

Memory Lane



Jack Thompson

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A Short Story

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“Good morning, sunshine.” A large black man in a green nurse’s aide uniform pulled the window curtains back and the morning sun splashed the room with bright light. The gray in his hair put him on the north side of fifty. “Time to rise and shine, George.”

The old man blinked several times trying to get his eyes to work. With some effort he raised himself onto his elbows, cleared his throat, and with a raspy whisper said, “You are going to catch hell, Sam. I think Mary wanted to sleep in today.” He looked toward the bed just to his right. “She likes to get her beauty sleep.”

“No, George, I’m sure your wife wants you up and about. You know what the physical therapist said about exercising those bionic knees of yours.”

“They’re not bionic, they’re titanium.”

“Right you are, George.” George Warner had undergone a double knee replacement six months back. He thought it was a waste of time and money for a man of his age, but his wife had insisted. “Can’t expect me to give up dancing just because your knees stopped working,” Mary had said. His first instinct was to point out that they had not been out dancing in more than a decade, but George knew better than to argue with his wife. What Mary wanted, she got. So, against his better judgement, he went through with the operation.

“Come on, even the six million dollar man has to practice using his toys,” said Sam, watching George closely.

“The surgery was expensive — too expensive if you ask me,” said George. “God knows, I certainly couldn’t have afforded it without Medicare. But, you know darn well it was nowhere near six million dollars.”

Right after the surgery, Sam had called him the six million dollar man, which annoyed George to no end. Sam had explained to him about the old television show called The Six Million Dollar Man, where a man’s body was reconstructed after a terrible accident, giving him super powers. George had never seen the show, not being much for watching TV, and he had gotten a good laugh at the time. However, the next time Sam called him the six million dollar man, George reacted as if he had never heard of it. It was not the first time Sam had noticed evidence of memory loss, and ever since then, Sam had used it as a barometer to measure George’s memory.

“My mistake, George. I’m sure you are right.” Today wasn’t going to be a good day.

“You can ask Mary if you don’t believe me.”

“No sense waking her if she wants to sleep. But you need to walk, young man. Doctor’s orders.”

Sam helped George get dressed and led him outside into the large courtyard behind the building. There were benches, two shuffleboards and several concrete tables for checkers or chess. Beyond the courtyard was the white sand of the beach and the Gulf of Mexico. “Looks like you are walking pretty good today. What do you say, let’s go for the far end of the shuffleboard.”

George let out a sigh. “If we must, we must.” Halfway to their destination, Sam let go of George’s arm.

“Show me what you got, George.” George wobbled a couple times with Sam staying close just in case, but he made it to the opposite side on his own, sitting down on the bench there that faced the water. “Nice going, George. You da man.”

Mary had been right, as usual. He could walk again. Still, the whole thing seemed like much ado about nothing. “Big deal,” said George. “It’s not like I have anywhere to go.”

“I don’t know about that. You said yourself, Mary likes to walk the dog out here. Soon you’ll be walking with her.” George smiled and took a breath of the fresh air.

“Maybe so.” It was true. Mary loved that dog and walked him religiously every day. What IS

his name, Lucky? No, Lucky was their first dog, a beautiful Aussie/Lab mix. Lambchop? No, that was number two, their Shepherd/spaniel mix. He could not remember. Good thing Mary was so generous with pet nicknames. Gemmy, shmoo pie, bubbie, Mr. Handsome, she had dozens. He could get away with forgetting, for now. But Christmas was in three days. He needed to remember. In any case, walking did get him outside twice a day for his physical therapy.

After a short rest, Sam took George back inside, dropping him off in his room for a nap.

Well after lunch, Sam found George in the day room where most of the people who were mobile congregated during the day. He was watching two men playing gin rummy. "Time for round two, George."

"Already?"

"We don't want those knees to get rusty, do we?"

"Titanium doesn't rust. I should know, I used to be a design engineer. Had my own firm. Did I tell you about that?"

"You did."

"And another thing, these titanium knees are supposed to be nearly indestructible. Last for a thousand years, said the brochure. If so, then I figure when I'm dead and gone, all that'll be left of me will be these damn knees. And yet, I can't kneel on them, or bump them into anything. Makes no sense."

"All I know is we have got to exercise those knees if you're going to get your money's worth."

George got up. "Don't get me started on the cost. Let's go before I change my mind."

This time George walked to the farthest bench at the edge of the beach and back again before sitting down.

"Not bad for an old white man," said Sam. "Want to go again?"

"I'd rather sit here for a while if you don't mind."

"Want your hat? Sun's cooking this time of day."

"No, it feels good."

"Okay, George, I'll leave you to it. Buzz if you need me."

George dozed on the bench for a while until a shadow moved in front of him, interrupting the sun.

"There you are, Mama. Come sit next to me," said George, patting the bench seat. Even though they never had children, the succession of dogs they owned had been a successful substitute for Mary. Like many couples with children do, they had begun calling each other mama and papa. The way Mary treated the dogs, it was certainly appropriate. To George, a dog was still a dog. He loved the dogs, no doubt, but more for Mary than for himself.

"What are you doing, Papa?"

"Just getting a little sun. Where is your gemmy?" said George, looking for the dog. He still couldn't remember the dog's name. Was it Hank? No, that was their third dog, an energetic Weimaraner/beagle mix. Not Mary's favorite, but she loved him just the same and cried just as hard when he finally went after 11 years. Brody? Nope, he was their fourth. A big Rhodesian/Lab mix that thought he was a lap dog. He had been a big, lovable handful. They always got mutts. Mary said they were better pets. Their decades together were marked by dogs as much as anything else. Now they had a Lab/golden named . . . Think George, think.

"Our little bubbie is napping in the room," said Mary. "But don't try to change the subject. You are supposed to be out here exercising, not sitting on your backside."

"Already walked to the picnic bench and back. I've done enough walking for today."

Mary gave him the disapproving look that she could manifest so well.

"Enough, I say," repeated George, feeling the pressure of her withering stare.

“All right, then. You leave me no choice. I may have to go dancing with that young fellow in room 109.”

“Allen Cummins? He’s a toothless old man who can only see out of one eye — barely. But, if that’s what you want.”

Mary grabbed his arm. “Oh, Papa, you know I only have eyes for you.” George smiled. He knew the truth when he heard it. “Come on, it’s soon time for supper.”

In the cafeteria, George and Mary sat alone where they always did, the small table in the corner in front of the potted Indian rubber plant. Tuesday dinner was corned beef and cabbage, a favorite for George, and he dug right in. Mary only picked, as he knew she would. Cabbage gave her gas. Instead of eating, she talked about a movie she had watched recently in the day room. Another of those romances that didn’t interest George much. But he listened patiently until she got to the part he liked. Mary’s tellings always ended the same way. “They were lovelies, Papa,” said Mary. “Just like you and me.”

George smiled. “Just like us, Mama.” When they were finished, George looked at the clock and stood up.

“Coming, Mama? Road Runner starts in ten minutes.” George had seen all the cartoons several times over, but he still laughed out loud when Wile E. Coyote got clobbered. And, somehow it comforted him to know that despite the coyote’s attempts to hurt the road runner, the road runner always came out unscathed. Mee-meep.

“You go ahead, Papa. I’m going to wrap up some tidbits for our Mr. Moobley.” It was another of her nicknames. George was getting desperate. Mary would expect him to wrap a gift for the dog and put his actual name on the card. George watched her carefully select pieces of meat for the dog. How Mary loved that dog. He dreaded the day that would inevitably come. The dog was nearly ten and showing lots of gray hair. He slept more than he used to. George didn’t know what to make of God and Heaven, but the way he saw it, making dogs’ lives so short was a cruel trick to play on someone like Mary. He hoped that in Mary’s Heaven the dogs would live forever.

George ran into Sam in the hallway and stopped him. George looked back over his shoulder to make sure Mary hadn’t followed.

“I need a gift for the dog,” said George. “Mary says Rachel Ray’s beef flavor soup bones are his favorite. Could you get me a bag? I’ve got cash in the top drawer next to my bed. Take whatever you need.”

Sam nodded. “I’ll take care of it right away.” Sam continued down the hall away from George’s room, chuckling to himself.

“What about the money?” said George.

“Oh, yeah, the money. I’ll get it later, after I know how much I spend.” Truth was, the cash in George’s drawer had run out years ago, but George seemed to think there was an endless supply. Sam didn’t mind spending his own money. It was Christmas after all.

When Sam neared the entrance, a young Latino man approached.

“The woman at the nurses’ desk told me to come find you. I’m Raphael.”

“You’re the new orderly?”

“That would be me. I started yesterday.”

“I’m Sam, the nurse’s aide for this wing. Good to have you aboard. I can really use your help.” Sam showed Raphael the cleaning closet. “Bucketful of hot water and a capful of disinfectant, no more than that. Start at the end down here and work your way up. Mop the floors in each room. Comprende?”

“Yes, boss.”

Sam looked up and down the hall. “You better skip room 101. Mrs. Perkins has some special

needs I'll have to tell you about. And, if you get down to 119 at the end of the hall, wait for me outside before you go in. I've got to run an errand but I'll be back shortly. You got all that?"

"Yes, boss."

"Sam will do. What do I call you?"

"Raphi."

Sam left and Raphi began his work. Meanwhile George settled into his bed, cranking up the head so he could sit up and watch his cartoons. It wasn't long before the road runner raced up, let out a loud mee-meep that startled the coyote into triggering his trap that dropped an anvil on his own head. George let out a howl.

With the enthusiasm of a new employee, Raphi efficiently finished mopping all the rooms and now stood outside of 119 with his bucket and mop. Sam had still not returned.

After waiting fifteen minutes, Raphi's curiosity won out and he peered into the room. The handle of his mop tipped over and knocked against the door.

"Sam, is that you?" said a voice from inside. "Come in."

Raphi ducked away from the door's window. He wasn't supposed to go in until Sam got back.

"Sam?" said the voice again, louder this time. "I need your help. Please come in."

Raphi rubbed his face and considered his options. Sam had been clear. Wait for him outside the room. Raphi looked down the empty hallway. Not a great way to start the new job, disobeying the new boss. On the other hand, what if there was something wrong, and he did nothing. That could be even worse. Raphi pushed open the door and stepped in.

"You're not Sam, not by a long shot," said George.

"Sam is out of the building. My name is Raphael."

George squinted. "Haven't seen you before."

"I'm new, just started as an orderly yesterday. I-I just..."

"You just heard the old man yelling and came running."

"Are you okay? Do you need me to call the nurse?"

"No need for that. You'll do. Come over here where I can see you better." George grabbed Raphi's sleeve. "Son, have you seen a big yellow dog out in the hallway? He was here in the room, but he must have gotten out."

"A dog? I thought there was a strict no pet policy in this place," said Raphi.

"What?" said George, sounding confused. "What the devil are you talking about?"

Sam had been delayed in traffic with all the Christmas shoppers. When he saw the bucket and mop outside of George's room he raced down the hallway and stepped into the room.

"I'll take care of this," said Sam. He grabbed Raphi by the arm. "Go replace the towels in the bathroom."

"But I did that yesterday," said Raphi.

"Well I guess you are going to do it again today."

Raphi shrugged and followed orders, walking into the bathroom to collect the towels.

"New guy, huh, Sam?" said George.

"Yes he is."

"You'll have to groove him in. I never liked having to break in the new engineers. I used to run a design engineering firm, you know."

"So you said. What was it, a hundred man outfit?"

"One hundred twenty-three at our peak. And every new guy we hired came out of college thinking he knew everything. But real life is not always according to the book, is it?"

"True dat. Not always by the book. Don't worry, George, Raphi will learn the ropes around here soon enough. Here's the soup bones for Barnard."

“Barnard, yes, that’s it, Barnard. Don’t know why I can’t seem to remember that dog’s name. Thank you for the soup bones. You should know, Mary would have my head if I didn’t get a Christmas gift for Barnard. By the way, have you seen him? He must have snuck out into the hallway.”

“Probably went looking for Mary. I’ll tell her to round him up and bring him back to the room.”

“Thanks, Sam. You’re the best.”

When Raphi came out of the bathroom, Sam took him out into the hall, closing the door behind him.

“I’m sorry, boss,” said Raphi. “He was yelling and—”

“It’s okay.”

“I didn’t mean to upset him. He was talking about a dog. I just thought—”

“That it’s weird that George thinks he has a dog?”

“Well, yeah.”

“That’s not the half of it. He also thinks his wife Mary is here as well.”

“What?”

“Five years into his retirement, his wife got the big C and passed away. Pancreas, I think. Nasty business. That was about ten years back. George took it hard. After forty years of marriage to Mary and the four dogs they raised together, I don’t think George could conceive of life any other way. It wasn’t long after she died that he ended up here at the Daycrest Nursing Home. Then one day, after his roommate passed on, I noticed George talking to the empty bed in his room. It was Mary. After seeing how happy George was, I decided to just play along. A couple months later they apparently got another dog. Mary named him Barnard. That’s why I wanted to talk to you before you went into his room.”

“You want me to play along. Do you think that’s healthy?”

“What healthy? The man’s eighty-six years old. Health isn’t really the big issue. You’ll see. You’ll get used to it.”

“I sure didn’t mean to upset him.”

“No harm, no foul. Look.” The two men peeked through the door’s glass window.

George was smiling and nodding at the empty bed next to his. Mary was telling him he’d have to do more exercise tomorrow. Barnard was stretched out on the floor between them sleeping.

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About Jack

Jack Thompson is an international bestselling author finding voices in many genres. In addition to his popular Raja Williams mystery series, Jack writes science fiction, political thrillers, paranormal romance, children's stories and fairy tales.

According to Jack, whether reading or writing, what makes a story great is how well it communicates to the reader. Whether presenting him with a hero he wishes he could be or a villain he chooses to hate, the characters must relate to the reader on a personal level. A reader will leave a good story in an improved condition. He may have learned something new about the world or himself, or simply been well entertained.

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