

For Annie: Happy Anniversary

Joy's Spirit: A short story by Scott Abel

Joy had it all. Even at a young age, anyone who met Joy came away with the impression she was true to her name. "Joy" fit her demeanour perfectly. No one could have been named more appropriately. And from that young age Joy also knew her calling in life. She had two loves; dancing, and the fantasy of raising her own family. Her motherly instincts began quite early on. She would play house, play with baby dolls and raise them; follow her mother in the kitchen to learn to cook. Later, she kept a hope chest and read romance novels. Yes, she had two crystal clear goals in life; to dance, and to fall in love and raise a large family.

By the time Joy was University age, she was quite a talented dancer. She travelled several states away from her small home town, to study interpretive dance and earn her degree. She wanted to open a dance school of her own some day, and teach young girls the thrills and exhilaration of dancing. It was there, at University, where Joy met the man of her dreams. All her plans were coming together. Her man was also a talented young romantic; and very motivated for career success in business. Upon graduation, there was a choice to make. Joy's man had been offered a job clear across the other side of the country. He vowed to make an honest woman of her, if she would follow him there to pursue his dream. Joy realized that part of any relationship is compromise. They agreed to first get married and then to begin their life, thousands of miles away from their homes and families. Joy figured if she couldn't open a dance school right away, she would be happy working on starting a family, so long as she had a place to dance.

So this is where the story begins. Joy had the wedding she has always dreamed about: A fairy tale in the making. She loved her man unconditionally and as deeply as any woman had ever loved her man. She believed in him enough to pull up stakes and start their life in a place where they knew no one. Her commitment to her dream was strong.

Joy found a dance studio where she attended regularly and danced with an artistic flare and talented display. Soon she was teaching classes. Things at home were a bit strained, as they can often be when reality surfaces and people start a new life together thousands of miles away from home and family. Her man spent more and more time at work; but he always reinforced to her that it was to make a better life for them both. Joy supported her man; but she was lonely as well.

But dreams often blind people to reality. Her man was a romantic but not in the same way as Joy. His dreams deep down were a little different. As he immersed himself in the corporate world, he wasn't so sure now he wanted a family. He loved his job. He loved the challenge and promise of being a future player in the big world of business. This put a strain on the relationship. But Joy of course remained committed and true to her promise and her vows. That had always been her nature.

Rachel

Joy and Rachel met at dance class. Rachel wasn't much of a dancer but she enjoyed the activity and that was enough for her. Eventually the two began a very casual relationship. They would connect for coffee after dance class every other week or so. Rachel marvelled at Joy's talent for dancing. Joy liked that Rachel was so different from anyone she had known. Rachel had not attended University or known the finer things in life as Joy had. Rachel wasn't very eloquent; but what Joy liked about her was that she said exactly what was on her mind, all the time and with no apologies. She could be quite blunt. Joy saw that as a kind of talent. She sort of envied the raw honesty of it. Truth be told, they kind of entertained each other with their differences. They didn't have a friendship so much as they shared an acquaintance. This was the auspicious beginning of what would become a profound relationship.

Several weeks later Joy had missed numerous dance classes. When she finally did show up, it was obvious something was not right with her. Rachel would not be delicate about her observation. "What the hell has been going on with you," she said. "You look like crap." Joy didn't take it personally because she had come to know and appreciate Rachel's ways. Plus Joy had weightier things on her mind. They met for coffee later that week. Joy was in tears.

"I surprised my husband at work for the anniversary of our first date, and uncovered an affair he's been having for some time." "I don't know what to do," she was crying hysterically. Rachel asked her, "What does he say about it all?"

"He says he doesn't want a family and there is too much pressure in our relationship. He says he's in love with this other woman. He says he wants out. He says he's sorry I had to find out this way."

"What a coward!" Rachel exclaimed. She didn't seem to have much empathy for Joy but she had daggers for Joy's husband. But Rachel could also see that Joy was despondent.

"I moved here for him, for his career, for our marriage, for our future," Joy whimpered, "I don't know what to do." This angered Rachel. "What to do?" "Are you kidding," Rachel prodded. "You respect yourself enough to get out and stay out," Rachel said. But it would not be that easy for Joy.

In the next few days, Joy's decisions were made for her. "Her man" packed up and moved out, declaring 'needing his space' now that all was out in the open. He continued his cowardly ways as far as Rachel perceived it. But Joy was still willing to fight for the marriage. This was her nature and her dream after all.

One night, full of resentment and anger of the thought of another woman in her bed, Joy decided to confront 'her man.' Weeks of built up, pent up hostility had reached a crescendo. Joy wasn't thinking straight. But she finally would confront him and unleash her built up resentment and fury. It may not serve a purpose she thought, but it would make herself feel better. Her thoughts were racing and her body shook with nerves. She hadn't slept in days. She headed out the driveway determined to track him down and confront him. Tears welled up in her eyes so much, she could hardly see. She was aware of

nothing except the pain and anger inside her. And as she made her way to him, oblivious to the world around her, it happened.

Facing a New Reality

Joy opened her eyes. "Who was that?" Someone was sitting near her reading a magazine.... "Oh, it was Rachel." Joy fell back to sleep. The next time she woke up there was that same image. "Was she dreaming? Where was she? Is that Rachel? Why would Rachel be there?" Again, Joy fell back to sleep.

Joy finally awoke from what would be days of being in a coma. Her family had flown in from across the country and they encircled her hospital bed: and between her family and the Dr's, Joy was given all the details. That fateful night, there was a police chase on the other side of the road that Joy was driving. The young teenage driver of the stolen vehicle lost control of the car, crossed the median into Joy's lane and hit her head on. Joy knew she was in a hospital. But she was still piecing together all the events and circumstances that were leading her to know where she was. "Did her husband know?" She looked around for him. He wasn't there. Before she could ask, the Dr's gave her the news.

Joy was paralyzed from the waist down. She would need several more surgeries, and she would never be able to bear children. Obviously she would never dance again either.....

Dumbfounded and grief-stricken, Joy fell back to sleep.

While she slept some other truths had to be faced. Joy's family was of meagre means and could not afford to stay by her side from all the way across the country. The sad reality was that none of them could stay. While Joy slept, Rachel came to visit and met Joy's family. Rachel promised them that she would be there for Joy and that she would keep them abreast of Joy's condition always. Rachel may not be good with words, but she was one person who was always good to her word. Rachel knew at that moment; that she took a responsibility in a promise; a promise of responsibility.

It would not be easy.

The next time Joy awoke, there was the image of Rachel again; sitting by her side, reading a magazine. This time Joy knew where she was. She knew her condition. "But why was Rachel there? Where was her family?" Rachel explained to Joy why her family had to leave to go back home. No response. Joy asked about her husband. Rachel responded with passionate, but controlled hostility. "Yes," she said, "he knows all about your accident, Joy." She continued, "He thought it would be too confusing for you to have him here, and may be misleading to you. He thought it best 'for all concerned' to stay out of your life." Rachel paused, but she couldn't resist one more comment. "I told you that man is a coward."

Joy's Pain

Over the next several weeks the harsh reality could no longer be ignored by Joy. She would never have children of her own. She would never dance again or open a dance school for girls. The only dreams she had ever nurtured were gone. Stolen. Dead. Lying in her bed she felt worthless. Hostility and anger built

and built and built. She was no longer Joy. She hated. And she hated in absolute terms. She hated her husband; she hated her family, she hated the Dr's; she hated herself; she hated Rachel.

Rachel continued to show up regularly. You could set your clock by her faithful attendance. Joy's relationship with Rachel had changed. It was no longer about both of them. It was all about Joy; her physical needs, her anguish, her torment and unfortunately, her hostility. Rachel nurtured and shielded; Joy resisted and rebelled. This would be their shared existence for weeks. Rachel would sit and read to Joy about celebrity gossip, or from news magazines. Or she would talk about her own life. Most of the time Joy just stared out the window beside her hospital bed; almost as if Rachel was a nuisance to her. Sometime she would lash out at Rachel. "What makes you think I want to hear about rich and famous and happy people?" Or if Rachel talked about her own life, Joy would bark at her, "blah, blah, blah, do you know how boring you are? What makes you think I want to hear about any of this!"... "Why are you here?..Go away!"

Of course these moments were few and far between: Most of the time Joy had no reaction or response at all; not only to Rachel's conversations, but to her actual presence. During those times, Rachel would just sit beside her and read to herself. But Rachel did not change either. She would be quick with a non-sympathetic retort, when and if Joy actually had something venomous to say. It was clear Rachel was not going to treat Joy any differently than she had in the past.

And so the relationship continued on like this, for weeks, months. Rachel was not stupid though. She knew that while Joy may be mute and numb on the outside, she was screaming on the inside. In reality, Joy was dead inside. She was raw and vulnerable emotionally, yet too emotionally drained for expression. She had hit the pit of despair. Joy was now the opposite of her name in every way. All was indeed lost to her. And it was never lost on Rachel either that Joy had lost everything she had ever wanted: And witnessing someone dealing with that, day in and day out, also affected Rachel deeply.

But Joy did not improve. In fact if she looked forward to anything, it would be a hope that Rachel may be there next time she awoke, so she could vent all her hostility on her. Rachel was strong enough to have none of it though. Whatever vile and hostile comments Joy could sling at Rachel; Rachel could easily counter. This was Rachel's territory after all. Joy was out of her league trying to emotionally punish or hurt Rachel: not that it stopped her at all.

After one of her final and most painful operations, Joy awoke to the usual sight of Rachel sitting by her side. What followed was a defining moment that even Rachel had a difficult time dealing with. As Joy looked up from her hospital bed her face reflected a deep emptiness; a true void. Rachel was witnessing what seemed to be the last broken heart string. Without uttering a sound, with a piercing stare at Rachel the message was obvious. Joy wanted out. When she did try and speak that day, there was only the garbled sound of emotional anguish and physical pain. The words may have been incoherent, but the message was explicit.....Joy's pilot light had been extinguished. And not a word was exchanged.

Rachel left the hospital that day, and it was the only day through the whole ordeal that tears accompanied her all the way home. And for a tough cookie like Rachel, sometimes the truth is that tears are just a way of washing clean a heart in need of a good cleanse.

Rachel's character though, has often and accurately been compared to a Pit bull. She re-grouped and returned the next day. Over the next few weeks not much changed. Joy didn't want to die per se, but she surely didn't want to live either. If she wanted anything at all, it was to not feel. She craved numbness above everything. Just to please make it stop for one moment in a day. But the anguish was relentless and continued to eat right through her. It was like a giant Pac Man, gobbling up all the component parts of her will and vitality from one minute to the next. She no longer had the resolve to even muster up anger or hostility.

Rachel continued her vigil of reading and one-way chatting to Joy. She didn't expect a response anymore.

A Walk in the Park

Part of Joy's rehabilitation was getting reacquainted with the outside world again. She was allowed outings of various types. Rachel volunteered to take Joy twice per week for walks in the park, or anywhere outside. There still wasn't a great deal of explicit interaction between the two, but Rachel was there to walk Joy every time she was scheduled. One perfect spring day, Rachel was pushing Joy in her wheelchair through a park. There was a leash free area for dogs. Dogs of all types were playing and frolicking. Rachel noticed that for just a moment, Joy was actually paying attention to the dogs. This sign of connection, registered with Rachel. She thought to herself, "Finally, this may be something I can work with."

That park became their scheduled routine. It was becoming obvious that Joy looked forward to going there. And Joy looking 'forward' toward anything was good. The effects were subtle, were gradual, but they were also obvious, at least to Rachel. She and Joy would stop in front of the leash free area and have their lunch. This became their usual pattern. Joy would watch the dogs; even look forward to seeing particular regulars from one outing to the next. And way down beneath the surface, watching the dogs in the park, day after day, Joy's heart began to remember. There had once been Joy, and perhaps could be again.

Her mind didn't know it yet, but her heart felt it. And it opened just a little; just a crack.

Once released from the hospital and on her own, Rachel and Joy continued their regular walks in the park. Another gradual process had ensued as well. Joy had begun resuming communication with Rachel in a way that was now mutual. She started to listen. She started to hear. Their relationship was pretty much back to being on equal ground again. It was about both of them, not just Joy.

The accident had changed them both. Actually to be more accurate, it was Joy surviving the accident that changed them both. Joy's long recovery, the struggle within herself, the unknown adversary for both of them: SURVIVAL made them both stronger. Survival led them both to discover in different ways, and by different means, what really matters in life. Survival made their relationship stronger. Survival presented them both with new opportunities to live life with a deeper level of awareness than most people ever find. And while they were living this reality, they were not yet fully cognizant of it.

More Heartbreak

Now that Rachel and Joy were regulars in the park, all the other regulars got to know them as well. It was a comfortable and congenial place for all. Dog owners and their dogs got to know Rachel and Joy: Passersby too. Even the employees for the Animal Control Unit got to know Joy and Rachel on a first name basis. The ACU van would come in to the park at regular intervals to insure the water bowls were full with clean water for the dogs. They had to insure all owners were cleaning up after their dogs, all dogs were tagged, and that all the dogs were getting along. The Animal Control Unit just provided a basic presence of reassurance that the leash free area of the park was safe for all and well-maintained. They would often park their van right beside Joy's wheelchair. And Rachel and Joy and the Animal Control employees would exchange regular chit chat while the ACU staff spent time there making their presence known. It was just an all around friendly environment where everyone knew everyone and newcomers were welcome. It was the perfect place for Joy to convalesce and rehabilitate.

One morning while exchanging familiar pleasantries with the Animal Control staff, a call came in from Dispatch. Since Joy and Rachel were standing right there, they heard every word.

Apparently some wannabe thugs in the area had started a dog fighting ring. This day, that ring would be raided and busted. The call from dispatch was that all hands were needed back at the compound and that the picture was grim. Even with all their training, the staff were warned by dispatch, 'to prepare themselves.'

Most staff were needed just for the sheer numbers of dogs. These dogs were aggressive fighting attack dogs, and staff were needed to control them into separate pens. There would have to be an assessment as to whether any of the dogs could be rehabilitated over time for adaption. But the other side of this coin was three dogs that were labelled as "bait dogs." Bait dogs are dogs with little to no aggression. They are used by owners of fighting rings and then discarded. Bait dogs are usually chained to a post and other dogs attack them to build their confidence and aggression. Word from dispatch was that these three bait dogs were in pretty bad shape and may not make it.

Joy and Rachel listened to all of this and were stunned by what they were hearing. The pleasantries of the morning had turned sour in a moment. The Animal Control staff sped out of the park and back to the compound. That's when Joy employed Rachel, "take me there, right now!" Rachel looked at Joy incredulously, and replied, "What the hell can we do there?" "We would just be in the way." "Joy, this is a matter best left to professionals."

Joy was adamant. "Take me there now, or I'll get someone to call me a cab." Joy was insistent. She hadn't been insistent on anything in years. Rachel capitulated. "Ok she said, but I don't know what you expect to do there, except maybe witness all kinds of sorted pandemonium."

And away they went.

When they got to the Animal Control compound there was indeed chaos with dogs coming in left and right from the bust of the Fighting Ring. Joy and Rachel were indeed, in the way. Lots had to be done.

And quickly. They tracked down one of the staff members they knew from the park and asked for an update.

“This is terrible,” he said. It would soon be all over the news as well. While updating Rachel and Joy another Animal Control van sped into the parking lot. It had the bait dogs inside. One had already died in transit to the compound. The two remaining were best to be put down right away. One of the bait dogs had a bone sticking out of its fur near the front elbow. No doubt a testament to the cruelty inflicted on it by man and beast alike. It was controlled with a large collar with spikes that fighter dogs wear. But as a bait dog the so called handlers put the collar tightly on the dog inside-out. This was to control him better, and to insure he was in constant pain, so that as a bait dog for the others, he wouldn’t put up much of a fight in training. The spikes from the collar had cut deep into its neck and then torn away several inches of tissue as well. The whole area was obviously infected, from never being treated. The pain must have been incredible.

The dog’s breathing was panicked. Directly in front of Rachel and Joy, a veterinarian scurried by and took a quick look at the bait dog, now lying on its side panting. “I hope these losers go to jail for the rest of their lives” he said. Then he put his hand gently on the dog’s head. The vet winced, shook his head in disgust and said, “Let’s put him down. This one has suffered enough.”

“No!” Joy screamed as she wheeled her way toward the scene. “That dog is not dead.” “Can’t he be saved?” Joy hadn’t shown so much emotion in years. The vet looked at her. “Lady,” he said. “I really don’t have time for this. Look around you. We save the ones we can. We humanely destroy the ones we can’t.” “That is what we do here.” The Doctor wasn’t being cold; he was just being blunt; something Joy had been used to since her years with Rachel. As the Dr. attempted to walk by her, Joy grabbed him by his white lab coat. “I will pay whatever the costs to operate on this dog and save him,” Joy begged.

And Joy had the money. Her insurance from her accident as well as a civil liability of negligence against the city for conducting a high speed car chase within city limits, left Joy with a great deal of money. But the Dr. responded, “I appreciate that this must be hard for you to witness ma’am,” he said. “But the fact is this dog, and others like it, may not want to live. Their will has been crushed. That is the unfortunate purpose for these bait dogs. They are used for a purpose and then usually drowned or shot.”

“Save him!” Joy prodded. “There is no valid reason other than convenience that you could not save him. I will take responsibility for him, after that.” Fearing that Joy was overreacting, Rachel pulled her aside and tried to talk some reality to her.

“Listen to the veterinarian, Joy,” Rachel said. “This is his job.” “For crying out loud you’re in a wheelchair for Chrissakes!” “If you want a dog, there are plenty here that need a home. Wait till this all goes away and we can come in and choose one that’s right for you and your situation.”

As if not even hearing Rachel, Joy wheeled back toward the Dr. “Save this dog.” “I will take responsibility.”

“Ok,” the Dr. Replied. “But saving him medically, may be meaningless in the long term.”

“I’ll take that responsibility,” Joy replied.

Rachel implored her. “Joy, you are taking on more than you can handle.” “I understand you may need some kind of purpose, but this is misplaced. Don’t do this.”

But it was done. Joy saw to it that the vet would operate and save the dog. Eventually there were three separate operations and days of recovery before Joy could take the dog home. But that day did finally come. As far as Joy was concerned, the dog was alive, at least this long. When she had Rachel take her to pick the dog up and take it home, the vet warned her once again:

“We all appreciate you stepping in to save this dog,” he said. “But I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t tell you not to expect too much. This dog may never trust a human or an animal. And given that dogs are pack animals, its experiences may have extinguished his will to live and thrive. Although he is ok to go medically, he may still die.” “Good luck,” he said.

Rachel drove Joy home with the dog in the back beside Joy’s folded up wheelchair. There were several medications for the dog, and Joy was going over them carefully during the drive. There was an awkward silence. Even though Rachel disapproved, she tried to make conversation: “So,” she said. “Have you thought of a name for him?” Joy paused, glanced out the car window, then into the back at the dog. Then she looked at Rachel with tears in her eyes, but not yet crying. “I can’t name him yet Rachel,” she said practically in a whisper. “If I name him and he doesn’t make it; well, I’m not sure I can handle that.” At that point Rachel knew that at the very least, Joy was acknowledging what she had taken on. Instead of berating her with advice at this point, Rachel supported Joy with a simple reply: “I understand,” she said.

Turmoil

Taking on the responsibility of this damaged animal was everything the Dr warned it would be. Joy was trying everything. The dog would not trust her. It would not come anywhere near her. When she tried to hand-feed the dog to build trust, the dog would pace back and forth and not approach her for the food. Pacing for dogs is a sign of stress. So that didn’t work. The dog found a spot in a corner of the house and would just lie there; often shaking for no reason. It would lose its fur in clumps due to anxiety. Loud noises from the television or thunder would send the dog into a fit of fear and stress. It would shake and whimper. The dog suffered terrible and observable nightmares; often waking itself up yelping in pain and fear. Joy had no idea what to do. Neither did many of the dog experts she called in for help. They told her the vet may have been right, and this dog may not know how to live and thrive. That may have to be the end of it.

The dog remained dangerously underweight. It kept to itself. When it did walk, its head stayed low, and its tail remained between its legs. The only energy the dog gave off was an energy of sadness and distrust. Joy was beside herself. It was certain the dog was failing to thrive. None of the expert advice was having any positive impact. There were no signs of improvement.

Rachel would call and frequently remind Joy, "I know you may not want to face what they have told you about this dog Joy." "So if you come to that moment where you want me to take the dog in, and humanely put him to rest, you just let me know."

At wit's end, Joy stopped trying to 'train the dog.' With no intention any more she started different tactics, merely by instinct. She would wheel herself near the animal and read to it. She would tell it all about her life and her trials and tribulations. She stopped trying 'to fix' the dog, and instead just sort of let it be, albeit with her constant company and soft voice, always talking to it, always communicating with it. But of course she knew that was more for her own sake now, than to any benefit for the dog.

After a few more weeks had past, Joy phoned Rachel. It wasn't going well. Rachel gave her the reality. "Joy," she said; "the dog may not be suffering but you are." "You never leave the house anymore." "We haven't been to the park in weeks."... Rachel put it to her, "Maybe it's time now."

Totally reduced to tears, Joy replied, "this is so hard, so hard.... I had no idea," she whimpered. It was indeed a true moment of weakness for Joy, who of course had known many already. But Joy told Rachel she could not and would not give up. The dog may not be better, but it wasn't worse either. And on that note she would continue.

The Letter

A couple of more weeks went by. Late one night, Rachel's phone rang. It was Joy. "I need you to come over as soon as you can. If not tonight, just let me know when." Rachel suspected this was the call to take the dog. With that thought in mind she didn't want Joy to have to wait any longer. "I'll be right there," Rachel said. She hung up the phone and proceeded to drive to Joy's place. Her mind was going over what she would say to ease Joy's conscience. Rachel was never good with words, but this time she wanted to at least consider in advance some kind of delicate discourse with her friend. Rachel was incredibly worried about Joy.

Rachel arrived at Joy's wondering what she would encounter inside. How could she even collect the dog on her own? The dog wouldn't allow anyone near it. Rachel didn't want Joy to have to witness any kind of scene with the dog. Rachel didn't want such an image to have to be stuck in Joy's head forever. Rachel was considering a course of action. But she just kept coming up empty for ideas.

When she got to the front door and looked up to ring the bell, there was something for her on the door. Rachel saw a folded piece of paper with two long stem yellow roses between the fold and her name on the paper written in beautiful calligraphy. The color of the roses was not lost on Rachel either. Rachel had a love for flowers. During Joy's recovery she would often wax on to Joy of her love of flowers and what they all meant or signified. Yellow roses meant, among other things; friendship, joy/Joy, beginnings. Rachel was so confused by what she saw. She also knew that up until taking on this dog, Joy doesn't do anything without forethought or purpose. She was now even more worried about what may await her on the other side of the door.

Rachel unfolded the paper and clutched the roses in her hand. The opened side of the paper had just two lines written on it; with the same beautiful calligraphy.

She read it aloud:

“A true friend is someone who walks in, when others have walked out.” ... “Please walk in...again.”

Rachel was still unsure of what all of this meant, but it struck her deeply. She knew with a kind of 6th sense awareness, that something life-defining was awaiting her inside. Maybe it was because she knew Joy so well now. Regardless of why, Rachel had that gut instinct that opening that door would be something she would never forget. And so, she slowly turned the knob, and quietly entered Joy’s foyer.

There was a small chair facing Rachel. On the seat of the chair was an envelope, again with her name on it, and a jewellery box. The envelope said simply, “Sit and please read.” Rachel wanted to check the house instead. This was a little too eerie for her. And being the realist that she is, Rachel usually hates surprises and mystery. But she trusted Joy as well. So in an instant of decision; she sat down, opened the envelope, and read the letter left just for her. It read:

Dear Rachel

“First, just so you know; I am fine and sitting-up, in my bedroom. So please relax and read this.

I’m not like you Rachel. I can’t just blurt out whatever pops into my head. I wish I could. I always envied that about you: Even when the words hurt. But I can never find words when I need them most. That is why I am writing this letter to you. I needed the time to hopefully find the right words. But I have a feeling they will still not accurately portray my feelings.

When I called you a couple of weeks ago, and told you “this is so hard...I had no idea” the reason I began to cry so uncontrollably is because it was at that moment I realized all you had done for me from my accident to now. My God, we were barely friends then. And I still don’t know why or how, but you showed up everyday, and I’m still here because of you.... It must have been so hard.... And I had no idea.

I could never express to you Rachel in those early days, that when I found myself totally alone, just me and life and death, and emptiness, I came to realize just how much real faith was missing in my life. And the faith that was there was deeply misplaced.

I can’t just say “thank you” and be done with it. I can’t just say “I love you” and have it express what I feel. But I need to explain to you, Rachel; that it came to me that actions speak louder than words. If I could just be you, one time, for someone, for anyone, then maybe you could see and feel the ‘thank you,’ and the ‘I love you.’

You kept telling me not to take on that dog. You warned me what it would take out of me. You didn’t realize Rachel that the dog is me. I am trying to be you. None of the dog experts could help me. So guess what? I took a page from your book. Actually I took the whole book. I read to the dog all day long. I talked to it all day long. I had no expectations from it anymore at all. Sound familiar? Rachel, if I could

just do what you did for me; if I could save one being like you saved me; then you would know my love for you. It would be there for both of us to see.”

Rachel was overwhelmed. Although she and Joy had journeyed to hell and back, they had never mutually exchanged such raw honesty before; not when it came to their own relationship. Rachel had to wipe away the stream of tears before she could continue reading.

Joy’s letter continued....

“I think back to when and how we first met: What seemed like meaningless get togethers for coffee. I realize now that for some people like you Rachel, it’s truly never about the coffee. It took me a long time to learn that. The coffee is always there for us. Most of the times we choose to have it served to us. But then at some point people like me finally realize there is a greater purpose to make the coffee ourselves and serve it to others: And for no deeper reason than to do so. Some of us may have to take the stairs in life instead of the elevator Rachel. And we may be more exhausted from it, but we sure can appreciate whatever heights we reach from the climb. And you taught me Rachel that it’s not about what storey I actually climb to. It’s not about acquiring the penthouse view. Instead, it’s about how many others I can take along with me, however high I climb.

Because of you Rachel I am here. And guess what? We did it!

Please open that box now. And then come back and finish this.”

Rachel opened the neatly wrapped jewellery box. Inside was a large white and yellow gold charm attached to a necklace: A strange looking charm. It looked like, well indeed it was, in the shape of a half of a dog bone! At the other end of the half dog bone looked like a bite mark; what you would see if a dog bit a bone in half but its teeth left an imprint in the bone. Yes, for sure that is what it was.

Rachel picked up the letter again and read the last few lines:

“Rachel, you did it. I did it. We did it. Please come into the bedroom and meet my dog.”

Rachel put the necklace on and tried to compose herself. She gently knocked on the bedroom door and proceeded to swing the door open slowly. She couldn’t believe what she witnessed. Joy was sitting there in her wheelchair facing her. The dog was sitting right alongside of Joy and with its head in her lap. Rachel had to look twice to make sure her eyes were actually capturing what her mind was telling her she was seeing!

“This is ‘Spirit’ said Joy, crying.” “I named him after you.” She opened her arms for Rachel to come into them and embrace her. On her way to Joy, Rachel noticed that on the dog’s new collar, he was wearing the other half of the bone, the other half of the gold charm. All of it was registering with Rachel. The two friends embraced in a way that no words could ever appropriately delineate. Both were shedding year’s worth of tears that were finally due to not only be shed, but shared as well.

In the middle of their long embrace, 'Spirit' let out of half-hearted protective growl. The two ladies then laughed hysterically.

Joy's Spirit

Rachel and Joy and Spirit became regulars again at the park. Spirit took to looking for sticks and bringing them to Joy and dropping them in her lap. The other regulars would always mark the appearance of the 3 musketeers there. "Oh, here comes Rachel, Joy, and Spirit" they would all say. And they would all wave and smile. The Animal Control staff could not believe this was the same dog. 'Spirit' was trusting and ready to meet and greet. Spirit would commence each trip to the park by running short circles around Joy's wheelchair with obvious glee. Joy and Rachel would always enjoy the ritual. And Rachel always wore the dog-bone charm, as did Spirit.

Spirit and Joy were like one. Joy taught Spirit some basic tricks, the first of which of course, was 'to dance.'

Spirit lived 8 happy years with Joy. When his time came he was put to rest having known a bond, having known love, trust, and of course having known Joy. Joy got permission from the city to have Spirit buried just in front of the entrance to the leash-free area. A little flat plaque on the ground reads, "Joy's Spirit." Directly across from that spot Joy donated a park bench. It was placed in the exact spot where she first sat in her wheelchair watching the dogs all those years ago: The exact place where she first started to 'come back.' The plaque on the park bench reads, "Dedicated to Rachel and to Spirit: Please sit and experience Joy" And on the plaque, in between the names Rachel and Spirit, was a gold Dog bone. The middle with the bite marks was connected. That bench still remains the perfect place to sit on a spring day.

Religion is often for those people trying to avoid going to hell. Spirituality is just as often found by those who have already been there.

Joy retells her story with enthusiasm always. She has a certain grace about her now. She perks up and sits straight when talking about her time with Spirit. She also learned many lessons way before Spirit came into her life. The first lesson Joy learned was that the longer she carried a grudge, the heavier it seemed to get. Now, when Joy retells her story and her journey she finds herself using words like "blessed, fortunate, open-hearted, optimistic, content, happy, and to her namesake, Joyful once again." In fact maybe these are the threads that help to sew together a heart ripped at the seams. Joy would often think to herself, "Maybe this is what overcoming feels like."

Grace comes only to an open-heart.

Her past before the accident no longer held any meaning for her; even with the wheelchair as its constant reminder. Instead, talking about this part of her life was like talking about someone else she used to know. It was like conjuring up a picture of someone else, somewhere else, but it wasn't Joy. "Did I actually suffer through all of that," she would often ask herself.

People can be amazingly resilient. All people can learn to manage terrible pain in such a way as to leave suffering behind them. Pain is inevitable. Suffering becomes a choice. People can learn to journey on, day in, day out, as Joy did. They can venture toward the light, instead of away from the darkness. And friendship or family, or any kind of bond created can forge the path to do so. But it's the bond created not for oneself but for another that matters most: To survive being defeated, beaten, and broken; to survive illness, death, tragedy, abuse; whatever. To move forward requires a will to do so. It requires an active faith. It requires work toward Joy and Spirit, not an attempt to move away from pain and tumult.

Experiences can scar anyone, but they never need destroy the Spirit. Not if we refuse to allow it. But it takes great courage to believe you can overcome when all is seemingly lost. To even find a starting point it may be necessary to allow someone else to show it to you. In The Law of the Jungle, Kipling wrote, "for the strength of the pack is the wolf; and the strength of the wolf is the pack." Joy knows that part of overcoming any life-altering event cannot be done alone. And another part of that overcoming no one else can do for you.

That is how there came to be Joy in Spirit, and Spirit in Joy.

We should all be so blessed.

Heroes

Rachel, Joy and Spirit are all heroes. And they show us whatever form of energy we put into the world comes back. What goes around indeed comes around. All kindness given indeed returns. And the path of these heroes began in one heart-breaking instant all those years ago.

Rachel never set out to be anyone's hero. She doesn't even know what a hero is. This is true of most heroes in real life. Rachel's path to heroism began as a promise she made to virtual strangers. She didn't know what a hero is, but she did know what a coward is; and all those years ago, she just kept a promise. Once she made that promise, being a coward was not an option.

The Talmud says that "a person seeking help for a friend, while needy himself, will be answered first." Perhaps this is also part of heroism.

Any aspect of heroism always has an element of bravery. But bravery isn't some Hollywood depiction of slaying dragons against all odds, or winning the big game in the last second. That's not real life bravery. Bravery, as part of heroism is just the capacity and the will to show up every day. Yes, that's it indeed. And when you choose to show up for someone else ahead of your own needs and wants; well that is heroic in the truest sense of the word. And giving that piece of yourself, that will to show up, is never lost. Mother Theresa said, "When you give what you do not need, it is not real giving." Maybe this is what she meant.

An Idea

And so I am sharing with you an idea. It's time has come. We live in uncertain times. And yet everyone is still out to get theirs, before it's gone. We need to put some positive energy out there in real terms.

Action. There are real heroes all around us; unsung, unknown, except to those for whom the difference was made. Many of these heroes do not even know they have served such a grand purpose in life. Perhaps it's time we take it upon ourselves to let someone know they have been a hero in our life. It doesn't take a lot of deep thought to come up with a person or people who have blessed our life's journey in that way.

There must be a person for each of us who teaches us how to pay it forward. In the end putting our best foot forward is about taking a stand for someone else. Sitting with a friend, lending a shoulder, talking to a neighbour; encouraging the broken, the downtrodden, the lost Spirits: teaching by example and learning by same; loving through whatever hardships life presents, not just on us but on others we may know to be in need: A simple caring hand on a shoulder; a cup of coffee, a warm embrace. And we should do this not so we can tell ourselves how wonderful we are; but rather, so we can share and feel how human we are. It's amazing how healing another, heals oneself. Because the reality is that it's much easier, if we start early enough, to build stronger people, than it is to repair broken ones.

Do you know someone in your life or your past, who just continued or continues to show up? Do you know someone in your life whose bite-mark has left an imprint right bone-deep inside you? It's time to tell them so. It's time to send out that kind of energy into the world. Maybe a friend or a family member; just someone who when you think about it, has always been there; especially when you needed them most. We all have heroes. Send them the link to this story and tell them why you are doing so. Let's hope it catches fire and everyone pays it forward. Go all the way and buy them the "hero-half-bone." I have a jewellery store that has made a mould of it for me. I will even create hard copies of this story and make a dedication with blanks so that you can fill it out to your own hero here.

"This story is dedicated to ----- . Thank you for being a hero in my life. Thank you for being a friend.

Pay it forward. The world needs it.

This short story is written for Annie, for our anniversary. She is the first recipient of the 'hero half-bone' Hooch (our dog) devotedly wears the other half.

God bless you all.

