



The Lucky Ones

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“You guys go ahead. Have a great time.” This, while clanging plates in the cupboard, emptying the dishwasher. “I could use some time to myself. Guys’ night out? Well, weekend out actually. I get it. Two days and a night of wild river –”

“White,” I said impulsively, immediately sorry for correcting her.

Our son, Peter, sat at the table opposite me, preoccupied with his brand-new wrist compass. “White water rafting,” he said.

She said, “White water rafting.”

I sensed a ripple of resentment. My plan to spend a weekend of father-son bonding before our son went away to college had upended the send-off his mother had in mind. But I’d shared my plan with Peter and the die had been cast.

“Seriously,” my wife Ann continued, “I’ve got a project or two of my own I’ll have a chance to get to.” She finished stacking the dishes and stood cross-armed, staring at me and Peter.

I nodded my agreement as coolly as I could and glanced at our son. He bobbed his head eagerly and I could tell he had no idea his mother was approving too heartily to be heartfelt.

And I was a bit apprehensive that Friday evening as Ann walked down the driveway toward our car’s newly supplied trunk, its lid lifted, ready for inspection.

Peter did the honors. “As you can see,” he began, unzipping the suitcases, “we’ve got layer upon layer, from swimsuits to raingear.” Peter pointed out the odds and ends packed in clear waterproof bags: sunscreen, water bottles, flashlights, batteries, insect repellent, toiletries. And a few freestanding items: our extra-wide broad-brimmed hats, two headlamps, and our sleeping bags.

“Airhead?” Ann asked, pointing to the deflated one-person float, a yellow rubber-duck pool toy lying flat beneath the electric air pump. Airhead is the nickname Peter gave the toy as a child. “On wild river – uh, excuse me – white water rafting? A pool toy?”

Peter laughed. “Not for the rapids, Mom,” he said. “It’s for basecamp. The water’s calm there. And plenty warm, especially in August. The river runs south to north.”

“Okay, okay, fine,” she said. “That’s more geography than I expected.”

He reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out his cellphone, and handed it to his mother as though offering a sacred relic.

She took the phone, but shrugged, confused.

“No cell service,” he explained. “Dad’s got his cell for the coming and going. But no service once we’re on the water.” He then pulled a book from the trunk and waved it like a pennant. “I’m going retro on this trip,” he said. “Paper pages and all.” He showed the cover. “A novel. Banned in several school districts.”

“Ah,” she exclaimed. “Banned! That explains it. The appeal of what’s forbidden!”

The next morning’s drive to the campsite was a relaxing way to begin our retreat. Clear skies, open road. I was reminded of the quote from the Company’s brochure: Day one is just the beginning.

We’d both been on this river a few years ago so we weren’t novices, but neither were we experts, which fueled enough nervous anticipation to be palpable. And a deluge of chatter. The rapids’ official degree of difficulty: a rating of three out of five. With two thunderous waterfalls – remember? A procession of hour-long passages through Class III and IV rapids. How high was the cliff I jumped off at the cove? Twenty feet, I claimed. Higher, Peter countered. He’d get to jump this time, he insisted. He paused for my rebuttal, but heard none.

We turned to other topics, perhaps to calm ourselves down. He listed the classes he planned to take. Hypothetically, at least. Possible majors to explore. He considered what he might bring from home. He mentioned his email exchange with his assigned roommate. Whether he should take an on-campus job. For spending money, he said. On what? I asked. After a few miles of silence, he lifted his t-shirt and revealed several bold black markings on his rather pale side.

“What the –?” I managed, before turning back to the near-empty road. I peeked again. “Is that...is that permanent?”

He nodded.

“What’s this about – some sort of rite of passage?”

“Not exactly,” he said. “Wanna know what it means?”

I wondered about that but was afraid to ask. The thick black markings were indecipherable to my eye. A graphic symbol of some kind. But of what? Hopefully nothing potentially offensive. But I didn’t believe that of my son.

“Luck will follow me,” he said.

Relief. But complicated.

“Well?” he asked, his shirt still lifted.

“Thinking,” I said.

He sighed and released his shirt.

I was thinking about the day – the evening, actually – I whispered a secret to him after we’d watched a barely permissible zombie TV show. He was only twelve then. Struggling in school. Struggling in sports. Struggling in life. What little of it he’d experienced. I told him my deceased grandmother had passed a secret along to me. A secret she asked me to pass along to him. Whenever I believed he was ready. I told him I believed he was ready now, on the edge of adolescence. I told him he was a lucky child. As decreed by his late great grandmother. That luck would follow him. Always.

And I was remembering how he looked at me that night. The totality of his twelve-year-old conviction. Despite all my previous deceptions. Santa Claus. The Easter Bunny. The Tooth Fairy. A succession of disappointments, but each accompanied by an acknowledgement that he’d grown old enough to know the truth. But now this latest fantasy: that he was a lucky child. As ordained by my grandmother. As if she were reaching out to him from the grave. That mysterious old lady whose apartment always smelled of incense and whose shelves were lined with glowing phosphorescent statues of haloed saints, bleeding hearts, and figurines crowned with thorns. A witchy woman with access to truths beyond the reach of his parents. And one amazing truth, affirmed by his outward gaze at me and his inward view of himself. That he was a lucky child.

“You hate it,” he said.

“I don’t,” I said. “I’m...I’m adjusting.”

“I was thinking maybe you should get one,” he said. “Great-grandma said you were a lucky child, also.” The thumps of highway seams marked the silence between us. “I was imagining it, anyway,” he said softly.

We arrived at the Tour’s basecamp a little before nine o’clock, the start time we’d been given. We crunched up the gravel drive into the semi-orderly parking lot, then joined the motley assembly of more than two dozen people spread across a freshly mowed field. The conversational buzz was exciting as visitors chatted with companions and strangers alike. We wound our way to the kiosks and secured our helmets and life vests. Peter seemed to be multi-tasking, trying on gear while searching for potential peers in the crowd. I was doing the same, but more easily than Peter given the larger number of middle-agers.

We were divided into four groups of six, each group with a blue-shirted tour guide leader and kayaker-photographer. Our “millennial” group leader, with his long sun-bleached hair and blue-tinted John Lennon sunglasses, appeared at odds with his no-

nonsense safety orientation. He was only a few years older than Peter. His instructions were basically a review for Peter and me – warnings we'd heard on our first go-round.

“Don't let go of your oar!”

“Don't panic if...when? (“Ha-ha!”) ...you fall in the river.”

“Never stick your arm outside the raft, even when – especially when – the raft is heading for a boulder. The water between the raft and the rock will cushion the raft, but not – I'm afraid – your outstretched arm which would snap like a twig.”

After nervous laughter subsided, we made our way down to the raft launch area. Whether by design or serendipity, the warnings we'd just heard bound us all closer together. Wild-river-runners, our leader dubbed us, and Peter and I glanced at each other, hearing his mother's slip of the tongue. Okay – wild river it would be, at least for the remainder of the weekend.

We climbed into the rubber raft one by one, the six of us, wobbly at the river's edge and bouncy on the ballooned perimeter where we took our positions. Our guide sat buoyed above us in the rear and gave the order for the proprietors to nudge us onto the river's tame water. Which is how we began. Tame. Starting with practice paddling. Forward. Backward. Left back. Right back. Stop. Then moving on to mimicking more complicated commands. “Sweep stroke!” “Draw stroke!” “Lean in!” “High side!”

Accompanied by noticeable rush of adrenalin. And confidence just as high. No youngsters in our raft. Six adults: two Millennials – a young woman and Peter, coyly aloof to one another – and four mature Generation Xers, as I thought of the rest of us. As we paddled farther, we came to the cliff above the cove – much sooner than I thought.

“Might as well get wet now,” our guide announced as our raft sidled to the riverbank at the base of the cliff.

Peter could hardly wait. Me? I marveled at how he and I had grown out of phase. On this trip, he was ready to take the plunge, but I was not – a reversal of our roles on our first trip. I urged him into the spotlight. He wanted me to join him, at least initially. Then he caught the furtive glances of the young woman. The two of them scooted up the gentle rearward slope to the summit ledge and jumped feet first into the river together. The rest of us cheered as we waded in the cove's warm water.

Back on the river, I was surprised to rediscover you hear the thunder of the rapids well before they arrive. The image of the pines reflected on the water began to ripple and then blur from the turbulence radiating from the rocks ahead. And beyond those rocks, the maelstrom!

Now the paddling commands came fast and furious – all the maneuvers we'd practiced leisurely before, barked at us above the roar of the waves. The invigorating adrenalin rush, now two ticks short of terrifying. Things went wrong. The young

woman lost her paddle, but quickly recovered it, moving in the raft nimbly and determined. A man stuck his arm outside the raft to ward off an approaching boulder.

“No!” we all shouted and watched his mind override his body and jerk his arm back to safety.

I returned to rowing – right-back, right-back – until I found myself flipped to the rear, my legs straight above me, my shoulders cradled in a fellow river runner’s lap. A woman’s. After she shoved me off her, I figured I could just as easily paddle from the rear. But I was wrong. In the blink of an eye, I was overboard, flat on my back in the river, leaning backward, surging with the current, still clinging to my paddle. Like we’d all been taught. Like we’d all probably discounted as entertaining melodrama.

I heard a lot of yelling from the raft but I understood none of it. Too much roaring river. Too much heart pounding in my ears. Too many distracting thoughts. Like, whether a tourist ever drowned on a rafting trip. Like whether Ann would have the right to sue if I drowned even though I signed a liability waiver. Like wondering if the kayaker bouncing in and out of view among the waves was laughing while taking photos of me.

In calm water beyond the rapids my fellow river runners hauled me into the raft like a sack of rocks. I was surprised at how little I could help. It was as if the river had sapped all my strength. And a good deal of my willpower.

The appearance of a campsite tucked in a quiet cove was a welcomed relief. It was Midway Basecamp, our guide informed us, our lunchtime RVP. The campground featured a Quonset hut in a meadow clearing fronted by a handful of picnic tables and benches. Farther back toward the edge of the woods stood one row of a dozen or more crude port-a-lets and an adjacent row of beach showers.

The guides gathered us in the meadow in front of the hut. One of their leaders – not our guide – called the group to order.

“Take advantage of the facilities,” he announced with a touch of irony. “Expect more upscale accommodations at our Overnight campsite.”

A mocking cheer rose up.

“Plus equipment for volleyball and horseshoes,” he continued. “And a romantic fire pit.”

A genuine cheer followed.

“And more rafting stories!” a river-runner shouted from behind to even more applause.

I didn’t turn to check, but it felt like all eyes were on me, standing there, soaked to the skin and covered in silt. After that mercifully brief orientation, I headed for the showers while the guides marched off to the Quonset hut to prepare what turned out

to be a tasty deli lunch. Before heading back on the river, our guide gathered all river runners together and called me up to join him. He took off his blue-tint glasses and surveyed the group.

“There are two types of river runners,” the guide said, putting his arm around my shoulder. I held my breath waiting for his punchline. “There are those who are humbled by the river,” he continued. A few chuckles spread through the group. “And there are those yet to be humbled.”

I noticed several knowing nods among those nearby. And a sympathetic smile offered me by my son. “Thank you,” I mouthed.

The afternoon on the river was uneventful. Which is not to suggest the rapids were any less exciting than the morning’s. It was just that my benchmark for eventful had risen rather high – there were no more overboards to spice up our adventures.

True to their word, the Overnight Basecamp was more comfortably equipped than Midway’s. The campground featured a couple dozen military-grade tents of various sizes, a more spacious Quonset hut, and private showers and sufficient flush toilets to accommodate the less wild side of our natures. Dinner was provided inside the hut or outside on the manicured picnic grounds. After dinner, most of us gathered on blankets around the fire pit and listened to frontier fables and poems recited by the guides and joined them singing and/or lip-synching woodsy campfire songs. All by the fading, reddening glow of sunset. Corny, true – but surprisingly entertaining.

After the festivities, Peter and I retreated to our assigned tent with the nightwear we’d laid out atop our sleeping bags. He strolled to a dark corner of the tent and picked up the rubber-duck pool toy.

“Uh – what exactly?” I said.

He picked up the electric air pump.

“You’re not going back on the water?” Perhaps the whine of the air pump was supposed to be his answer, but I was having none of it. “Oh no, you’re not!”

“Our guide said it was fine,” he said above the whine. “A few others are coming. We’ll stay along the shore.”

“The young lady, too, I suppose.”

“A few others,” he said. “Gen-Z’ers, naturally.”

“And they all got...” I gestured to the inflating yellow duck. “...toys?”

“Tire tubes,” he said. “I think out of the box.”

“And I don’t like it.”

“Our guide is coming with us.”

The air pump whined on as I debated my next move. I considered the purpose of our trip. The father-son connection I'd hoped for. The shared experience we'd already had. I wondered what might be the cost of my intransigence. But also the potential dangers of their little outing. The air pump whine finally stopped. I watched him, deadlocked, as he fitted the headlamp on the base of his broad-brimmed hat and flicked its light on and off.

"Others are bringing flashlights," he said, pointing to his headlamp. "Like I said: out of the box."

He gave me the same smile he offered at the riverbank earlier that afternoon and it felt as though it meant something, but I couldn't figure out what. Then, with one arm around the rubber duck, he used the other to lift his shirt and brandish his tattoo. Luck will follow me.

"I'll be fine," he said as he exited the tent.

I'd avoided a fight I might later regret. Perhaps we'd look back on this occasion as the beginning of a new chapter between us. Perhaps. Think on the bright side, I told myself. That's what my grandmother gave me. Positivity. Her everlasting gift to me. Decades ago, when I'd told my best friend about her gift, tears came to his eyes. Him, a combat-tested veteran.

"She said I was a lucky child," I told him.

It was the night he turned forty and we were celebrating his birthday at the Robin's Nest. He knew my grandmother. He knew she came from the old country which was why neither he nor any of my friends could understand her English. But they did understand the mystical powers she'd brought with her. Like being able to discern when their mothers were pregnant before they were told. And whether they'd be greeting a new sister or new brother into their families. Or whether the summer would be extra hot based on where the squirrels built their nests. My friend understood why I, as a seven-year-old, would believe my grandmother when she told me I was a lucky child.

"What a gift!" he said on the verge of tears. And truly it had been a gift. It was how I explained the silliest of my good fortune like winning the Lone Ranger board game at our Cub Scout raffle. And it was how I understood my future wife agreeing to date me. And later, her agreeing to marry me. And her giving birth to our son. Which was when blessed replaced lucky in how I thought of my good fortune. "If I had a child," my friend said, "I'd pass that gift on." He slammed back another shot of bourbon, tears still in his eyes. "No gift like that from my folks," he said. "My father was my worst enemy."

I decided at that moment to do what he suggested: to pass my grandmother's gift to me on to my son. But for years it seemed Peter had tucked my gift away. Until the day he shared an experience that opened my eyes.

“I swear, that tire came out of nowhere,” he told me. “Bouncing down the highway like a Super Ball.” He was seventeen and he was driving his friends back from bowling one Saturday afternoon. “I’m in the middle lane,” he said. “A car in front of me, one behind. Two cars ahead, I see this jeep swerve into the slow lane right into a tractor trailer. I mean, right into it. Michael sitting next to me screaming. Then I see why: a runaway tire bouncing right toward us. And guess what! I stay the course. I stay-the-course. No swerve. No stop. No panic. Tire bounces right past.”

Before I could exhale, he added, “Once again: I am one lucky child!”

I was speechless. For so many reasons. The predicament he described, so frightening. The outcome, so fortunate. So...lucky, as he’d said. But his once again. Once again: I am one lucky child! Such a shock to hear him say this. To hear him reveal he’d been viewing his life this way. For how long? For how long this once again?

And then my nagging question. A question I never asked him or anyone but myself. Where did that tire come from? Not its physical origin. I wasn’t interested in loose lug nuts or wheel bearing assemblies. But what did its sudden appearance mean? My son described his good luck escaping it, but it was preceded by bad luck – the bad luck of the bouncing tire appearing out of nowhere. He never acknowledged this. That was when I began to think of good luck and bad luck as woven together, one twisted thread. A thread I decided to label as chance. Which I added it to my good fortune vocabulary. Near Lucky. Right next to Blessed. Chance. By which I meant: I don’t understand.

The jostling came out of nowhere – sudden, rough, and intrusive. I balled my fists and snarled at the intruder, surprised to find myself horizontal.

“So sorry, sir,” he said – a voice and face I almost recognized. “It’s your son, sir...your son.”

I rolled over to see the empty sleeping bag. And then I placed the voice and face – our guide’s.

“What time is it?” I said.

“Three AM, sir. Thereabouts.”

I sat up, my head spinning, foggy. “Three AM? Where is he?”

“Unaccounted for, sir.”

I glared at him in the gloaming light of his lantern. Unaccounted for? “He’s missing?” I got up and stepped into my sandals and struggled to slip a pair of shorts over my pajamas. “You were with him, right?” I said.

“Yes! When we started.”

“When you started? Where’d you see him last? When’d you see him last?” Water welled in his eyes as he edged toward the tent flap, either to distance himself from me or return to the commotion outside. I followed him out of the tent into what looked like an otherworldly circus. Small flying disks beamed ghost-white spotlights across the ground while several three-wheeled vehicles scooted in and out of the streams of light, then disappeared into the forest. Before I could get my bearings, the lead guide ran toward me as if on the attack and I backed up in self-defense.

“He didn’t get as far as the next rapids,” he said, panting.

I pushed him away. “Where the hell is he?”

“Between here and the next rapids,” he said. “We know that for sure.”

“But, I mean where! You were with them, right? Someone was with him! He was with a group.”

The two guides stood side by side, their frowns lit by the shifting spotlights from overhead. Behind them three river runners milled about, the beams of their flashlights zigzagging the ground.

I pressed my temples, dizzy from the chaos. A tug at my elbow caused me to reel around, and the young woman behind me flinched. “Sorry,” I said, recognizing the young woman in our raft.

“I – I was with them,” she said, folding in on herself, but her current wariness didn’t camouflage her strength. I could understand my son wanting to be near her.

“What happened?” I said.

“He wanted to continue,” she said. “The rest of us were done. Too tired. He said he’d go it alone, but not for too much longer.”

I wondered at the life vest she held in her hand then lifted like some sort of testimony.

“He couldn’t fit into his...his...,” she stammered.

I visualized Airhead, his absurd duck pool toy.

“He couldn’t fit into his float with this life vest on,” she continued.

“He didn’t wear his life vest?” I said.

“But the current was really gentle,” she said. “I mean, really gentle. None of us thought anything of it.”

“My God!” I said, glaring at our guide as though he and I had an understanding. As though I should’ve been able to count on him. But I shook my head in disgust, more disappointed in myself than the guide.

Suddenly the spotlights from overhead disappeared, leaving the four of us in the dim glow of the guide’s lantern. I pointed up, confused.

“Search drones,” he explained. “Steered by the ERTs.” He must’ve noticed my confusion. “The guys on the rescue trikes,” he said. “They’re guiding the drones. Searching the riverbanks.”

And then to my shock and shame came yet another fear. My wife. His mother. What would I tell Ann? But how could that fear intrude on this nightmare? It took a moment to catch my breath. “What can I do?” I said.

“Well, sir, we’ve got pros out there –”

“Don’t expect me to sit and wait! That ain’t gonna happen. Either you give me a plan or –”

“You can ride with me, sir,” our guide said, much to the dismay of his leader. “We’re taking two rafts to search riverside. You can come with me.”

As we headed to the river, the young woman we left behind called out softly, “So sorry, sir. So very sorry.”

Well, that was easy, I thought. Her post-hoc apology. But easy, too, was my anger. Toward her. Toward Peter. Our guide. Anger at myself. I stumbled and fell to my knees at the shoreline. The guide helped me to stand and stared into my eyes. I realized I’d been crying. So much anger – so much fear. They’d nearly paralyzed me. I nodded my determination to join him on the search.

The guide helped me into the raft and we took up our paddles and headed downstream where the current would have carried Peter. Doing something helped. Taking action. My antidote to despair.

The young woman had been right in describing the river as gentle, our paddling made easy, allowing us to focus our attention on the riverbank. There was a half-moon out that night, but it hung low in the sky and offered little to augment the guide’s searchlight.

The nighttime darkness transformed everything familiar in the forest into strange shapes and shadings. Impossible objects seem to hang from tree limbs and the shoreline became a kaleidoscope of shifting images. But it was the quiet that truly frightened me. It seemed like a cry for help would’ve easily been heard. So, what did it mean that we heard none?

“I should call out to him,” I told the guide.

“Go ahead,” he said. But something in his tone hinted it might not help. Or perhaps that was just my imagination. And that, too, frightened me – my imagination.

For the next half hour I hollered myself hoarse. The forest gave back no echo – only the sporadic snarls of the trikes in the distance, their headlights darting in and out among the trees. My voice began to lose strength, weakening against the hiss of wind and water. And a remote low-pitched rumble – growing louder.

“The rapids,” the guide said. “A ways off, yet.”

Still, my heart sank. I tried to summon my old positivity. If ever I needed it, I needed it now. Combined with his, I prayed. His luck and mine. Together. Seizing that good luck thread of entwined good luck/bad luck chance.

It seemed we were drifting toward a muddy inlet on the right bank. I paddled harder to stay our course on the river.

“Ease up,” the guide said.

But I couldn’t stop myself from flailing at the water, even more so as the rumble of the rapids grew louder.

“No, no!” he said. “Seriously. Ease up! I want to steer us into that creek.”

I rubbed my eyes, burning with sweat. “But we should follow the current,” I said pointing ahead.

“I know, I know,” he said. “But I’ve been watching the drones. I don’t think they scanned this inlet.”

“Why not?”

“Perhaps for the same reason you want to stay the course. It’s logical to follow the river. The inlet is muddy and the shoreline marshy. There’s no logical reason to look there. But you never know.”

My son’s refrain occurred to me. I think out the box.

I joined the guide paddling into the muddy creek, a soft burbling sound replacing the river’s rippling flow. The trees receded along the shoreline as we went, and the mud thickened, demanding more and more effort to advance. The guide mumbled about needing a double blade paddle and that perhaps he’d made a mistake. I ignored him, deepening my strokes instead, even as my arms stiffened and my fingers cramped tight on the paddle.

“What’s that?” he said, beaming his searchlight on a patch of yellow on the mud in the middle of the creek.

I bellowed my son's name and the guide called out to him, too. We'd recognized the duck pool toy. Otherwise, my body went numb. It was as if I had only one purpose, to seek my son's voice. To hear his reply. To know he was alive.

The silence that followed seemed endless. And then came the grunt. Wordless. But recognizable. A living human sound. A young man's. The guide's searchlight scanned the reeds while I rowed toward that grunt.

And there he was. Hip-deep in mud. Facing toward a shrouded shoreline, blurred by mud and marsh, twisting his head and shoulders backward in our direction. He waved his arms wearily, swaying in slow motion.

I wanted to jump out of the raft and get to him and I must've moved as though I would because the guide grabbed my knee with a vise-like grip.

"Let's get closer," he said. "This mud's like quicksand."

We strained to maneuver the raft in front of him, then the guide extended his paddle. I could see Peter was completely exhausted, his face mud-stained, tear-stained. He grabbed onto the paddle and it took our collective strength – the three of us – to pull him out of the mud and into the raft where we fell, lying motionless, physically and emotionally spent. I recovered quickest and I rolled over and hugged him. I held him so tight, like I hadn't since he was a child. He tried to speak, but I hushed him, wanting to savor the miracle, wanting to cherish the moment, to take in, once again, what it felt like to be truly blessed.

On our way back to the campground my son confirmed the guide's suspicions with one-word replies. Yes, he'd followed the current until he'd heard the rapids. Yes, he detoured into the inlet to gather his strength for the journey back. Yes, the pool toy got stuck in the mud. Yes, he abandoned it, thinking he'd walk to the shoreline. And finally, yes, he stepped into the mud and sank.

"Your hat, too," I said, just to say something.

"Hat and headlamp, too," Peter said.

"ATVs will be arriving in the morning," the guide said. "To take you back to your car. If that's what you want."

"We'll sleep on it," I said.

As it turned out, I didn't sleep at all. Too much adrenalin. Too much anxiety. Too many intrusive thoughts. My son, on the other hand, slept like the dead. Not the slightest troubled twitch. Even his snoring sounded relaxed.

He was groggy upon waking. We decided to lounge and listen to the whisperings outside the tent where our adventures were being discussed in low voices. And there were also several complaints voiced rather loudly. Male river runners demanding reimbursement. Or a discount, at the very least. Loss of sleep, their go-to gripe. But

all complainers wanted to continue the trip. We smothered our laughter at their charade, a welcomed brief moment of glee.

I left the tent and notified the leaders we wouldn't continue, a unanimous vote in our tent. We didn't discuss money. Or the kayaker's photos. I thanked all for their concern and I reported Peter fine, even if shaken. I made that latter claim to fulfill their expectations – actually Peter seemed just fine to me. The leader informed me it would be only a short while before the ATVs arrived to take us back to our car. That would be okay with us, I told them. In the meantime, we'd wait in our tent.

“What'll we tell Mom?” I asked him.

“I assumed you'd tell her everything,” he said.

“Not necessarily,” I said.

“Not necessarily you'll tell Mom, or not necessarily we'll tell everything?”

“Both,” I said. “Actually I'd prefer if you told her. And no, it's not a test. I'll chime in, of course. Your mother would expect me to. In fact, she'd expect me to take the lead. But I'd like to leave the lead to you. If you think you can handle it.”

Challenging his maturity was usually a good strategy. I could see his narrative wheels spinning.

“But before all that, I've got a confession to make.”

“You?” he said, perhaps spinning a confession of his own.

“Yeah, me. It'll come as a shock but the truth must be told. You know, that lucky child business? Me passing on to you my grandmother's prophecy? I made it all up.”

He looked at me as if I'd told him I was not his father. An expression of disbelief. With a touch of confusion. And a deep sadness.

It took the air out of me, too. A disappointing blow. But a blow I could live with. A blow we could live with.

“And this is the truth?” he asked.

“Yes. And I'm assuming you can handle it. I'm not sure if my grandmother lied to me when she told me I was a lucky child. She may have truly believed it. But if she did lie, it was a forgivable lie in my opinion. But I couldn't forgive myself for continuing to lie to you. Not after last night.”

“So once again – no Santa Claus.”

“That's right. Yet we still manage to find joy in giving, in receiving. We find suitable replacements. And I've got a few for you.”

“Okay,” he said with a sigh of resignation. “I’m listening.”

I cleared my throat as if about to give a sermon – one I’d been rehearsing and rethinking throughout the night. And I made no apologies for my demeanor. I wanted him to know I believed this opportunity was that crucial. “I have opinions about the way the world works,” I said. “Of course, they’re just that – opinions. About how a person can succeed in life. First off, I figure you gotta have ability. Some ability. In something. A must. And I figure you got plenty. But remember, it’s just my opinion.”

“I like it so far,” he said.

“And you gotta have confidence. Confidence in your ability. You may have too much of that! I believe that lucky child business didn’t help. But again –”

“It’s just your opinion!”

“Exactly. And I also believe it doesn’t hurt to pray. To be able to pray. When ability and confidence seem beside the point.”

“And luck?” he asked.

“I list it last. Especially after last night. Especially as you move forward. You know, onto your next chapter.”

“I don’t count on being lucky as much as you may think,” he said. “I think my tattoo has –”

“I like your tattoo,” I said. “Really. I do. Better an optimist than the alternative. But regardless of luck, you gotta think. And you gotta think about your thinking. Think about the potential consequences of your actions. Have you considered all the info or just the info that supports your assumptions? Are you open to alternatives that refute those assumptions? Are you afraid to change your mind? Because that fear – the fear to rethink – is most important of all. Because none of us likes to think of ourselves as afraid.” I took a deep breath of having just been unburdened. “That’s all I got.”

“You planned this lecture last night?”

We laughed a bit. His smile took on a slightly different cast. Less smug perhaps. A tad more modest. Or it might’ve been my imagination.

“I’ll take you upon your offer,” he said. “To tell Mom the story. Most of it, anyway.”

“Good. I was hoping.” I took a deep inhale of the morning’s damp air. My body was still unwinding after last night, only now loosening to allow sensations beside anger and fear. “I want to hear all about Mom’s projects,” I said.

He gave me a quizzical look.

“The projects she talked about getting to while we were away,” I said.

His gaze remained quizzical.

“I know, I know – a random thought. It popped into my head when I was considering how I’d ever tell her I’d lost our son.”

He shook his head slowly and looked away. I believed he understood my suffering.

“What were those projects she planned to complete?” I said.

He shrugged, but not dismissively. “You should ask. If I ask, well... You know, after my misadventure.”

“And what?” I smiled back at him. “I’m without blame?”