

~ This Morning, Ray ~

“Hey! Good mornin’ Michael!”

My older half-brother Raymond smiled with that trademark, broad gap-toothed smile of his. He was waiting on the threshold to the kitchenette at the end of the short bedroom hallway. He held a cell phone in his hands.

I nodded my salutations as I stole cautiously down the darkened hallway towards him. Mornings don’t always bring out my best side. And this morning was no exception.

“Wanna cup of coffee?” He offered politely.

I shook my head “No.” I did not want to make the effort to speak.

“How ‘bout some breakfast? Cereal?”

He roused my latent interest. “What ya got?”

“Umm. I dunno. Let’s see.” He set the cell phone down into its electric charger on the kitchen counter. He looked energetically in a cabinet under the sink.

It was logical that he would not know what was in his own breakfast pantry. He lived in this two-bedroom apartment down here at the beach with his wife only on weekends. During the week, he lived in White Oak with friends, while his wife of some forty years remained in this little apartment only a couple of miles from the ocean on the Delaware-Maryland border. I had spent Sunday with them, while my own wife had held a wedding shower for her sister at our place. Monday morning had arrived. My brother would be taking the company van, parked downstairs, to go to work up near Washington, DC.

My brother pulled out two cereal boxes, one full of some honey raisin bran. He poured a little into a bowl for my inspection. Without my prescription glasses, which were in my pants pocket, I am legally blind, but I know I had seen raisins on the cover of that cereal box. I leaned over the counter, peered into the bowl and poked around among the bran flakes with my right index finger until I uncovered some raisins.

“OK, I guess.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll have some of them, too. Look pretty good,” he concurred agreeably. He arched his lips up and brows, and then nodded, as if he had just made an interesting, new discovery.

I did not see his wife Joyce anywhere. I assumed she was still in bed. We stood at the kitchen counter and he poured each of us a bowl of the cereal with milk. I tasted. Dang! I thought this stuff tasted more like candy than cereal, but I ate it anyway. I was hungry.

He shuffled us out of the tiny kitchen into the similarly small living room, where we assumed our positions from the previous night. Raymond sat on the tan two-cushion, fake leather couch beneath

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the wide slide windows that ran parallel to the ceiling. He placed his cereal bowl on the coffee table before the couch. I sat to his right in the recliner chair, which I did not recline. I was just two steps from both the kitchen to my right and the short bedroom hallway behind me.

“Pull that thing over other there—around in front of ya.” He referred to a plain, slatted, wooden tray table about two feet high next to the right of the recliner. He had told me to use it last night when we had eaten dinner in the same manner, but I had not wanted to, had not needed to. It had been just as easy to reach over to my right, pick up my sandwich or piece of fruit, and eat it with no chance of knocking the table with my feet.

“Go ahead Michael,” he ordered and motioned with his head. *Mann!* He sounded just like Dad. I followed his suggestion. It would be easier to manage the cereal with the bowl in front of me.

Directly across the postage stamp-sized room from me stood the sliding screen door to the wooden porch deck. A twenty-seven inch color television set resided near the sliding door, in a blonde wooden cabinet. The set seemed to be on perpetually when Raymond was in the room. Now he had tuned the TV to the morning show. I can't remember the name of the show, because I never watch it. However, it's the one with a guy named Regis and the good looking blonde—Kelly something. That chick's really put together. I pulled my prescription glasses from my pocket and put them on my face. We held our cereal bowls in our hands and alternately slurped and crunched our honey raisin bran, while I leered at the blonde on the tube.

The phone to the apartment rang in the kitchen, so Raymond got up to answer it, carrying his half-filled coffee mug with him. As he strolled in front of me, it registered that he was all dressed for work. From his new, rust-colored, suede moccasin shoes (to ease the pain from the gout in his heel) to his company baseball-style, work cap with *Accent* written across the front in grey. The blue-grey cap covered his baldpate. Between the hat and the moccasins, he wore a cream-colored short-sleeved knit shirt with two buttons below his neck with a tiny, floppy collar. Casual khaki slacks and belt rounded out his workday ensemble. Well over two hundred pounds and not quite six foot, with a round cherub's face and unkempt grey hair around the lower half of his head, he resembled a jolly Santa Claus, moonlighting in the off-season as a golf starter. Except unlike Santa, Raymond has a strong, straight nose. He has Dad's nose. It's a nice looking nose.

I chuckled because we are so different in looks, temperament, everything. We both got a kick out of him introducing me to his friends yesterday. Twelve years his junior, four inches shorter and nearly a hundred pounds lighter than Raymond, I have a swarthy complexion with dark eyes, dark hair and thick-lense, tortoise shell, prescription glasses to match. We introduced ourselves as brothers and nobody could believe it. Once we convinced them that it's true that we are brothers and then Raymond told them we're twins, like Danny Devito and Arnold Schwarzenegger in the film of that same name. His friends looked sharply at us, somewhat soberly. They studied us up and down and from one of us to the other. Of course, he claimed to be Arnold, but I didn't mind, because it stimulated the conversation.

“Hello,” he says into the phone mouthpiece. Then he grinned broadly revealing his trademark broad gap that separated his upper two front teeth.

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“Well, helloooah Anthony. And how are—“

“What? . . . Unh-hunh? “Yeah, and —“

I watched as he tried to sip his coffee leisurely and listen to the party on the other end of the line. His joyful expression melted. I guessed nothing leisurely was coming from the calling party. I could see Raymond was a little perturbed, but he threw his annoyance aside and gamely asked.

“Yes, and how are you doin’ this morning, Anthony? . . . I say how are you this morning, Anthony?” Raymond listened and nodded. “Good, good. Glad to hear it.”

He listened intently. His deeply blue eyes darted back and forth beneath long, thick blonde lashes, indicative of the thoughts darting inside his brain. Raymond rested his butt back against the kitchen corner stanchion. He faced across the room, staring at the long, horizontal open window which ran from just beneath the ceiling down to the couch. His blue eyes continued to dart quickly back and forth beneath his long lashes. I could see his brain churning as he listened closely to “Anthony.” I assumed the caller was from his office. Engaging and a gifted, effective salesman, Raymond was ever a lone ranger. He did not conform easily to corporate ways, no matter how small the corporation. Something, I felt “Anthony” was about to learn.

Raymond crossed his right foot, his moccasin-covered gout foot, over his left, good foot so that his bad right heel was up in the air, off the floor.

“Well, I don’t have an appointment until three o’clock . . .”

“Noon? OK, I’ll see if I can help out, but I don’t have my first appointment until three this afternoon.”

“Well, the cell phone is charging, that’s—“

“Yeah, when it’s done charging, I’ll be coming—“

“... Look Anthony, I’ll see what I can do, but my first appointment isn’t until three.” My brother rolled his eyes and shifted his feet uncomfortably. Clearly, all good will from the start of the conversation had evaporated.

“All right, Bye.”

Raymond hung up the phone, shaking his head in disgust.

“They just don’t understand. The thing of it is, is they got a new office manger and he’s all gung-ho.”

“Oh?” I said. (I work for the U. S. Army. I know how difficult them gung-ho types can be.) I said, “I hear ya, Mann!” He offered me some coffee but, as I never touch the stuff, I declined politely.

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He followed me into the tiny kitchen while I rinsed out my empty cereal bowl in the sink. Then I watched as he poured himself another cup of coffee.

“Hey, let’s take *our* coffee out on the veranda. It’s a beautiful day.” He smiled broadly. He appeared to have regained his joy momentarily. At least, he had gotten the “beautiful day” part right, because it *was* gorgeous.

Big brother led the way, with his forefinger crooked around his coffee cup holder out in front of him as if he were carrying an old candle lamp. I followed him through the opened, sliding screen door onto the dull, battleship grey painted, second-story porch. The “veranda” as he called it was puny, about twelve by six feet, maybe. However, the view was magnificent! The Indian River Inlet, all blue and green shimmered in the bright, colorless, morning sunlight. The sparkling inlet waters rolled almost to the doorstep of his grey boarded, three-story garden apartment building. A steady, invigorating fifteen-mile per hour breeze ruffled my excessively long, uncombed morning hair, shooting some zing into me. We sat in a pair of white, plastic chairs so we could overlook the short balcony rail at our leisure, out to the Indian River Inlet and the Atlantic Ocean beyond.

The view was crystalline, pristine. We could see clearly little green islands in the back bay, fresh with the budding leaves of mid April. The equally green contours of the land surrounding the inlet together with the bay waters reminded me of a fist-glove. The temperature had already reached seventy and was climbing. In the bright sun where we sat, it seemed warmer. About two miles in the distance, we could see easily the bridge that spanned the inlet connecting the beach road on either side of the water, just before the inlet emptied back out to the Atlantic Ocean. An occasional sea bird dived into the sparkling, blue-green inlet waters to snag a late breakfast. A pontoon boat floated not two hundred yards from us.

Raymond sipped his coffee and asked: “So! How’d ya sleep last night?”

“Anh, not too good.”

“Something wrong with the bed?” He asked, concerned.

“Nah, the bed’s fine. Just, I ain’t used to it, is all. I don’t sleep around much, ya know?” I said with a dry grin.

“Yeah, I know. Maybe it’s just Ginger you’re used to,” he quipped. I grinned some more.

“Yeah, I’m used to her OK.” He laughed with that coughing kind of laugh of his in which he swallows the laugh down deep in the back of his throat before he finishes.

“Maybe the best thing you ever did—introducing us,” said I.

He pulled his mouth off his coffee cup as he sucked in some of the hot java. “Wonder if Ginger feels the same way? Ah ha, ha, ha, ha.” He convulsed as he laughed with his head remaining stationary but his shoulders and torso pumped up and down rhythmically and in unison. Like Santa, he shook like a bowlful of jelly.

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“Well, most times I think she does,” I say, still grinning.

“Hey, ya know Michael? You ought to bring her down here, Brett, too. We can take the pontoon over between them islands. Boat over to the Rusty Scupper, have a brew or two. Ya can go jet-skiing, anything.” He pushed his lips up in a kind of smirk. “Piece of cake.” He snapped his fingers to underscore the simplicity of making such an excursion.

“Yeah, Brett always wanted to go jet skiin’. When we went to Florida on vacations, he’d bug me about it. But back then, they cost like \$35 a half hour, so I rented a canoe instead for five bucks an hour.”

“Yeah? Well here, it’s all free. No problem. Jet ski, canoe, pontoon, whatever!” He opened his arms wide and fanned his hands out toward the inlet, as if it were all at his fingertips.

“Free, hunh? You own a boat or a jet ski?”

“Nah, not me.” He scoffed. “My in-laws, you know—and the neighbors here.” He waved his hand grandly to his right, coffee cup in hand, indicating where his neighbors and in-laws lived.

“Right, so it’s not a problem for you, ya mean?”

He laughed again, swallowing his chuckle with his next gulp of coffee.

“Just what do you provide, Raymond?”

“Hey, I provide the laughs.” He tilted his head sideways and revealed that gap-toothed grin. “You know me.” Indeed, I did.

“Ya got a spot on your shirt, there.”

“Yeah? Where?”

“There.” I pointed to his heart. “Right in the middle there, along your sternum, kind of a beige spot.” Holding the coffee in his right hand, he pinched the knit shirt and pulled it out away from him with his left. His blue eyes almost crossed, searching for the stain.

“Oh yeah. That’s an old one. Not much you can do about it now.”

I nodded rather skeptically.

“Oh, it’s still a good shirt though,” he assured me with a grin. “Still got a lot of wear left in it, yet. Can’t throw it out now just because of a little stain.” I arched my brows, pursed my lips and nodded again, still skeptical.

“Hey that would be a great idea, wouldn’t it?” Inspiration lit up his face.

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“What’s that?”

“Well, you’ve seen those shirts where they have like a little sticky like thing, some kind of flap on the sleeve, you know? And you pull the flap down so you can see the size of the shirt?”

I shook my head and frowned, “No, I never seen that.”

“You haven’t?” He was surprised. I said, “No.” But he was undeterred.

“Well, I just had one of my ideas.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. See we can make a shirt like that with the fold down flap in the front, but it’s like real wide but real thin, so you can’t see it, see?”

“Unh-hunh. So what’s the point?”

“Well then, when you go to eat, you pull it down—“

“Like a bib?” I interjected.

“Yeah, you got it. And then, people won’t spill on themselves and ruin their shirts. And when you’re done, you just pull the flap back up and cover the mess. No spill, see? It’s all gone.” He demonstrated with an imaginary bib flap on his shirtfront, grinning like a rascal.

“Yeah.” Very nonplussed, I said, “Think someone already had that idea—called ‘em napkins.” I raised my eyebrows. “And they throw ‘em away.”

He sipped at his coffee, but looked at me seriously. I stared back in disbelief that he wasn’t laughing.

“So? So really, what do you think about my idea, Michael? I get ‘em all the time, you know. Ideas like this, you know, moneymakers.” Then, he repeated his question with a straight face.

So I felt obliged to respond to this silliness. “Well, it’s kind of like what Sundance said to Butch Cassidy in that movie we watched on TV last night.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“You just keep thinkin’ Raymond. That’s what you’re good at it.” We both chuckled.

He sipped his coffee while he dangled his gout heel lazily up over the arm of another white plastic chair. “Sure is beautiful today, hunh? Not a cloud in that sky.” I searched the horizon and found his claim to be true.

“Yeah! Very peaceful, very tranquil,” I observed.

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We gazed out over the inlet, enjoying some of God's awesome handiwork on the Delmarva Peninsula. It was the kind of day that makes you step back and take a deep breath and thank your Maker for His awesome creation as well as for seeing you through the long, harsh winter.

The phone rang in the kitchen. I offered to get it and bring it out to him. It was a wall phone that no longer resided on the wall, but still it had about a thirty foot cord. I hustled inside and fetched it back to him by the fourth ring. I handed Raymond the entire phone, handset and receiver base. He lifted the receiver to his ear.

"Hello? . . . What am I doin'?. . . I told ya before. . . . Well, what difference could it possibly make to you what I'm doin'?. . . No, I told you. I got a three o'clock appointment. Look, I had this all planned out this weekend. I worked late on Friday and Saturday—" Yeah? Helpin' out in the office ain't my responsibility. I'm the salesman, remember? But I'll try to help you out some. I can stay 'til 2:15 . . . Why not 'til three? Because I already told ya, I got a three o'clock appointment over in Silver Spring. I can't stay in the office any later than 2:15 and make that three o'clock— . . . Yeah. OK. Goodbye!" He hung up the phone and shook his head in disgust again.

My brother Raymond, like Butch Cassidy, is as affable a soul as you would ever want to meet. His causal, free-spirited manner rides easily with friends and customers alike. However, his laid-back ways can prove taxing to those who would be in authority over him, as evidently this new, gung-ho, office manger Anthony was discovering.

"Sheesh! These guys! I better check the charge on that cell." He disappeared inside to pick up the cell phone from its charger. He brought the small hand-held phone back out onto the deck with him to observe its status by the bright, unfettered light of day, while I enjoyed the view of the inlet.

"It ain't chargin'", he says blandly.

"Don't look at me," I commented. "We don't own any cell phones. Afraid I can't help ya."

"Anh, I'll just try it again."

He went back inside with the cell phone, studying the small console religiously as he went. A couple minutes later, he ambled back out onto the little deck in his typical, slew-footed saunter. The house phone rang just after he sat down to finish his coffee. He answered it.

"Hello?"

"Yeah, I'm still here . . . Yeah, I know it's nine-forty. Well, alright. Look! We just went all through this. . . Well, who wants to know? George?" Raymond stood up. "Well, you tell George I made my schedule up last week. I got my mind all set on this, had it set all weekend and my first appointment isn't until three. I got another one in Takoma Park at five . . . What two o'clock?" Raymond squinted his eyelids and stared out into the shining waters of the pacific inlet. "First I heard of it. Where is it?" Raymond's jaw dropped. "Bladensburg? That's that little six hundred dollar job! . . . All right, all right. I'll take care of it, but I won't be able to stay in the office as long if I got an appointment at two . . . Well, you'll just have to find somebody else. . . Yeah. 'Bye.'"

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He set the phone down on a little white plastic patio tray table and started to complain.

“They just don’t get it.” He shook his head back and forth. “The thing of it is, is I’m really like an independent contractor. I’m not just some company employee that they can tell to do all this stuff.”

“Like an independent contractor?” I asked perplexed. “I thought you worked for George.”

“I do. But hell, I don’t get treated like a company employee. They don’t pay any medical insurance for me, no retirement. I got no benefits at all. George gives me a draw, sure. But he’d sure as hell take that away fast enough, if I didn’t cover it one month. I got no illusions on that score. So, I figure I’m just like an independent contractor.” He shrugged and, as I listened, he rambled on. “. . . So I figure I deserve the perks of an independent contractor and that don’t include covering the office while George is out. Besides, I said I’d help ‘em out a little, but I got my three o’clock.”

“You tell them that—that you’re an independent contractor, I mean?”

“Shouldn’t have to. If he don’t give me any benefits, they should figure it out for themselves, they’re so damned smart.” He frowned and stuck his nose in the air.

“Why don’t you get any benefits?”

“Cuz I’m sixty-two! All the other people in there are under fifty. If he covers me, everybody else’s premium goes up. He said if I’m willing to pay the difference for the other employees, he’ll change the coverage to include me.”

“That don’t seem right. How many employees are there?”

“Hell no, it’s not right! There’re thirteen employees. So I figure if they want to treat me like an independent contractor, then I’ll act like one.”

“Does George know that?” I ask.

Raymond shot back. “He’s learning!” I laughed. “I better go check that charge,” he grouched.

He came back a few minutes later, this time limping on his bad knee—the one upon which he had not yet had surgery, the one which obviously was in need of some professional medical help. His other knee, the “good one,” had been operated on a couple years ago, but Raymond said it still caused him some problems.

“Damn thing, still ain’t charging.” He shook his head and shrugged. “I tried somethin’ different this time.” He sat back down, dangled his gout-foot over the arm of the chair again and took a deep breath. “Umm, sweet isn’t it!” He exhaled and visibly relaxed, as he took in the stunning scenery.

“Where is the office, in Waldorf?” I asked.

“No, in Clinton, off Kirby Road, over by that old concrete factory.”

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“Yeah, I know where you mean, but that’s three hours from here. You ain’t gonna make it by noon.”

“Guess, George will have to cover it himself, then. Hmmpf!” Raymond was nonplussed.

Then he muttered, “The thing of it is, is that damned George is out cherry-pickin’ when *he* should be covering the damned office.”

“Cherry-pickin’?” I asked, confused. I had heard the term used in basketball parlance for guys hanging back on the offensive end of the court to cash in on some easy buckets, but I didn’t see Raymond playing any ballgames here.

“Yeah, cherry-pickin’! Last month in March, I sold eighty thousand dollars worth of business.”

“Sellin’ carpets?” I asked astonished. “Mann! You must be selling flyin’ carpets or magic carpets or something.”

“Nah, carpets is just a small part of the business. Mostly we sell floors, wood floors and finishing or refinishing jobs.”

“Oh, well! That still sounds like a lot of money for some floors.”

“Well it is. It’s damned good money! But these are nice floors, real professional. Our guys do good work. George sold ninety thousand dollars worth last month, but he worked everyday. I was laid up for four days with my bad foot. And I couldn’t do much for another week or so because of my bum heel. So I missed about ten days of work all together, while he worked the whole month. And on top of that, George is cherry-pickin’!”

“He’s what?”

“Well, he’s the owner, so he skims all the best leads off the top for himself. When Joyce worked in the office, she saw the leads got divided up evenly between us. Now George leaves me with—

“The leftovers? Like that six hundred dollar, two o’clock appointment, you were talking about on the phone?”

“Yeah, that’s right. *That’s right!* And still, he only outsells me by ten grand! When I’m *laid up!*” Raymond raised both his arms in exasperation, inadvertently giving the touchdown signal.

“So why’s he do that? I mean you, you’re the salesman, right?”

“Because if he sells the job himself, he don’t have to pay me commission on it.”

“*Oh!* I see. And he does that, cherry-pickin’?”

“Right!”

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Raymond clenched his teeth and his puffy face began to turn red. I did not say anymore, hoping he would calm down. He had just suffered a stroke about a year ago. We thought we had lost him that time. He had spent several days in intensive care, but he had pulled out of it OK—the same old Raymond. If he didn't have insurance though, I'm not sure how he paid off the hospital bills.

He calmed down now. It *was* an absolutely gorgeous day. We took time to smell the roses, so to speak, or, in this instance, at least the awesomely fresh spring, coastal air.

We both enjoyed the view and the day while he started to talk about the glory days, when he had sold and installed swimming pools for a living, vinyl liner-steel wall pools. He told me that he could not count the number of times a former client had run into him somewhere on the street, at the gas station, even in funeral homes, after ten, fifteen, maybe twenty years later to compliment him on the pool Raymond had sold to, and installed for, them years ago. He recounted some of his many sales triumphs and his ingenuity in overcoming installation problems.

“What about Margaret Gasch? You ever run into her?” He became silent and introspective. Margaret Gasch was a former neighbor. I went to school with her two oldest kids. They had lived in the next block up the street, in our old neighborhood in Hillcrest Heights at one time, before they had moved to Clinton. Raymond had suffered a lot of problems installing the Gasch pool because of the high water table under her lot in the Clinton Acres subdivision. Mrs. Gasch had been none too pleased with his efforts in resolving the situation either.

Now he crossed his right arm over the top of his protruding belly. He placed his left elbow in the palm of his right hand and his left fore and middle fingers alongside and over his straight nose. His thumb rested under his chin and the other fingers of his left hand curled around his mouth. This posture had become a trademark of his since high school, when he had tried to hide his acne. Now it had the effect of shielding his face from my view. He directed his gaze away from me out into the inlet, as he reflected on the unsavory history of the Gasch pool installation. Raymond stared off into the inlet and pursed his lips. His tone became distant when he mentioned rather casually that “No”, he had not run into her.

Just as quickly, his somber mood passed. The light flickered renewed and bright in his baby blue eye, as he turned back to face me, exclaiming, “But you know what? I'll bet that pool of hers is still standing!” He bobbed his head with assurance and then switched from one former client story to another as if he were flipping off one light switch and turning on the next. His countenance brightened. He dropped his guard and began to gesticulate with his pudgy hands.

“Was puttin' in this pool down in St. Mary's County, fillin' it in with fire hose water, see?” I nodded as I squinted against the mid-morning sunlight shining above his head.

“And I let go of the hose with one hand to do something and the damned thing twisted out of control. The end of the hose hits the wall underneath the diving board. And ya know those little brass knobs around the brass coupling on those hoses? You know? You remember?”

I nod again. I remembered those fire hoses could get nasty if they weren't manned properly.

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“Well, one of those little knobs caught the liner and put a little hole in it right underneath where the diving board is. Well, the owner is hanging around. He finds out and he gets real pissed, right? I mean he’s really steamin’. He’s lookin’ and pointin’ at the hole and cussing me out good. Says how I ruined his pool and all.”

“Yeah, I’m trackin’ with ya.” I bob my head for emphasis.

“So the owner goes off to work somewhere else in his yard to burn off steam. Meanwhile, I call the office. I tell ‘em to cut a two-inch diameter out of this spare blue liner we got hanging up on the back wall, and to file the edges of the patch down wafer thin.” I nod and Raymond leans forward in his chair as his blue eyes widen.

“So I avoid eye contact with the client and putter around the pool. Inside of an hour, the guy from the office brings me the patch and the edges are wafer thin, just like I asked. I take the epoxy and lean over and plaster that patch on, see? And I run my hand over it and I can’t feel it. I can’t see it and I can’t feel it. Wafer thin, see?” He bobs his head in agreement with mine. He adds, “Then I finish filling the pool with water.”

“So what happened?” I asked.

“Well, the owner comes over and I play it cool and I said, ‘Well, how do you like your pool?’”

“He’s still steamin’ and he says, ‘You ruined it. You put a hole in it. How do you think I like it?’ So I says, ‘What hole, where’s the hole? I don’t see it.’”

“He points underneath the diving board and says ‘There, there!’ I says, ‘Where? I still don’t see it.’ He looks and he looks, but he can’t find it, see? He looks at me kind of baffled like. Then he hustles over by the diving board. He gets down on the ground and leans over the side of the pool and feels around on the wall. He passes his hand right over the patch. But that patch is like wafer thin along the edges and he can’t find it, see?” I nod again.

“So the guy says, ‘What did you do to it? I can’t find it and I saw that tear before with my own eyes!’ I just shrug and play dumb, see?”

“The customer says, ‘There was a hole there before, I saw it. You did something, but I can’t tell what it is. What did you do?’”

“I said, ‘Well, that’s good. It looks great, then right? Like new?’”

“Then the owner starts to get mad and says, ‘Yeah, but you did something. What was it?’”

Then my brother turned to me and spoke to me as if I were the angry pool owner. Raymond became real sober and looked me straight in the eye, just as believable as hell, as if I were his irate customer. He said:

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“I patched it. But you know, I’m really glad this happened. I mean, for your sake. Yeah, I really think it’s a piece of good fortune for you, because this little incident shows you the true beauty of this type of pool. They are very maintainable. If this had happened to a concrete or a gunnite pool, we’d have to replace the whole wall, possibly even the whole pool just for this one little mishap. But with this steel wall-vinyl liner pool, there’s nothing to it. Just a little patch and it looks just like new.” Raymond snapped his fingers.

“‘Will it hold?’ the owner asks me. ‘I said, ‘Of course it will hold. In fact it’s even better now than it was before in that spot.’”

“‘How’s that?’ He asks. ‘Because,’ I said, ‘It’s like you have two liners right there over that one spot. The thing is twice as strong there as it was before. Your weakest point in the pool is now your strongest! Yeah, it’s kind of good this happened, really.’”

And, as Raymond is nodding at me knowingly, I’m bobbing my head in agreement right along with him. Yeah, my head thinks he’s right, when I know in my heart that somehow it seems like he is fitting a square patch into a round hole. And I believe him in spite of myself. As far as we know, both patch and the pool still stand fast today.

So, there was Raymond persuading me, right there on his deck, just like he had done when he had calmed the irate pool owner with the hole in his liner some twenty years ago. My brother looked at me just as serious, just as sober and well-intentioned as could be. Why? Because you could see it in his eye. He fully believed what he was saying. Raymond studied me knowingly, wholly confident in his unassailable logic. Now, that’s the beauty of Raymond, I thought. That’s why he can sell anything to anybody, anytime. He can take a negative and turn it around into a positive; a weakness into a strength—double strength in this case. The man has sold more stuff and made more money than I’ll ever make in three lifetimes. Where all of those earnings have gone is anybody’s guess. Yet, I know, he has had a lot of high old times off his earnings, too.

* * *

“Good morning, Ray, Mickey.”

“Hey! Good morning, Joyce,” I replied somewhat surprised as my sister-in-law stepped out onto the deck in her pink housecoat when it was after ten.

“Ray, do you know what time it is, Honey? I thought you would be gone by now.” She was more surprised than angry.

“Yeah, me too. It’s that damn cell phone. Can’t get it to charge. But that’s all right. Gives me more time to enjoy this great day with my brother Michael here.” He extended a hand toward me cavalierly and we both smiled. “You just get up?” he asked his wife.

“I’ve been reading,” she answered rather matter of fact. Then Joyce produced the cell phone, which she had been holding in the palm of her hand, unnoticed by us.

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“Damn it, Honey, I was charging that thing.” Raymond was only slightly miffed.

“No you weren’t, Honey,” countered Joyce gently. “Did you press the green button here before you entered the programming sequence?” She tilted the face of the phone his way so he could see it better and pointed to a spot on the cell’s console that I could not see. His face blanked out, but she continued patiently.

“Now Honey, I’ve told you this before.” She spoke with a sort of beneficent reticence. “You have to start your sequence with the green spot, remember?”

“Green for go!” I chirped, which drew a smirk from Raymond.

“Yes, that’s right,” she agreed like a patient schoolteacher with an earnest, but somewhat dull student, “‘Green for go.’ I’ll take and put this back in the charger now, OK Honey?”

Raymond kind of grunted and turned back to his scenic view. The house phone rang again. He asked Joyce not to answer it and to take the annoying thing back into the kitchen with her.

“But why? That might be Patrick calling about my hair appointment.” Genuine concern etched itself across her face.

“No, it’s the office, trust me,” he asserted strongly.

“Could be the office?” She suggested mildly. “Then you should answer it, Honey.” The phone rang for the fourth time.

“Nah, I’m on the cell phone now.”

“But it’s not working yet, Dear. I have to charge it.”

“Yeah. Gee! That’s too bad. Have to get it charged before I can leave then. My first appointment is at three today—”

“No,” I corrected him, “your first appointment is at two, remember? That little six-hundred dollar job?” The phone rang for the sixth time. Joyce stood there perplexed. He handed her his empty coffee cup.

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that,” he said to me. Then he directed his attention to his wife of forty plus years. “Forget about this phone, Honey,” he motioned to the ringing house phone on the little plastic patio table to distinguish it from the cell phone in her hand. He held up his coffee cup. “Would you mind bringing me a refill, Dear?” He grinned pleasantly.

“No, I don’t mind, *Dear*. I’m just confused.”

Shaking her head, Joyce took the empty coffee mug from her husband, but she left the wall phone on the table still ringing. After his wife had re-entered the house, she turned back to proclaim loudly

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that it was past ten-thirty. Then she walked back to the kitchen. The phone rang repeatedly between us, as my brother and I sat in silence, ignoring its annoying but persistent noise. Finally, after what seemed like the one hundredth ring, the phone rang silent.

Relaxing with both feet now slung over the arm of the vacant, white plastic chair, Raymond leaned back in his seat and stretched deeply to recite, “Not a cloud in the sky, Michael. It sure is a *beee-u-tee-ful* day!” If he could believe that, given his condition, who was I to argue? No, as Anthony had already learned, there was no arguing with Raymond.

“Yes,” I replied in total agreement with him. “Can’t disagree with you on this morning, Ray.”

~ Epilogue ~

Now I seem to recall there was a popular song some thirty years ago, when I was still a teenager. I believe Ray Stevens performed the tune, which he called “Everything Is Beautiful.” The first couple of verses went something like this:

Everything is beautiful in its own way,

Llike a starry summer’s night, or a snow covered winter’s day

Or, you might substitute—“Like my brother here this morning, Ray.”

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