



One

I found him.

I wasn't looking for him, but there he was, real as life. It was only a glimpse at first, but he stopped and turned, almost as if he felt my gaze upon him. The instant we locked eyes, he grinned. And it was like the old man had never left.

But he did leave. He had disappeared several years ago without so much as a good-bye, and like the old man himself, the circumstances of his departure had been odd. Leaving our tiny, coastal community without being seen by a single person was strange enough—small-town folks don't miss much—but tucking a cryptic message inside a beaten-up suitcase and abandoning it in the middle of a parking lot . . . well, the whole thing had been perplexing. It had also been the number-one topic of conversation in our town for weeks.

In time, however, the residents of Orange Beach came to believe he was gone for good, and a mourning of sorts had settled over the whole community. It wasn't a tragedy. We had suffered through hurricanes and oil spills—we knew what tragedy felt like. It was more of an emptiness we couldn't quite define.

So in lieu of anything specific, we talked endlessly about what

we did remember. We discussed his clothes and wondered why we had never seen him in anything other than jeans and a T-shirt. Besides the leather sandals on his feet, that particular ensemble typified his entire wardrobe. We had seen him at a wedding on the lagoon, in restaurants, and even in church a time or two, but never dressed in anything other than jeans and a T-shirt.

No one had ever known where he lived or even where he slept at night. To our knowledge, he had never so much as spent a rainy evening at anyone's house. He didn't own property in our county—we all have friends working at the courthouse, and they checked.

Neither, we all agreed, could he possibly have had a tent in the small brown suitcase that never left his side. And about that suitcase . . . until the day of his disappearance, none of us had ever seen him without it. It was an early weekday morning when Ted Romano, the owner of Pack & Mail, found the old, scuffed-up piece of luggage sitting by itself in the middle of an almost empty parking lot.

Yes, we all had stories about watching the old man struggle through a door with it or carry it with him as he filled a plate from a local salad bar, but as far as we could tell, no one but the man himself had so much as touched that suitcase until the day he vanished.

There was also the age thing. We were almost obsessed with the subject of how old the man might be. We had conceded long before that it was impossible to know his age for sure. His appearance yielded no real clues. "Old" was as close as we could guess. His hair was longish—not long enough for a ponytail, but *longish*—and as white as polished ivory. Usually only finger-combed, his hair was casually worn and almost beautiful. But his hair was only the first thing about him anyone noticed.

It was the old man's eyes that stopped people in their tracks.

Sparkling as the laughter of a child and imbued with a color I can describe only as tranquil blue, his eyes verged on luminescence. Set against the brown skin of his face and framed by that snowy hair, his eyes would hold a person as long as he cared to talk. And he could really talk . . .

None of us had ever had the opportunity to listen—truly listen—to anyone like him before. It wasn't that he talked a lot. He didn't. It's just that when he *did* talk, the words that tumbled from his mouth were so precise and significant that folks drank in every one.

You may think I am exaggerating, but there are more than a few of us in Orange Beach who credit this old man with changing our lives. In fact, I might be at the top of that long list. But then, my relationship with Jones has spanned more years than anyone else's.

He found me at a particularly tough time in my life when I was twenty-three years old. For several months he was a friend when I didn't have one and told me the truth at a time when I didn't want to hear it. Then he disappeared for close to thirty years.

The next time I saw him was a few years ago when he arrived, as he had the first time, seemingly out of the blue. One awfully curious thing I became aware of during that time was that the old man had apparently been in and out of our town for years. Maybe for decades.

Remember how I said we didn't know how old he was? Well, I talked to some people who were pretty old themselves, and they said the old man had been around when *they* were kids. And they swore up and down that he had been an old man then. Of course, that doesn't make sense to me even now. When I first heard it—and I heard it a lot—I ignored all the talk. Still, I had

to admit that he didn't look much different from the first time I had seen him.

His age wasn't the only strange thing about the old man. His skin color was another. He was deeply tanned. Or dark brown. No one could agree on whether his pigmentation had been determined by genetics or a lifelong aversion to sunscreen. As for me, I simply didn't care.

It was curious, however, that African Americans seemed to take it for granted that the old man was black, and Caucasians assumed he was white. I saw it happen so often that I thought it was funny. I even asked him about it once. His answer didn't have much to do with the question, though, and I was not surprised.

I loved the old man, and I was not the only one. And I already told you how much of a difference he made for many of us. But I would be remiss if I did not submit this for consideration as well: there were people in our town who thought the old man was crazy.

It was all very strange . . . how he was mocked and ridiculed by some and the way he just grinned and took it. Some folks—right to his face—even called him names.

Me? I just called him Jones. Not Mr. Jones. Just Jones.



Two

Gulf Shores, Alabama

November, thirty-two years ago

It was a cold night on the Gulf Coast, and I was wearing everything I owned, including an insulated denim jacket I had found in someone's trash. It was almost midnight, and I was coming from a marathon session of cleaning fish for Jeannie's Seafood at the intersection of Highway 59 and the beach road. I was headed back to the Gulf State Park Pier, exhausted and cold, eager to climb under its shelter and sleep.

As was my habit, I got off the main road and walked behind the homes and businesses on the beach. I did this in order to avoid attention from anyone who might wonder what a kid was doing walking the streets of a small beach town alone at night. I was trudging through the concrete pilings under the Pink Pony Pub when Jones joined me.

It was not a surprise, really. I was becoming accustomed to the uncommon way he would commonly appear. This night he simply matched my stride and walked with me. As usual, the old man was in jeans and a T-shirt. "How do you keep from freezing?" I asked.

“I think warm thoughts,” Jones replied, before noting, “Woowee! You smell like fish.”

Continuing to trudge through the sand with my head down and my hands in my pockets, I said, “Yeah, well, spend a day up to your elbows in twenty-six hundred pounds of ’em, and we’ll see what *you* smell like.”

Jones was quiet for a while. I suspected he had sensed my mood and was being careful. My current station in life had taken an emotional toll that was not beyond repair. The circumstances were evident, however, even to those who knew me in passing. Jones was aware that I was a threat to fly into a rage or burst into tears or rip someone to pieces with my words. One or more of these crazy manifestations of how I felt at the moment happened far too frequently, and sometimes they happened in public. I didn’t want to behave or conduct myself in that manner, but I believed it was nothing I could control. *What can I do?* I often thought. *This is me. This is how I feel. This is just the way I am . . .*

I cut my eyes toward the old man and kept walking. He had a habit of turning up most often, it seemed, when I was tired or depressed or angry. I’d look up from washing someone’s boat or pause to stretch while cleaning fish, and there he’d be, over to the side, twenty or thirty feet away, just watching me. He’d smile when I caught him like that, and I didn’t mind. After all, he was the only person remotely interested in a young man who was homeless and living on the beach.

The old man could make me laugh, and he did so quite often; but mostly, he made me think. Not necessarily *about* a certain thing . . . He made me think in *ways* I had never considered. Jones had a knack for turning a situation or a deep-seated belief upside down or sideways in such a manner that it became perfectly clear and made total sense.

I didn’t look at him again, but I could hear the fine, sugary

sand squeaking under his steps. He was quiet, simply offering his company to a lonely young man, and I couldn't help feeling guilty for how I sometimes acted toward him. I often grew frustrated with the old man, sometimes to the point of anger, and then would regret the sharp words I used as I took that frustration out on my friend. In saner moments I wondered if the overwhelming frustration I felt might actually be with myself. I certainly struggled to think the way he did.

"You can't just come up with some answer to everything," I'd said to him only a few nights before. In an ugly tone of voice, I had sneered, "You act like an answer is waiting around the corner, and when you find it—*boom!*—the problem's solved, like somebody waved a magic wand!" I remember stepping close to him for my big finish. With contempt dripping from my words, I had said, "Things are not that simple."

Jones had shrugged and, with the barest hint of a smile, replied, "Seems to me that when the answer appears, the problem *is* solved. You might be scared or frustrated or discouraged or all three, but when you find an answer, life is never the same again. So actually, son . . . things aren't that complicated."

I had wanted to scream.

Approaching the Holiday Inn, we could see that high tide was sending its waves to break upon the foundation of the resort's pool area. Only a seawall protected the hotel's elaborate concrete beach from the waves of the real thing; therefore, it was the only place on our walk where we couldn't stay on the sand. I experienced this obstacle regularly and knew that to avoid wading through the surf, it was necessary to cross the pool deck. Together in the dark, all alone, Jones and I climbed the steps that would allow us to negotiate the array of lounge chairs,

circle the pool, and exit the property by way of the stairs on the other side.

Despite the security guard who roamed the hotel grounds at night, I wasn't too scared. The lady who worked the night desk inside the lobby was a middle-aged, African American woman named Beverly. She was also a friend of mine. I called her Mrs. Beverly and occasionally gave her fresh fish as my part of an unspoken agreement that prompted her to look the other way when I used one or another of the hotel's amenities. Still, I was cautious. I didn't want anyone in trouble with the hotel manager. Especially me.

I crouched low, making my way across the deck. Arriving at midpoint, right beside the deep end of the pool, I turned to tell Jones to do the same. I flushed with annoyance, seeing he was *not* bent over and *not* hurrying. The old man was moving casually, absolutely upright, hands in his pockets, with those leather sandals scuffling along the sandy concrete. Having trained myself to avoid attention and the subsequent problems that came with it, I was striving for silence, and the old man's sandals resonated like a metal rake dragging through gravel.

Irritated, I hissed at him to hurry up, get down, and be quiet. But before I could continue my short trek, Jones inexplicably smiled sweetly and reached toward me in a gesture that indicated he wanted to place his hand on my shoulder but instead . . . firmly pushed me into what was a very cold, unheated pool.

I was under the water—all the way under the water—before I had any comprehension of what had just occurred. Years later I would carry a weird mental picture of the old man at that particular instant. I would see him through the surface of the pool, leaning over me with his white hair blowing in the cold wind. As I surfaced with a gasp, Jones was smiling. Not laughing (I might have killed him) but smiling as if he were curious or expectant

or fascinated with the object in front of him—which was, of course, me.

I kicked to the side of the pool and grabbed hold of the edge at his feet. All the fire or meanness or whatever it was I carried around was suddenly gone. I wiped my eyes with my hands, looked up at him, and asked, “What was that for?” as he reached down to help me out.

Soon I was wrapped in ten or twelve towels from the Holiday Inn laundry room and drinking coffee from the pot in the lobby. We were sitting on the floor, huddled in the not-quite-inside, not-quite-outside doorway that led to the hotel tennis courts. It was not comfortable, but it was out of the wind, and I was relatively sure we would not be run off.

After giving him the silent treatment for a time—conduct that I must admit had no effect at all—I peered at him sideways and said, “Jones. Man, I don’t get you. What in the heck was *that* for?”

He looked up at the ceiling, took a deep, contented breath, and crossed his arms comfortably. “Well,” he began, glancing at me briefly, then back to the ceiling. “Son, you are at this very moment in the biggest war you will ever wage in your life. It is confusing, but you’re fighting for what you’ll one day become. There are forces clashing for space in your head that you don’t recognize, can’t see, and won’t understand until you’re able to look back on the whole thing years from now.

“You know, a lot of folks will tell you that little things don’t matter.” He flashed me a quick look and added, “You’d better turn that on its ear, son. Little things *do* matter. Sometimes, little things matter the most. Everybody pays a lot of attention to big things, but nobody seems to understand that big things are almost always made up of little things. When you ignore little things, they often turn into big things that have become a lot harder to handle.

“Don’t sweat the small stuff,” Jones said with disdain. “That’s a lie that’ll ruin your life.” He looked hard at me again and locked my gaze with his own. “Your choices, your words, and every move you make are permanent. Life is lived in indelible ink, boy. Wake up. You’re making little bitty brushstrokes every minute you walk around on this earth. And with those tiny brushstrokes, you are creating the painting that your life will ultimately become—a masterpiece or a disaster.”

Jones shifted in the small space to gain a little comfort and faced me directly when he spoke again. “Okay, back to your question . . .” The old man tilted his head to the side a tiny bit.

“It occurred to me that I wasn’t always going to be around to help you with your thinking. So I decided, then and there, that you needed to understand a very important fact about your earthly existence. It is this: Every single day for the rest of your life, somebody is going to push you in the pool. And you’d better decide *now* how you’re going to act when it happens.”

Jones squinted and leaned toward me. “Are you gonna come out of the water whining? Maybe crying or complaining? Will you come up mad and defiant, threatening everybody? Will you throw fists or worse?”

“Or will you come out of the water with a smile on your face? Looking to see what you can learn . . . who you might help? Will you *act* happy though you feel uncertain?”

He stared at me for a beat or two before lowering his chin and speaking in an earnest tone. “It’s time to decide, son,” he said. “Almost every result that your life produces from this moment forward—good or bad—will depend upon how you choose. Every day, in one form or another, whether you like it or not, you *will* be pushed in the pool. You might as well decide right now how you’ll act when it happens.”

With that said, Jones got to his feet and left.

I was worn out, tired beyond measure, and I knew I had to leave soon. Before facing the cold night again, however, I dozed, resting somewhat, allowing my mind to drift over and around Jones. I thought again about why he never wore a coat. I thought about where he would sleep that night and about how generally strange he seemed to be. I thought about my life. I thought about Jones's baffling words. And I wondered what in the world I was supposed to make of both.

