pause the young man said, "David, ya know about the fire, the stories of the smoke and all, it's all history for you; like some sad story that's so long ago it doesn't much matter anymore. For you it's just a story, like some kinda distant fable that yer not even sure about. Somethin' ya heard told by family members over holiday dinners and card games and such. That kinda sterilizes it ya know. But it's the future for her and for me," he said pointing upstairs. "Jest a day in the future... that's all. Jest a day."

Pausing again and falling into thought, the young man resumed, "After the fire, I got ten years of bein' lost... real lost. The kinda lost that ya think is what yer gonna be forever. But it won't be, even though it seems so. And then I'll come back and rebuild this whole thing," he said, motioning around the basement. "Not quite like this yer seein' here, like it is right here, right now," he said running his hands over the support beams overhead, "Brought back too many bad memories, too much darkness to recreate jest like this. But close enough to keep me close but keep me

distant at the same time. What I won't be able to recreate is that fine young woman upstairs. No rebuildin' that. People... they're once in a lifetime. Ya get that once in this life. That's it. So, enjoy 'em while ya got 'em, 'cause ya don't realize what a gift they are until they ain't there."

Reflexively, David's logical orientation clamped down once again. He shouted, "That's crazy. That's just crazy. You sound like aunt Mabel! You sound just like her."

With a contemplative look that belied the weight of the situation, the young man replied, "Yeah, well yer aunt Mabel isn't born just yet either, but let me tell ya, she's going to be quite a woman." Pausing, he said, "She kinda reminded me of your Grandmother upstairs, you know, strong and improbable, but kinda gristle like. Your aunt Mabel, yup... yup," he said nodding his head soft and gentle. "She had your Grandma in her for certain." With tears welling up in his eyes, he continued, "Some great things got passed on into her fer certain. Great things mind ya."

Rubbing his hands together and staring off the nothingness born of pain and contemplation, the young man straightened himself, canted his head and said, "In my years I found out that sometimes what seems crazy is more real than anything else, it just looks crazy, that's all. Lookin' like somethin' doesn't mean that's what it is. Crazy is just something that we tag onto the truth when we're not strong enough to face the truth or when we don't want to understand it 'cause it's uncomfortable and all. If we don't wanna hear it, or it just ain't to our likin' we call it crazy 'cause then we don't have to pay it no mind." Thinking a bit, he said, "Just a piece of advice for ya, ya'd be smart to listen to aunt Mabel when that time comes David. When it comes."

“Okay, enough,” David yelled. Holding his head in his hands then looking up and pointing a finger directly at the young man he said, “I don’t know what this is, but whatever it is, it’s not what you’re telling me. It can’t be. This is, this is... like a bad joke or a concussion or a hangover or a really bad dream or a really ‘bad’ hangover, but it’s not what you’re telling me,” he said with a depth and intensity, attempting to ward off truth as we too often do. “This is not that! It can’t be! It just can’t.”

There are those acutely perplexing moments when a man is unexpectedly thrust to the end of himself. From there, he’s pushed out beyond himself. It is here, in that frightening place that a man fears the collapse of himself in a manner so complete that this may be the end of who or what he is, or what he thinks he is.

While we have all witnessed life end in a myriad of ways, we have done so from a safe and somewhat distant distance. Facing the appearance of our end means that we will experience that which we have only witnessed. Fortunate as it seemed to be, some bit of the transformation that had happened on the front porch only moments ago or would happen ninety years from now or whatever it was, was seasoning David’s rigid mind soft again.

The young man leaned forward, turned toward the door of the root cellar and drew the old chest into the middle of the basement. Turning the chest toward David so that he had a full-frontal view of it, the young man looked up and said, “Look at this, David. Look here,” he said pointing at the chest. “Recognize this?”

David took his head out of his hands, turned, and stared at the old chest. His gaze penetrated the chest, causing his hands to fall to his sides as he stumbled toward it. With his mouth gaping open he walked up to it, bent slightly and ran a trembling hand over it.

He gazed back and forth across it with a dizzyingly surreal amazement; the kind of amazement that briskly wipes the head clear so that the miraculous has sufficient room to start running. The chest was strikingly new; not brand new, but much newer. Remarkably newer. Unmistakably newer. Indeed, it was the same chest, the very same chest with a whole lot of years peeled off of it. It was the chest in reverse. Time, as we've come to know it, only goes forward. We can look back, but nothing goes back. Ever. Nothing gets new. It just doesn't work that way. With a little time and some practiced craftsmanship things can be made to look new, but that's only the old in redress. Not the old in reverse.

For David the chest was time in radical reverse, which is potentially or maybe providentially a reversal of everything; of the way we think, or the way we thought things to be, or the way we thought ourselves to be, or how we conceptualized everything. We can only imagine and subsequently understand things methodically moving forward toward some future place of death or decay. But to suddenly throw the hands of time in reverse and to reverse decay in that action was for David to invert the whole of existence and throw it all backwards.

And if that was true, if that was possible, if this was in fact 1928, it all suggested that anything, literally anything could be reversed. Anything. That what our limp imaginations and lifeless faith hold as an insurmountable reality may actually be completely surmountable, or more pointedly, may not be reality at all. And if that is so, then life is a journey of unimagined possibilities.

Snapping David back, with a calm air of reverent sadness the young man said, "It was my mother's. My grandfather gave it to her way back when she was just a child, to keep her keepsakes and important things in. Ya know," he said with an air of warmed reminiscing, "She had this at Gettysburg when she was about eight or so.

Somethin' like that. That old chest right there," he said pointing, "that old chest was within earshot of that battle. Yup, it heard it all they say. It heard men dying David. It heard cannon shot and the shout of battle on them rolling hills. Always seemed to me that it kept those memories close, real close, like it could almost talk." With a slight and wistful pause, he said, "Wish it could. Really wish it could. That'd be fascinatin' wouldn't it?" Running his hand across the leather and oak lid he said, "I wonder what it would say if it could talk? But I guess it does, kinda... talk."

David found his mind pummeled by the whole of the experience, helplessly free-falling into some gyrating emotional abyss from which no bottom seemed to exist. He was spinning, wandering, attempting to pull it all into some cohesive whole that would make sense of the senselessness and would give him permission to believe that he was not insane. He wanted to believe everything that was happening in front of him, but to believe would mean a blatantly militant readjustment of his whole life, his entire thinking, and the way he looked at everything.

As David pondered everything that was transpiring, or supposedly transpiring, he began to rapidly realize that this would not be merely an adjustment as such. This would mean altering the whole of his existence, for something this massive and incomprehensible would leave nothing untouched; nothing unaltered. Nothing. Even if this were some sort of aberration of stress or, God forbid, early onset dementia or something else, this singular moment in and of itself would change everything for evermore. The monumental nature of such a shift left him immobilized.

Sometimes life abruptly opens up in ways so vast that it engulfs all of our constructs and theories and beliefs in the swiftness of that single moment. At times such as these, life does nothing less than demand a brutally exacting reconstruction of everything that we've expended

the raw essence of our lives constructing. Much like the farmhouse that tomorrow would fall into ashes and blown cinder, such is the course of our lives in such moments. And at these moments we are left wondering if we have the passion or compassion to rebuild on foundations now razed. And so, David fought believing what he wanted to believe.

When life is about to do something great, it often sneaks up on us in order that the element of surprise might enhance every part of what it's about to do. There has been a grand withholding of sorts that makes the culmination of the moment as sweeping and momentous as the change that life is about to birth and the road that it is about to pave.

And then it dawned on him, kind of like a slow dawn that reveals the new day gradually but surely, like that Thanksgiving morning two weeks ago, or in reality that morning that will happen ninety or so years from now. David turned, pointed at the young man, but the words he had escaped him. Then he pointed at the chest, and then back again to the young man with no ability to access any words or craft any syntax that could deliver the emotions spinning within him.

Suddenly, the sound of chickens floated into the basement, followed by the neighing of distant horses. The woman called again from the top of the basement steps causing David to jump.

“David, the well needs to be unfroze and primed again. Can you get to that? I got clothes to launder and dinner to fix; the days getting’ on.”

“Be right there,” the young man replied, returning his gaze to David. “David, I gotta go. But there’s something we need to talk about.”

With his mind now finally shaking itself loose, David turned to the young man and muttered, “You’re... you’re my grandfather? Is that, is that what you’re saying?”

You're my grandfather... grandfather David? Is that, is that possible?" he stammered. "You're the guy I'm named after? You're him, you're him, the guy in all the stories? The pictures? But, but, you're dead, a long time ago... and you're certainly not young, or you shouldn't be, you can't be, and..." his words trailed off.

"David," the young man said stepping up and putting a hand on David's shoulder, "Yup, I'm yer grandfather," he said with an odd smile that bespoke the oddity and sheer unbelievability of it all. "I know," he said. "I know." With a depth that comes from great age and painful experience, he said, "I've gotta tell ya, it's a privilege to meet ya. A great privilege. I mean it. I've been lookin' forward to this." With a pause he said, "I for sure have."

With another pause to catch his breath and reign in the swell of emotion, his grandpa said, "Our lives never crossed ya know, we lived in different times. That's the way God set it up so it can't be anything but right and fittin'. But ah, things change. Time's done a good thing for us David. A gracious thing. It's gone and overlapped for us... it's overlapped for these few minutes anyway." Staring into David's eyes his grandfather said, "I'm glad for that. Mighty glad. But it's overlapped because there's somethin' ya gotta do David. None of the rest of us can do it, 'cause sometimes great things are reserved for great people, and yer that person, David. Yer him."

"Great? Great?!" David quipped. "Are you kidding me? I'm not great" he said pointing at himself. "I barely survive. All the success and the career and all that... that's, that's just a cover for my failures. For, for all my inadequacies," he said, throwing his arms wide. Pointing at his chest he said, "The way she left me," he said, "that says it all. Just look at that. Just look at me! You know what I'm great at?" David said leaning forward. "I'm great at

pretending, but that's all I'm great at. You don't know me. I'm not great at all."

Giving the moment some space, his grandfather said, "Ya have just said who ya think ya are. Which means you have yet to find who ya really are. And that, well that's comin'. No David, I don't know who ye are, but I know what yer goin' be 'cause I met ya on the other side of all the meetings." Before David could ask what in the world that meant his grandfather turned and said, "I want to give you somethin'."

Kneeling down, his grandfather opened the chest and tenderly sorted through various objects as if he was handling something sacred. After a few moments he pulled out an old Bible. Turning to David he said, "Seen this before?" Indeed, David had seen this before. Indeed! Absolutely. Yet, much the same as the old chest, it too was once much older. The years had somehow fallen off the old Bible, rendering it newer yet still old; the reversal sent David careening again.

Cradling it in his hands, his grandfather said, "This was my mother's, your great-grandmother. It was a gift from her father... my grandfather. I know that this was passed down to ya 'cause that's how I wanted it. It'll be a whole lot older when ya get it, but some things aren't changed by time no matter how much time passes. Age don't diminish important things. It ain't that powerful. You know David, those things that really matter, that stuff that's real valuable... time don't change that kinda stuff. It can't. It don't want to anyway."

With a bit more seriousness, he continued, "David, some things go on forever 'cause they're supposed to and 'cause what they give people isn't limited to one time or one place. Some things are eternal; worth holdin' onto cause nothin' can replace 'em. And things are eternal David 'cause there's a part of us that's eternal. This life ain't wide

enough or long enough ya know. Not nearly. There ain't near enough runnin' room for us to live out all that we are in one life. Nope. Only eternity has that kind of space. Only eternity. I need ya to remember that."

Opening the Bible, he pulled out the six pieces of paper that were just as crisp, new and clean as they were when David would hold them over ninety years from now, or when he held them only a moment ago, whichever was most true as it seemed that both were true. The pages were everything in reverse. They should have aged, but they did not. Everything else showed the wear of time, whether time was forward or time was backward. But the pages seemed to defy both. Like before, they were exactly the same when nothing else was the same at all. They had that uncanny steadiness about them, that they stood above time whether it was going forward or backward. Any maybe that was a characteristic of hope. Consistency. Stability. Steadiness. Invincibility. The stuff of hope.

Each page had something written on them. The top page was different, written in words that were a bit crude, basic and almost cryptic in script and form. In scanning the pages more thoroughly than he had had the chance to previously, David noted that others were something more like scrawling, some were quite ornamental, and yet others had some degree of regal penmanship.

Handing them to David, his grandfather said, "This top page here is nearly fifty years old David. Fifty years from here. I know ya wouldn't know it lookin' at it, but, well it is. Don't reckon I know about the others, but they's important for sure. They's all important. Real important. My mom wrote this one sometime just after the Civil War. Sometime after all of that settled."

Pausing, he continued, "I guess war makes ya think about a whole lot of things. She never wanted to talk about the war; never did... guess it was all too bloody, kind of

like mankind killing itself thinkin' that there was anything that would justify killin' in the first place." Thinking for a moment, he continued, "Ya know, it made her stronger. Ya think you'd see stuff like that and you couldn't help but be convinced that there weren't no hope. Never happened to her. Nope. Never. Not mom."

Raising himself as if he was about to tell a story, he said, "You know, she said she snuck off to the battlefield one evening a couple a days after the battle was over. Some of the bodies had been buried and such... not all, but some. But she said there was enough of them left to paint a picture that changed her forever. Something like a photo snapped in yer head that ya can't get rid of, much as you try. So, you gotta figure out what you're gonna do with it; whether you're gonna let it tear ya down or build you up, 'cause mom said we always have the choice ya know."

With his mannerisms picking up a bit of energy, he said, "She said that one kindly soldier, some young boy really, found her wanderin', took her aside and said, 'Ya know what? These men got to get to heaven a little early. I bet they're kinda likin' that about now, walkin' around heaven and all. No war. No dying. Just real livin'. They're good men. God'll treat 'em real well.' And then he walked her home, all the while chatting about home and hearth. When she got home her parents were mighty angry, but the young soldier requested that they treat her kindly so that the memory of death might become something that she would use to bring life."

"Guess it all forced her to look at the good in life 'cause if ya don't... well, if ya don't it just all becomes too much I guess. Life becomes what we focus on David, so pick carefully what ya focus on. Sides, there's always good no matter how bad it gets. Always. Even after tomorrow, they'll be good. The fire won't change that either. Nope, nope it won't," he said. Pulling himself emotionally back for a moment he said, "Enough of the reminiscing."

David looked at the pages, sorting through them over and over. “They all look new, they look like they’re totally new,” he said. “They were new before I came back here or did whatever this is or was or whatever... so they stayed new when everything else didn’t.”

“Well, that’s because they are David,” his grandfather replied, as if that fact was rather obvious and that David was somehow remiss for not understanding it. Yet for its bit of sarcasm, there was much, much more that lay hidden behind his answer.

Looking down as David held all six in his hand, his grandfather said, “I’m a simple farmer David, I’m what they call a ‘man of the earth,’ so all I know is that time hasn’t touched any of ‘em, but I don’t exactly know why nor do I wanna ponder all that. Pretty much the first one here’s fifty years old or thereabouts’, but at the same time all of ‘em look like they were just written, just like they were written today despite the fact they weren’t. Nope. They ain’t aged at all, not a one of ‘em. David, they haven’t aged ‘cause they’ve been waiting for ya. Yup, they’ve been waiting for ya; plumb pulled up and out of the progression of time and all the while waitin’ for ya. All except one.”

David’s mind continued to spin. Despite all of the mental prowess he possessed, he could not correlate what he heard, what he held in his hand, and what was going on all around him. In the midst of mental and emotional vortex that ceaselessly spun him, suddenly a thought flew out of the sordid mess. Mentally picking it up off the floor of his mind, they were the words of his aunt Mabel. With stunning clarity, he heard her words perfectly in his head, “Davie B, the pages are the most important thing about the farm. I know that yer grandfather left them somewhere, but where I don’t know. I don’t know where. Oh, I wish I knew where. Things won’t be done until you find them. Nothing will be done until you find them...”

“Yup, yer aunt Mabel was right, David,” his grandfather said, invading David’s thoughts and causing aunt Mabel’s words to shatter like broken glass, falling to the floor all around him. “What? What do you mean... how do you know what I’m thinking? How did you know about that conversation?” David responded with a sense of impending lost-ness.

“Well, David, let me explain, or try anyway” his grandfather said. “I lived a long-life David,” he said having taken the pages back and sorting through them with deeply calloused hands. “I got married young ‘cause I was in love. Darn good reason to marry. Right reason. Ain’t no better reason. Saw that girl upstairs at farmer’s markets and some fairs and never fell out of love after that. Love hooked me good. I farmed all that land out there,” he said, holding out his left arm in some sweeping motion. “And did pretty darn good. Takes it outta a man to farm a piece a ground like that, but ya put yer life in it, jest like ya put your life into yer marriage and yer family. All yer life, no matter what,” his grandfather said, speaking from the heart of a fellow sojourner who had likewise traveled down roads bled of hope.

“You know, didn’t matter how hard I worked ‘cause I watched this house burn down anyway, jest like it will again tomorrow. And I watched my wife upstairs die in the flames, like I will again tomorrow. Sometimes the best man ya can be isn’t good enough to save those ya love... ya know, to keep ‘em from leavin’. People leave David. There’s a million ways they do it, but they leave. People leave one way or another even though ya do yer best. Can’t keep people leashed ya know. Ya do good by ‘em ‘cause that’s the right thing. But ya gotta let them make their own choices.” Pausing and staring squarely at David, his grandfather said, “Ya know that son. I know that ya know that.”

Picking up the old Bible and tenderly thumbing through it, his grandfather continued, “After ten years of sadness that jest about killed me, I came back here and rebuilt this house. This house right here,” he said pointing around himself. “I couldn’t bring your grandmother back, but I could bring back a piece of what we shared... this place and farmin’ and such,” he said continuing to gesture around the basement. “I did that ‘cause I gave up, and then in the givin’ up I learned enough to know that I needed to give up givin’ up.” Looking up at David his grandfather said, “Ya following me?”

“Yes, I believe I am,” David said slowly and reflectively.

“I needed to have it back. Ya know, I needed to farm again, jest didn’t know that at first is all. Pick life back up and do it again. Yup, some things you just have to come back to ‘cause they’re too much of who ya are. Can’t run away from those sorts of things. If ya don’t come back and hold onto the good things,” he paused and continued, “‘cause there’s always good things David, ya’ll get really bitter and I don’t think life’s supposed to be like that. Not at all.”

It seemed as if his grandfather drifted off into some warm thought or haunting emotion or fear of some future event. Catching himself he drew back, cleared his throat, looked up and said, “I’m sorry, that was not right of me.”

Drawing a deep breath, he said, “I never farmed quite like I did before; somethin’ just was never quite there and I couldn’t get it back. Not all of it. But I farmed anyway. I farmed in seclusion you know, pretty much by myself; staying to myself. Your Mom was here of course; she was... but when she turned eighteen she went off to college. I thought that was a fine idea, mighty fine and much needed. Ya know, I kind of figured that the 20th century and these new times would demand that of ‘er,

everything seemed to be moving so fast and all. She did the right thing, moving on ya know. So... I farmed right up to 1957. That's when they took me to the nursing home David."

Gathering himself as recounting the span of a life yet to come caught him, he continued, "Now that's twenty-nine years from now, so I've got another twenty-nine years of doing it all over again, but it's worth it. I reckoned it was worth it a long time ago."

"What's worth it?" David asked with a voice lathed thick in curiosity. "What do mean, it's worth it? What's worth it? What?" David's question emerged from a biting sense that there was nothing in life worth going through all that again; that there was barely enough value in life to live it at all. So if something was worth it, really actually worth it, he wanted to know. Desperately.

Turning and walking to the basement window, his grandfather looked out and with a voice cracking in emotion he said, "Our family has had a lot of pain David. Yep. A lot. A whole lot. A lot of us have lost a lot of things along the road ya know. Some died in fires and some died in war... a war that hasn't been had yet, but it's a comin', ya can be sure of that. Like on the horizon of history. Some died deep inside, kinda like you David, which I reckon is the hardest kind of death. Some died in their minds, the strange things that the mind does. And some died just because they let it happen."

Turning back to David his grandfather continued, "But life's a whole lot more than that. There's good in it David, real good. There's something good in it that ya just can't beat." Pausing, he continued. "It gets lost and all, sometimes so lost that you can't see it anymore so ya think it ain't there to be found, but there's a good, a kind of eternal good that's always bigger than everything that's bad, and 'cause it's bigger there's always hope. The only

thing that can kill hope is you ‘cause life ain’t big enough to kill it, but you are, so ya better be real careful.”

With a pointedness in his voice, he grandfather said, “Ya need to remind us of that David. That’s yer job. Remindin’ us is remindin’ yerself, ‘cause you need that too. So, yer job’s to remind all of us of an eternal good, ya know, of hope that’s always right there even though we can’t see it in spite of the fact that it’s sittin’ right next to us; like right on top of us.” Pausing, he continued, “And it goes beyond us; family I mean, ‘cause there’s a world out there, particularly your world that needs to know that too. For certain, it’s mighty desperate to know that.”

Wiping a bit of smudge off the window with his sleeve, he continued. “Yep, kinda wipin’ yer vision clean so you can wipe ours too. And there’s folks that are willin’ to relive their lives just to give ya the one chance to do that. There’s people who’s gonna go through that pain again, ‘cept knowing what it is ‘cause they did it once already. ‘Cause the message of hope, I mean the God kind of hope, well that’s a message worth dying for again.”

Canting his head slightly as if in that deep kind of thought, he said, “I been thinkin’ that makes what they’re doing easier, but there’s another part of me that’s thinkin’ it’s harder and such ‘cause ya know what’s comin’. Don’t know. But, that’s why yer here, and that’s what these here pages are about, and that what’s these folks are sacrificing for.”

David heard the sound of a back door close firm and footsteps above heading for the basement door. “David, David Allen, is you coming up or do I need to come down and rustle you up these steps?”

“I’m on my way,” his grandfather shouted. “I’m coming right this second Nell.”

“So, here ya go” his grandfather said, handing David the Bible, “one page at a time David; one trip at a

time. I got them in the order my Mom gave them to me, so do them just like that. In this order right here.”

“Do what like that?” David said with a voice now weak and mired in confusion. “Do what? In what order? What am I supposed to do?” he pleaded. “What?”

David had lived out the better part of his life based on meticulous plans that tediously mapped out every step. He was a man of carefully calculated action, mostly to avoid any more pain. Yet, he stood in a basement supposedly ninety years or so in the past with history in front of him instead of behind him. No amount of logic or reasoning could hand him even the thinnest thread of reason from which he could weave even the most primitive map. What he was yet to realize was that the miraculous tethered to the crude cord of logic and reason was always strangled in the restraining. And once dead, it leaves a corpse of dreams forever unrealized and hope forsaken in the loss of those dreams.

Pausing, he looked deep into David’s eyes and beyond them into the depths of his soul. “Help us David; help us to see good ‘cause there’s been so much bad. Lots of folks are counting on ya. They’re waiting for ya, but they can’t do it for ya. Help us find hope in all this mess. Help the world out there find it.”

Tucking the pages in the old Bible, his grandfather casually knelt and reached into the chest. Turning back the first page of an old photo album that lay in the chest, he pulled out a faded and mottled black and white photograph almost as if such an action had been rehearsed many times before. He handed it to David without looking at it as if he knew all too well the image emblazoned on it in vacillating shades of gray on an ornate patchwork of black and white. Taking the photo in yet trembling hands, David said, “I hadn’t seen this in here before.”

“Well David,” his grandfather said, “I reckon that means ya weren’t ready to see it before now,” as truly great things will only reveal themselves when we are ready in both heart and soul to see them, which is why we see ‘em so rarely.

Unexplainably caught in the photo, David held it out a bit, squinted his eyes and asked, “Who is this?” canting it back and forth. It seemed to be a photograph of some unidentified child, more of an infant that could have been any one of a million infants.

“Look closely,” his grandfather said, “Look real close. David squinted and looked deeper, beyond shades and gray to something of the soul of the photo. Although small, the child had an oddly commanding face of confidence. It seemed a newborn with an aged sort of soul that eclipsed whatever age the infant appeared to be. It was something of the ‘old soul’ in the greatest relief David had ever seen.

Gently taking it from David’s hand, his grandfather took the photo, turned it, stared at it for a moment with some sort of compassion borne of the deep soul and said, “Hope grows David. It ain’t somethin’ that we just have ya know. Nope, it grows as we grow, if we let it. So, you might hold onto this picture ‘cause it’s gonna be part of yer growth.”

Handing it back to David, he turned it and gazed at it again. Yet, it was no longer the infant that stared back at him in black, white and gray relief. Rather, it was now a child, three maybe four years of age. Looking closer, David realized it was the same child only grown older. “What? How?” he stammered.

Sometimes words only diminish the magnificence of a moment because the moment begs the silence needed to most effectively savor it. And so, before David could say

anything, his grandfather reverently inserted the photo back into the Bible and gently closed it.

“Wait,” David said, “I don’t...”

“Knowin’ will come David, it’ll come,” his grandfather said taking David’s hand and tenderly grasping it. “It’ll come sure as tomorrow, sure as my promise to ya that it’ll come.” His grandfather then turned David’s hand and held it palm down over the leather cover. The woman’s voice from upstairs said, “I’m coming down there to rustle you up.”

With footsteps descending the basement stairs, his grandfather looked into David’s eyes with something of both deep longing and profound pain; like a forever farewell that’s bigger than our ability to accept it or express it. Then he pressed David’s palm squarely against the Bible. “Goodbye David, God-speed on yer journey.”

Suddenly it all blurred; the image of his grandfather fell into the same indistinct shadow as before. The shadow slowly drew away into some sort of grainy mist. As it did, a second shadow approached the first, and then everything fell away as if it was sucked out from reality and thrown out of a past that drew backward beyond reach. Yet, history would soon come forward again.

Chapter 10

Questions

Insanity and wonder are divided by a terribly thin line. It is, in fact a line so untraceably thin at times that it quietly renders itself imperceptible, particularly when our vision is tight to the point that vision is lost. We too often sentence wonder to the prison of insanity, relegating it there largely out of the fear that wonder might just be wonder and therefore too wonderful. We are prone to wonder if wonder can be real; which is really that tiny bit of hope within us that yet refuses not to hope.

Can wonder exist, and can it be squarely grounded in reality and suspended above it at the same time, working in and around and through everything? Is wonder the very thing, maybe the single thing that redefines the whole of reality? Could it be the thing that shakes the very pillars of our understanding by unabashedly declaring that wonder in fact defines reality as something exquisitely expansive, entirely welcoming and wildly liberating?

In a curious mix of compassionate friend and unrelenting mentor, real wonder must invite and demand that we step outside of our comfortable confines, for one cannot do so without the other. Wonder beckons us to chivalrous adventure that reality too frequently declines and kills in the declining. Despite its immense power, wonder recognizes that its very survival is dependent upon the willingness of humanity to allow wonder to be liberated from the chains of our mental confines in order to valiantly redefine life as we know it. As with all great things, their influence lives or dies by our permission, leaving great things at the hapless mercy of the fearful beings that we are. Wonder is no different. For wonder to survive then, wonder must force us to wonder if the cost of reason is the

price of wonder. And if so, are we willing to pay such an exorbitant price?

Wonder recognizes that it falls to each of us to decide where we will live out our lives, whether that be in the heights ascribed by wonder, or the cavernous depths excavated by the instruments of fear. Wonder hopes that we recognize that we have been entrusted with the improbable power to reject the majesty that wonder ushers into our lives. Wonder is too unfathomable for the menial lives that we've misinterpreted as marvelous. So, we pull up, (if we ever journeyed at all), and settle into the mundane as it can be tediously mapped and predictably plotted. Wonder goes wanting, fading into some blurry emotional distance; calling out a muted invitation out of the hope that it might be permitted a place to transform the very life that's walking away from it. And when we walk away from wonder, we walk away from hope. And that is a 'walk' we dare not take.

The blur went to a listlessly free-falling blackout that seemed instant but elongated at the same time. There are times in our lives that time itself cannot measure as the nature of these moments places them squarely outside of the rubric of time. Wonder cannot be measured in increments of any kind, despite our desire to draw the lines and erect the barriers. And so, for David time had been entirely breached in a manner that made time timeless.

Apparently, David had fallen to the floor, although he had no recollection that he had done so. The chilled cement roused him, being the first thing that gave him a gradually emerging sense of reality that pressed into the shrouding mist of unreality. Grappling with the dark gap in events, he pulled himself into a disheveled sitting position, drew up his legs, leaned a heavy head on shaking knees, took several deep breaths and allowed the fog to gradually abate. As the fog slowly dissipated, his mind began to throb with a mix of indistinct thoughts that moved in and out of

reality as he knew it; refusing to be neatly sorted into mental boxes so that he could explain it all.

After a moment, David pressed a palm against his forehead and canted his head slightly. The interminable pounding in his head seemed to send pulsating shock waves throughout his entire body; a throbbing that happens when the soul is touched in places made sacred by rawness. Shaking himself from the mist that enshrouded his mind, he agonizingly looked up to see the old chest exactly where his grandfather had put it only several moments, or maybe ninety year ago, or maybe where he had put it. The Bible with the pages had somehow remained in his hands with the first page lying on top. David pulled out the first page and held it against the other six. It was now aged, yellowed and tattered at the corners. The others remained unexplainably new. Sorting back and forth through them, he said, "I could have sworn..."

Gazing up past the chest he was caught with the reality that the utility sink and sump pump were there... again. Leaping to his feet and catching himself as lightheadedness cause him to list, he stumbled to the basement window, pressed his face against the glass and peered out to see the garage standing where it should be, and his car parked in the snow, lightly iced with a wafer-thin layer of winter's white kiss.

It was dark, as it was supposed to be, or as it was, or has it should have been... or something. No farm machinery. No sound of animals. Day had gone back to night. No voices were calling from upstairs. David stood in a silence that was screaming what he had just witnessed, witnessing to its reality before it would fade into unreality. Taking the disheveled shards of whatever it was that he had just experienced, he attempted to force-fit them into something that made sense. He stood in the middle of the basement, diligently working to find a rational line of logic that would compartmentalize it all sufficiently to say,

“Okay, that’s what that was.” Nothing did that ... quite enough.

What little energy he had left abruptly vaporized, disseminating into the air around him. Suddenly he was rendered as limp as a damp cloth with the understanding of life now largely rung out of it. Collapsing to trembling hands and knees he crawled up to the old chest with anticipating palms pressed on the cold cement floor. Dream or reality? Destiny or dementia? Delusion or something else much more real? The choice that we make at such terribly delicate junctures has the power to break life open, demolishing every barrier to every road in the opening. Or, they have the power raise the barriers to unassailable heights and forever strand us on whatever road we’ve chosen to live on. And so, the two opponents vied as bloodied combatants for a place of prominence in a mind still misty.

David eyed the chest out of an ascending fear that was offset just enough by the sense that he had stood before that chest nearly a century ago and watched a grandfather anoint its contents as good, making them redemptive in the anointing. It was old again, having aged in what appeared to be a blur of seconds. David realized that it was not some vivid imagination that aged it because it was all too perfect to have been the muse of imagination. Yet, the logic within his mind took up arms against the realities that were in his heart. And so the battle for the soul of a man raged on a cold basement floor.

Life sometimes tip-toes up on us at intentionally undisclosed times with surprises sufficiently strong to fully pry open that which we’ve completely shut down. Things that we blithely relegated to the confines of the irrelevant are unexpectedly resuscitated in our minds, granting them a value we had never ascribed them before. We stand stunned that something we’ve held, something we’ve estimated as holding no value, something we’ve relegated to the pit of

the irrelevant is now suddenly raised and seen as priceless. That sense of being stunned by riches missed is geometrically multiplied as we realize what we forfeited along the way, what such forfeiting says about who we are, and what would have happened had we continued to have missed them.

The old chest was aged again, as it had been before whatever it was that happened, had happened. David pulled himself up to it, daring to believe his eyes for a moment, and then calling them into question. He roiled and rolled between belief and disbelief. Utterly helpless, he gyrated back and forth between the two, unable to affix himself to either.

Slowly he ran his hands around the chest's proud, quiet frame as if tenderly engaging a gentle friend once again now ninety years later; trying to create an intimate camaraderie with this most strange object. He found himself unexplainably compelled to touch it, running finger-tips over its ornate buckles and rich wood; daring to look for something with the eyes of his soul verses the single dimension of wounded eyes that turn rational for their own protection. David found himself driven by some raging passion to believe that what had happened was indeed as true as it was rich.

Standing up and reaching for the Bible, he stumbled underneath a basement light, allowed the dimness of the bulb to illuminate its cover and peered at the Bible. It too had aged or re-aged, returning to a leather cover cracked, worn and tired as he had always remembered it. Gently opening it he looked at the pages that his grandfather had handed him, attempting to make sense of one page aged and five impossibly new.

Taking the page that his grandfather had placed in his hands and putting it on the top of the others, he studied the first page again. *This can't be the same page*, David

thought. Thumbing through the old Bible and then looking around the floor, David felt that maybe this was another page; a different page, a page he had missed. Maybe the original, bright and new had fallen somewhere. But you can't find something that isn't lost. Sometimes we think things to be lost only because we are lost and we have transferred such a sense onto them. At times such as those, we are the ones needing to be found.

Giving up the search and surrendering to the reality laying in his hands, he stared at the page, attempting to decipher what this was. The aging the page had become brittle, yellowed and terribly faded; irreconcilably different than all the other pages. He had clearly and unmistakably recalled it as clean and as new as the others; that was how his grandfather had put it in his hand and pressed him palm against it. But now, for whatever unexplainable reason it was old like some sort of aged parchment. Same page, but aged in an instant, so it seemed. It was worn around the edges, stained in several places and no longer supple or snowy white; all of which seemed entirely appropriate somehow.

Underneath the page was photo with the image that had aged or appeared to have aged. Holding it under the light, his mind met the photo with the memory of the infant and then the toddler. Instead, he now saw a child, eight maybe nine. And in the seeing, he remembered that it had aged before. Holding the photo at a distance and then bringing it close yet again, he peered and indeed the child had aged yet again. The photo remained old and exactly the same in every respect except the child had grown into what appeared to be a shy and tentative preteen.

In a panic that was likely something more of surprise than panic, David dropped the Bible and the papers, sending the pages floating to the floor and the photo pirouetting as well. Confused but simultaneously aghast at such an irreverent action, he begged the forgiveness of a

grandfather who had stood there only a moment ago nearly a century ago, as terribly confusing as that was for David.

“I’m, I’m sorry... I’m sorry” he said stepping forward. *There’s no one here*, David suddenly thought, feeling that some apology was warranted but to who or what?

Everything had irreparably unraveled, demolishing every piece of David’s life in the unraveling. Nothing fit into the sturdy and safe rubric that David had tediously constructed to protect himself and deal with his pain. All of the rubrics and intricate frameworks that had propped up a world incinerated by a divorce bent and collapsed. The trustworthy benchmarks that had always provided a sure and certain orientation in the most turbulent storms had been toppled. Their absence left David desperately wishing them back, yet simultaneously wondering why and how they had fallen so easily.

For life to afford us a truly new road, particularly a road of wonder and hope, we must have any remnants of the old road removed lest we are tempted to take them up yet again. And if they cannot be removed, they must be made so undesirable that nothing would behoove us to ever take them.

At times, we are left at crossroads that pave innumerable roads off to every conceivable horizon. At this bewildering juncture, our rubrics no longer fit and our trustworthy benchmarks are gone. All of the resources that we have used to choose our roads suddenly provide no direction. And it is in this place of utter helplessness and confusion that we have yet to realize that we are at the same time free of anything that might prompt us to pick up old roads to nowhere. Sometimes life has to strip us in order to save us. Sometimes it’s less about making the right decision and more about not making the wrong one. And

sometimes, it's possessing the faith that something bigger than us is preparing to do something bigger in us.

David stood at a juncture that seemed to send roads off in a bewildering array of directions. With trembling fingers, he stooped and picked up the pages, neatly putting them in the order that his grandfather had put them. Once arranged to his satisfaction, he took the next one. Bringing it back to the light, David squinted and tried to read the words. In ornate handwritten script now faded, he read:

“The great war of this troubled union rolled by our home. It laid the terrible sounds of gunfire and men dying at the threshold of our tiny front porch. The great sin of man was unleashed on these hallowed fields. The world was engulfed in Armageddon. How could there be anything after the horrible carnage that lay in these fields and on these hills? How can life rise up from flesh and blood violently slaughtered and strewn in hatred of one brother for another? We must believe that something exists beyond the stench of death. With all earnestness we must believe that each battle builds the character of eternity into the fabric of men. Battles build hope. Send him home my son to find it.”

It all went black again, effortlessly and without any sort of forewarning at all.

Some scant furniture had been left in the old farmhouse. Part of the abandonment was that no one really wanted the stuff. The other part of it was the feeling that stripping the farmhouse entirely would be tantamount to some sort of inexcusable thievery. Such an action would have been a blatant disregard for all the memory that made the place what it was. Even death did not warrant that all of one's possessions should be removed as if death had some sort of finality about it, particularly in this place. Death did not, David had found.

David was stirred awake to the sound of a lone, diesel pick-up truck rumbling down the road of Indians, horse and heavy wagon. The sun had just begun to paint gentle mauve and pink pastels on a wintery eastern horizon, albeit while competing with a mottled masking of gathering gray skies. Hurling out of his drowsy state, he shot up, finding himself sitting on the old sofa that had been left in the front family room. It had somehow held its color and its sense of purpose for the decades it had sat waiting and patiently anticipating. Catching his breath, David firmly planted his hands on the cushions on each of side of himself, leaned forward and drew himself out of the deep mental mist that had encircled his brain.

Next to him his cell phone vibrated, demanding that he give attention to what seemed a million messages reminding him of various meetings, pending deals to be closed, appointments to be rescheduled, shareholders to be calmed, and the ceaseless rearranging of a horrid array of conferences, most of which seemed irrelevant and uneventful. He realized that his phone was back, if it had ever really been gone. Squinting at the screen, the display read 6:12 a.m., Wednesday, December 12th.

Exhausted to numbness, he rose to his feet, stroked back his hair and attempted to shake himself loose from whatever had just happened. Slowly, it all began to fall into the various slots in his mind, recreating a fuzzy time-line of bizarre events and impossible happenings. Clarity only brought confusion as wonder defined and corralled by definition is not wonder; therefore, it will remain what it is... undefined. And yet, he easily ascribed it all to assorted dreams stimulated by whatever life crisis he thought himself to be in. It was not about fear or the impossibility of such happenings. Rather, logic rendered the impossible possible and even reasonable... to the point it could.

The world out the window seemed the same, something that he was entirely grateful for. Yet, there was a

hint of disappointment that the wonderful imaginings of the previous night might be just imaginings. A dream that seemed real, but a dream nonetheless. His world had spun to heights of what seemed insanity, yet at the same improbable time it also felt wonderful. He desperately wanted to find something to ground him, to pull him back to some sense of normality. Normality might be bland and flat and entirely un-compelling, but it's familiar.

The world outside was just as he had left it the night before. What had transpired in-between then and now was unclear and begging for some explanation that David figured he'd try to avoid. Yes, a dream it was. Maybe if it was avoided and labeled as a dream born of a mind stressed to breaking it would disappear, giving David a desperately need 'out.' Maybe it was a mind driven by stress to some strange edge that could easily be abated by a little rest. And so for David, an explanation of dreams borne of life transitions and fed by stress worked well enough. It was indeed a dream. That's all. And for the moment, the explanation of the experience was settled.

With the previous night's events sufficiently explained and categorized, David sat back down on the sofa. Confidently at ease, he picked up his cell phone. Rapidly scrolling through the many messages, he attempted to reassemble a life terribly disjointed by reviewing his calendar and letting the meetings of the upcoming day reorient him to some sort of focus.

Apparently, the buy-out had hit a glitch. Again. The market had taken an unanticipated dip, although it appeared to be on the path of recovery. The COO was in tizzy about getting a contract firmed-up, although this was how he always responded to such matters. The attorney said that the changes to the buyout were legit, which was calming for David. "Nothing new there," he pondered. A client indicated that he didn't have the funds he had purported to

have had which meant that the agreement that had eaten up so much of David's time had to be modified yet again.

"Busy day," he mumbled, "busy day... why does it always have to be so busy... so stupid busy?"

In his tone there was a chilled thread of meaninglessness; the kind of meaninglessness that shakes a man's soul to the core and strips his life of any meaning at all. The kind of meaninglessness that hits us entirely unexpectedly and renders the whole of our life's existence as a script played out to an end that's bankrupt. And somehow, despite the crafty denial, we know the ending to be exactly that.

This seemed to be the kind of meaningless that was so strikingly opposite of what his grandfather had said to him, or supposedly said to him in last night's dream. Even though he had relegated it to a dream, it possessed power nonetheless. A dream it might have been, but it remained worthy of contemplation. That bit of hope drawn from his grandfather's words now collided head-on with a deluge of hopelessness returned. And sitting in a 20th century farmhouse facing the hopelessness of the 21st century, David found himself caught in the horrible angst of it all. The night had been categorized as a dream, rendering it as nothing more than the muse of a tired mind. Therefore, nothing had changed although everything had changed. Everything will continue to change.

Shaking the thought out of his head, David again centered on his schedule, attempting to cull meaning out of the innumerable meetings, phone conferences and deadlines that populated his day. For the first time, he could draw no meaning out of them. None. Sorting, resorting and recalibrating it to mental oblivion he could not resuscitate any meaning from the cold corpse of his schedule and the inert life that it defined. We are a stubborn people at times, having collided with greatness, yet finding ourselves

attempting to revive all the dead things that had gratefully and mercifully perished in the colliding. We relegate wonderful things to the infantile musing of dreams gone sour.

Whatever had been said to him the night before, whether it was real, imagined or a mind skirting the precipice of insanity, life would never be the same although he presumed it would be. Never. When truth arrives, despite the manner of its arrival, it is simply too visceral not to permeate everything it touches, leaving us less concerned regarding its arrival and more caught up in the fact that it came.

It shakes a man to his core when what gave him a purpose for living is suddenly empty, leaving the whole of his life constructed on a foundation of sand. It's particularly devastating when everything that had given him purpose before had been stripped from him in a blur of selfish choices, flagrant lies and the deceit of another that strips a man so thinly raw that life beyond that point seems wholly improbable. It is when we are pillaged of things that we thought untouchable that we are left in the paralysis of shock. When someone sets out to steal that which is sacred, some sort of inexcusable line gets crossed that we presumed to be impregnable. And at the point that we realize that even the sacred can be stolen, our vulnerability becomes total.

We then attempt to replace all that was lost with the thin veneers of success and achievement. We gather up whatever charred pieces that remain and we attempt to arrange them in some sort of composite that represents something of that which is no longer there. And so, we live a life that's not a life. The most dangerous part of that was that it actually worked for a bit or had the appearance of working. And then to have these veneers consumed by the words of a grandfather ninety years ago, or a night ago, or a dream ago, or whatever it had been was unimaginable.

Suddenly, for the first time since his wife's abandonment there was nothing to his life. Despite the exasperating mental exercises to reconstruct something from the cinders and ash, he could not. The life of escape he had effectively designed was now, for some inexplicable reason, wholly ineffective. David could not make it what it had been. Sitting on the worn sofa of a 20th century farmhouse after a nine-decade journey back and forward through time (whether that journey was a dream or not), the thought processes that had saved him now failed him. By now, the phone read 6:52 a.m. It took David a mere forty minutes to realize that the life he had created over a decade was gone. Irretrievably gone.

Gathering himself, he headed out the farmhouse door into the sharp chill of a curious December morning, somehow forgetting the night before in the impending rush of the impending day. Sometimes rushing into our day is in fact running away from our past. And when we run in that manner, all of our energy is consumed in the running with little focus on the destination to which we are running.

David headed for the car, woke a sleepy engine to the cold of the day, turned around, headed down the expectant driveway, pulled out onto the road of Indians, horse and heavy wagon, and drove into a world of meaninglessness.

The old family Bible, the pages, and an aging photo was left lying on the old sofa, waiting in silent anticipation for another journey.

The office seemed sickeningly flat and vain; a pointedly disturbing feeling that David thought would dissipate once he arrived. He assumed that he would seamlessly step back into that which he had stepped out of. That life is always a process of picking up where we left off, even when where we 'left off' should be 'left behind.' And where David was 'left' after a grandfather and nine

decades was some place where everything would be ‘left behind.’

The office was irreconcilable for David, much like he was someplace else entirely. As the minutes droned on, the creeping realization that whatever it used to be, whether in imagination or reality, it would never be that again. Sitting at his muscular oak desk with its well-appointed decor, the office was now thinly one-dimensional; flat and stale and empty of color or a pulse. The hearty plants tastefully placed about his office, original paintings that adorned cream-colored walls, various awards and trophies strategically displayed to evidence attainment, plush leather chairs that greeted visitors and hosted meetings... it meant nothing.

Standing at the immense windows that framed two walls of his expansive office, David peered out over a cityscape of glistening skyscrapers, concrete sidewalks, asphalt byways and canyons borne of buildings squeezed into tight city blocks. Innumerable cars and a sprinkling of pedestrians far below hurried off to destinations unknown to David and likely unknown to those doing the traveling. Streets and small parks were adorned with a sprinkling of trees and shrubbery asleep in winter’s embrace. While he had made this very existence his everything, suddenly it was nothing.

This very office had been robust and filled with improbable energy. It had flooded his life with purpose when purpose had been scandalized in the flames of an unwanted divorce. His career had saved him, but only for this moment.

Now, nothing held anything of value anymore. The contracts, the marketing, the meetings, employee development, hard-won bonuses, career advancement... all the stuff that had energized his depleted life and gave meaning to his own meaninglessness was suddenly empty

and entirely void. He seemed to sit there at his broad desk, grabbing his job by the throat in an attempt to bring it back to life. Taking it by the collar and shaking it in his mind, he tried to shake it alive. Yet despite the incessant shaking, it remained a corpse; cold and lifeless and void of everything that David desperately needed it to be. It would not be revived. What David hadn't realized was that it had never been alive in the first place. And what he had yet to realize was that you can't resurrect that which never lived.

We naively invest in a life that is not a life, the whole while thinking it to be the best sort of life. What we invest in can look the part, seeming to hold a robust vitality and a sustaining meaning that grants it a perceived richness worth investing in and living for and even dying for. Yet, in time the fraudulent becomes depleted, and in the depletion it becomes startlingly exposed. When it finally becomes exposed, we typically rush with great vigor to prop it up and rigorously breathe life back into it. Our lives become entirely focused on the resuscitation of our lives where we desperately pledge a renewed allegiance to it, hoping that such dedicated action will revive what was always dead.

Yet, all that we're doing is expending ourselves in the attempt to breathe life into something that is not life and therefore never had the breath of life in the first place. Such an endeavor will result in the maintaining of a limply contrived life which is not capable of being anything but contrived. We see a heroic sort of boldness in the effort of resuscitation, but we think resuscitation to be life when it is the false perpetuation of something much less. Once we hear the voice of a grandfather in our heads, nothing is ever the same.

“Dave, Dave, are you... okay?” Steve asked tentatively. “You alright?” Out of nowhere, Steve was suddenly standing at the head of David's desk. For Steve, the environment never defined him. He had always stood above it; his authenticity defining his environment instead

of it defining him. Steve was ‘enough’ in a manner that anything that might define him would end up being defined by him instead. All of that was something David could never quite define. Sometimes we can’t quite put our finger on something because we’re not quite ready to stake our lives on it. Yet, despite the lack of definition it was something that he had always admired and had often wished for himself.

In addition to all of that, Steve was an astute administrator with a heart sensitive and attuned; sharply shrewd and yet softly wise all at once. Steve possessed a balance forged of balancing the living of life, instead of balancing an avoidance of life. David always appreciated those qualities. Out of that appreciation they had formed a deep friendship both inside and outside of work.

David had few friends because few people could be trusted in a soul-baring kind of way. A life of isolation, despite the sequestered depth of aloneness was indisputably preferred to a life of vulnerability and risk. Work had become his trusted companion. Survival had become his sole goal. And forever outdistancing a past that frustratingly kept pace with him was his motivation. Friendships of any kind did not fit in any of these places. Except Steve.

Steve had been born with cerebral palsy, rendering his life a challenge prematurely robbed by his disability. His disability had never granted him permission to fake life. Therefore, he had lived his life engaging life as he had no other choice. It is our handicaps, whatever the nature of them might be that steel us against the shallowness of the world and keep us transparently authentic. As such, we should wish for more of them, rather than deny those which we have. Steve stood as starkly authentic as compared to David who had built a life starkly contrived into to survive.

“Dave, are you okay?” Steve asked again.

David had been robbed along the way, having had something only to lose it. Steve knew a kind of reverse robbery where something was stolen without it ever being experienced in the first place. Indeed, he had been robbed without ever having experienced the enjoyment of that which had been robbed. It made him a unique kind of person, embodying great loss with the tenacity that brought great success and fostered great hope.

“You okay?” Steve asked again with a quizzical tone in his voice.

“Yeah, yeah,” David replied in a long and drawn out tone. “No... I guess I don’t know,” he said spinning his chair toward Steve and looking past him out the office window to the cityscape below. “I don’t know.” Taking a deep breath, his eyes aimlessly meandered around the office and then fixed themselves on Steve. “What do you do when everything you’ve worked for, all the stuff you’ve poured yourself into for, for years, suddenly seems meaningless?”

Staring back out the window with a heavy, lingering pause he continued, “Ever have that happen, like the purpose is all gone, like life loses a heart... and it slowly dawns on you that there wasn’t probably any purpose ever, in the first place?”

Pausing and shaking his head, he continued. “It’s like you face something you don’t want to face, but you don’t really know what it is. Maybe, maybe it’s like facing yourself, you know. Or facing that you’ve settled in life and whatever the settling is has cost you. Only you don’t realize that until some... something happens. I don’t know,” he said shaking his head again. “It’s just, it’s just like I’ve gone down a really long road that I chose to go down, and I never doubted it to be the right road, and I’m wondering if it was ever the right road. Maybe it wasn’t even a road.” Pausing, he stared down at the floor and said, “And all of

that might just be fanciful musing of a guy that's just really tired."

Leaning introspectively on his cane as he so often did, Steve said, "You know, sometimes everything we've worked for was only to take us to the next thing. Sometimes it doesn't look like the right road because it was just a road to the next road, even though we thought it was more than that. I wonder," he said while leaning against David's desk, "If life's not about trying to get us to the very place we don't want to go because that's the very place that we're supposed to go. Like we want to stay on whatever road we're on because the next one might take us to places we should be going, but don't want to go. I think that might be true," Steve said with a slight nod of the head.

After a pause where he seemed to be sorting out what he just said, Steve said, "I'm not certain why I'm telling you that, other than it just feels right to say."

David smiled for first time in a long time, looked up at Steve and replied, "How do you know this stuff? What'd you do, major in philosophy in college or something?"

"No, no, I get it," David continued. "I get it. Sometimes life's too busy for us to think about the important stuff. Stuff like what you just said," he said pointing at Steve. "Time, well time just moves too fast you know." Pausing, he continued, "I need to think about this... yeah, think about it. A lot."

Standing up, he laid his hand on Steve's shoulder and said, "Can you handle the Bowen merger, at least for today? It's just getting the buyers to review the conditions of the sale, that's all. It should be pretty clean. I'll pick it up tomorrow."

"Sure," Steve replied heartedly.

"Okay. I'm out for the day. See you tomorrow." Grabbing his coat, David turned toward Steve and with a smile born of a softening heart said, "Thank you. I really

mean it you know. Probably in a way that you don't understand. Thank you." Then he turned and headed into a history that would build his future.