

Neighbor Jack

Jack was sitting on the stone edge of his fishpond, again, and for the last time. This time his pant legs were rolled up, and he had removed his socks and shoes. He remembered the many times he was too drunk, or too hung over, to know if his shoes and socks were still on. It had been two years since he was in that condition. It felt good. He looked up at the little house where he had lived for as long as he could remember. He finally had the good sense to sell it. He was older now, ravaged by time and alcohol. He could no longer keep up the yard and repairs on the house. In this neighborhood, everyone kept nice houses and nice yards. The backyards were big, and turned into woods that ended at a small creek. It was a nice place to raise kids. If only his dad hadn't been a drunk, his childhood could have been nice. This morning, he would walk through the house with the people who bought it, showing them where the water shut off and how the fuse box was marked. Then he would give them the key.

As a boy he hadn't had time for the woods or friends. He was an only child. His father had usually been on the warpath after school. Jack would have to get home and help his dad with some chore or other. Help was the wrong word. Jack did the chores with his father supervising, and criticizing. After dinner, he helped his mother clean up, then retreated to his room to do homework, read, or work on his model ships.

As long as he stayed in his room and stayed quiet, he was safe from his father. Before he went to sleep, he would put all his models and paints in a large flat box that he hid under his bed. In a drunken mood, his father could have easily demolished everything. He had done it before. Jack's dad had been a heavy drinker, and a mean

drunk for as long as Jack could remember. Many times he had come home in a drunken rage. He threw things and broke other things, hit Jack and his mom, and then would pass out. Sometimes he would wake up before he was sober and cause more trouble before Jack and his mom could get out of the house and out of his way.

For someone so bullied, Jack's mother had an ornery sense of humor. Once, when Jack was twelve, the usual drunken rage had been in full force before his father passed out on the bedroom floor. There was a big oval braided rug on the floor, conveniently right under his unconscious father. Jack had crawled under his parents' bed and pulled on the rug. With his mom pushing from the other side they positioned his dad under the middle of the bed. The bed was low enough to the floor that there wasn't shoulder room to roll over. They knew they could easily hear him when he started to wake up, and they could run from the house before he got downstairs. He never caused trouble outside in front of neighbors.

This time he slept for hours. It was evening when he awoke. It was dark outside, and the lights were off in the room. Jack had closed the door as an added precaution. When his dad tried to stretch out his arms and hit the bottom of the bed, his eyes flew open to total darkness. He could feel the wooden slats above him and a hard surface with a bit of padding under him. He began to scream. "Let me out, I'm not dead! Help, help, I'm not dead! Get me out of this coffin!" He began to cry, and if his head didn't hurt enough from the drink, this live burial was splitting his head open. Suddenly, he knew he would vomit. "Help! Help! I'm going to be sick. Get me out," he screamed. Then the booze from the night before, and the meatloaf he ate when he got home, came up. He almost choked to death. The choking, the taste and the smell made him vomit again.

Then he passed out, again. Jack and his mom pulled him out from under the bed, and down the hallway to the bathroom where they positioned him on the floor in front of the toilet and closed the door with the lights left on. They cleaned up the bedroom and hung the washed rug over the clothesline, then went to bed.

Jack's dad woke up, took in his surroundings, and thanked God he was alive. He stayed in the bathroom for an hour or so. Jack guessed his father was contemplating his life, like Jack was now. His father had taken off his soiled clothes and took a hot shower. He put on his pajamas and slipped quietly into bed next to his wife, who was lying with her back toward him. She had said that she pretended to be asleep and that his father, being ever so gentle, kissed the back of her head and wrapped his arm over her shoulder, still thanking God under his breath. His father didn't get drunk again after that, but within six months he died of a heart attack, so who knows how long his sobriety would have lasted. Jack and his mom both gave a sigh of relief after the funeral. Jack made a vow to never drink. By the time he was twenty he had forgotten his vow. Now he was the cause of her worry and shame.

He'd had some bad mornings at the fishpond. He remembered an especially bad one a few years back. It was barely daylight. His head had hurt like a son of a bitch. It was all he could do not to vomit into the pond. Why had he drunk that much? He had thought he was having a good time until it was too late to stop. That wasn't unusual. Now his day was shot, and it was looking like a beautiful day. Maybe he would just go to sleep by the pond, on the grass. *Please God*, he thought, *let Mom be up*. He could really use a hot cup of his mother's coffee, the way she made it for him when he was hung over. He didn't know what was different about it. It tasted sort of like Christmas,

cinnamon or nutmeg, and heavy cream. He hadn't gone into the house when he got home at dawn. He didn't want to wake her. Maybe he should have.

When she awoke, Jack's mother shuffled to the kitchen where the window over the sink looked out to the back yard and the fishpond. She saw Jack sitting there looking weak and sort of "green around the gills." She started the coffee, went for her robe, and when the coffee was done added cream, cinnamon and brown sugar. She walked out to the fishpond with the coffee in the big mug Jack loved. He saw her coming and was both happy about the coffee and ashamed for sitting there feeling so useless. *Thank you, God*, was all he could think. For this little blessing, Jack promised God he wouldn't sleep all day. He would get up after lunch, cut the grass and carry the laundry upstairs.

Jack didn't like remembering that particular hangover it reminded him had always lived with his mother except when he served in the Navy. Their house was small compared to others in the neighborhood, two bedrooms and a bath upstairs, an "almost" bathroom in the basement and just enough space for him and his parents. And for so long now it was just he and his mother. The basement bathroom was a concrete block enclosure divided into a shower and toilet, much like the one in every other house on the street. These bathrooms were for the men to use after cutting grass, tending the garden, and other dirty jobs. It was great on hangover morning. He could stand in the hot spray until the water heater was empty. It would help his headache, and there would be no messy bathroom to tidy up. His mother handed him the mug of coffee and asked, "Will you be alright? Can I bring you some toast?"

“I’ll be fine, Mom. I don’t need any food right now, just your wonderful coffee,” he said.

His mother smiled a little and said, “You want me to sit out here awhile?”

“No,” said Jack. “I’ll be in soon.”

Jack sat there in the morning sun, just like today, staring at the goldfish trying to eat the hairs on his legs. Just how far had he sunk? As far as his father? Hadn’t he sworn he would never drink? He said he would never be like his dad. He didn’t start drinking until after he went into the Navy. In the Navy, Jack made friends without drinking. He was the fun guy on the ship, telling wild stories and joking around. He didn’t drink even when their ship was scuttled and the men were so bored. There was no place to buy booze, but someone always had some hidden on the ship. It wasn’t until two years into the war that he started to drink. It was after he got that letter from Nancy. She got married to some schoolteacher who wasn’t even in the service, an eye problem or something kept him out. He had known Nancy since junior high school. Her cousin lived next door to Jack, and Nancy came to stay every summer. When he was ready to leave for the Navy, he told her he loved her and only her. He asked her to wait for him. Her response was “Oh, Jack, you are so gallant.” Then she said, with a little giggle. “I love you, too.” He took that to mean she would wait for him and marry him after the war. She promised to write, which she did once a month or so.

Her letters were filled with things about her daily life, her cousin, and other people Jack knew. Her letters weren’t romantic. Jack believed that was because of her youth and modesty. A sultry, steamy letter could only be written by a sultry, steamy girl. Nancy wasn’t like that. The day he got his “Dear John” letter his ship was in port in

Hawaii. He went with his buddies to a local bar and got rip roaring drunk. He didn't remember how he got back on the ship. Thank God for good friends. Those good friends made sure he had drinking companions from then on, and on, and on. He had planned to have "Nancy" tattooed on his forearm while in Hawaii. Her letter arrived just in time to stop him from that mistake. He got a tattoo on his right forearm with an anchor and "USS Maine" written over it. On his left forearm he got a heart decorated with a swirling banner that said "Emma."

But that was years ago. Jack's mind wandered to the time he built the fishpond he was enjoying that morning. When he had started the fishpond, it was one of those hung over days. He didn't feel too bad, just a bit foggy. He wanted some pleasant place to sit and recover or just think. It was summer, about eight years ago. Their driveway ran downhill on the right side of the house, making a curve into a basement garage door. He never pulled his car into the basement, so that concrete pad in front of the door was used more like a patio. Jack chose a spot for the fishpond just beyond the concrete pad. He used wooden sticks and string to lay out the shape of the pond, got in the middle of the string circle, and started to dig and dig and dig. He had to stop for the first day; he wasn't in good enough shape for all that digging.

The next day, he called his friend, Russell who had access to a backhoe. Russell made about two shovels into the ground when liquid began to ooze from the hole; foul smelling liquid. Then, suddenly, a flood of soapy water mixed with human waste violently poured out of the hole in the sewer line. Jack ran to the basement and hit the stop button on the washing machine. "Hey Mom, don't flush the damned toilet or run the water," he yelled up the stairs.

“What?” His mom yelled back.

“Hell’s bells, don’t run the damn water. That fool Russell broke the sewer line.”

When he got back outside, he could see the soapy sewage running toward the neighbor’s guesthouse where Ann Stewart lived with her little girl. He took off running, shovel in hand, trying to get ahead of the floating turds, but slipped and fell face first into the streaming sewage. It wasn’t very deep, but had enough momentum to push up over his shoulders on to his back. Jack’s torso made a dam with a diversion around the side of his body, saving Ann’s front yard. He spent the rest of that day scrubbing himself and the yard with the garden hose. The next day was spent getting new pipe and making repairs. He picked a different spot for the fishpond, scaled back the size, and dug it himself with a shovel.

At that time, he had wondered why so much soapy water was rushing out of the sewer pipe. This happened right after his mom got her new automatic washer and dryer set. The washer had an electric pump to send the water to the sewer line. Like everyone else in the neighborhood, Jack’s mother had used an electric wash tub with a ringer bolted on top, and hung her laundry on a line in the back yard to dry. She was getting older and tired of the heavy work, so she had bought a new washer/dryer set from Sears. It was a gas dryer, so she called a plumber to run the gas line to the dryer’s new spot in her basement. Jack convinced her he could do the rest of the setup, and he did a pretty good job of plugging in the electric cord and sliding the dryer into place. He remembered being proud of that. What an ass he was! He didn’t read the instructions since his confidence was high and higher with each beer. He didn’t know what the

round hole in the back of the dryer was for, except a place for the hot air to get out, maybe. Oh, what a big ass he was!

Then about six months later, on laundry day, smoke began to pour up the basement stairs. Jack's mom called the Ashland fire department and ran outside, screaming for help. Mr. MacNagle from next door ran over and opened the basement garage door from the outside. He saw the dryer on fire and turned on the outside hose, fought his way through the smoke, and doused the dryer. A bit later, the firemen showed up and dragged anything burned out onto the driveway. They said the fire had started in the lint trap. When they asked Jack's mother when she last emptied it, she didn't know what they were talking about. She didn't know there was a lint trap to be emptied. Jack didn't either, since he hadn't read the instructions. What an ass he was!! Her homeowners insurance paid for a new dryer, but Jack's mom was always afraid of it, and she continued to hang most of her laundry in the back yard.

Jack had many fishpond meditations over the years. It was surprising he could remember so many hangovers. Once, on a Sunday afternoon, he was sitting by his fishpond, as usual, drinking a few beers and smoking and watching Bonnie and George Hanstein in their back yard two doors up. The siblings were both in high school, about three years apart, and were known to fight with a vengeance. Bonnie had put up a target and was practicing her archery skills. George was using an axe to cut some small trees into firewood for a bonfire later that night. Suddenly George felt a sharp, terrible pain in his left shoulder. It took a few seconds for his brain to understand there was an arrow stuck in his body. Then, in a few seconds more he got angry and rushed Bonnie, hitting her on the side of her head with the flat side of the axe. Bonnie hit the ground in a

daze as blood dripped from her head. Jack saw it happen, and was frozen in his lawn chair. He tried to yell, but all that came out was beer and a noise like “uh, uh” as he watched George, holding his right hand on his bleeding shoulder, use his foot to nudge Bonnie. She began to scream, “What the hell is the matter with you? Are you crazy?” As she rolled over and pushed herself up she saw the arrow sticking out of George’s shoulder. By that time Jack was in motion, but wobbly. He took one good step, and the second went into the fishpond causing him to fall forward, half in the pond and half out. He smacked his chest on the stone edge of the pond and his face on the lawn. The pain in his chest was so severe, all he could do was lie there trying to breath.

Jack’s mother saw him from her kitchen window, wiped her hands on her apron, and scooted out the back door, down the four concrete steps and across the concrete pad to the pond. She said she thought Jack was drunk and passed out. Or was he having a heart attack? She lifted Jack’s head, trying to get one hand under his shoulder to help him up. He was too heavy, so she instinctively looked around for help. Then she saw Bonnie bleeding from her head, tee shirt soaked with blood and George even bloodier with an arrow sticking out of his shoulder. She fell backward in shock, and then couldn’t get up. Her round, short body wouldn’t allow her to sit straight up, so she just rolled from side to side trying to get enough momentum going to get solidly on her side. Jack chuckled when he thought about it now, but at the time he was hurting too bad to see the humor.

Finally Mrs. Hanstein heard the yelling and came out onto her back porch. She said the scene made her think of a natural disaster. She ran to her kids first, looked at them for a moment, then ran across Jack’s yard to the MacNagel’s guesthouse to get

Ann Stewart. Ann was a nurse, not the kind that worked in an emergency room, but the kind that worked in a doctor's office. But Ann remained calm and called for an ambulance while Mrs. Hanstein held her dishcloth against Bonnie's head. On the phone to the ambulance company, she said to send more than one ambulance, as there were four people down, two wounded, two heart attacks.

Jack's neighborhood was in a city without police or fire or ambulance service, so help had to come from Ashland, the nearest incorporated city. It took a half hour for them to show up with stretchers. In those days, that's about all the ambulance people did: load people on stretchers and transport them to the hospital. Jack and his mother, although bruised and hurting, had regained enough composure to wave off overtures of help and slipped red-faced into their basement. Bonnie and George went to the hospital, with their mother following in her car. Bonnie's concussion was mild. George's wound was in soft tissue. His shoulder bone had stopped the arrowhead. He had a great shoulder cast and sling for weeks and weeks. During his recuperation, he often sat next to Jack by the fishpond, talking and laughing about the incident.

There were some good times, or sort of good times, around the fishpond. Jack used to like for the neighbor boys to stop by and talk. He always tried to have a new story or something interesting to show off. A few years back, after another night on the town, Jack brought home a young bobcat in a wire cage. He bought it off someone in a bar. Word spread up and down the street that the boys should come see the bobcat. According to fifteen-year-old Bobo Anderson, Jack had bragged that he caught the bobcat by himself. Jack didn't remember much about it. He only knew the story as Bobo retold it. He said Jack told the crowd that he threw a net over it, followed by a big

canvas drop cloth, rolled the bobcat up in the canvas, and shoved it into the cage. The boys “oohed” and “aahed” as he told his tale. More and more exaggerated details came out with each new arrival to his audience, according to Bobo.

Jack was finally talked into picking up the bobcat and holding it in the air for a better look. During Jack’s show and tell, Mrs. Anderson put supper on the table. She called Bobo home the way all mothers in the neighborhood did. She walked outside, cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled “Bobo, dinnertime!” He went home, face red, still laughing, tears running down his cheeks. He told his father, Clyde, the story of everyone gathering around the bobcat and how Jack said he caught it and then he said, “When Jack reached in to grab the bobcat by the back of the neck, that little thing bit the ever lovin’ shit out of him! I mean, it went crazy! Tore his hand up! I thought I would die laughing!” Clyde began to laugh, and had to get up from the table to pour a shot of bourbon into his coffee. The more Bobo talked, the more they both laughed until they were both crying. Dinner was postponed while Clyde walked up to Jack’s to see the bobcat. Jack was holding his wounded hand in the fishpond, little swirls of blood attracting the goldfish. He remembered that part very well.

“What the hell happened to you?” asked Clyde. “I hear you have a Bobcat in a cage.”

“Well,” said Jack, “I did, but I let him go after the boys left. No need to keep the thing locked up any longer. Caught my hand on the cage door when I let it go.”

“Hmm,” said Clyde. “That cage sure did a number on your hand. You should be more careful.” At that point Clyde couldn’t contain his laughter any longer. “You dumbass, get your hand out of that dirty water, you want to die of blood poisoning?”

Clyde turned and headed home, still laughing. Jack remembered being a little embarrassed. He was sure the boys believed him. Clyde didn't matter. When the neighborhood boys would gather around for his stories, alcohol made Jack feel admired, part of a group, like it was in the Navy.

Jack got up from the side of the fishpond in expectation of the new owner's arrival, picked up his shoes and socks, and wished his mom was still around. He thought about those mornings he went into the basement for a hot shower. He would throw on a clean tee shirt and pajama pants from the laundry and slowly climb the stairs. *Why did I drink so much?* How often had he asked himself that while his brain pounded and swirled with every step. Many times his mother baked early in the morning. Was it just for him? He loved it when she had just taken a lemon pie from the oven, and the whole kitchen smelled like meringue, sugar and lemon. Even hung over he could eat lemon pie. It was perfect with another cup of his mother's coffee. But the lemon fragrance, just for an instant, made him think of Nancy. She often smelled like lemon. She told him she stole the lemon soap from her older sister's dresser drawer. There was a whole bag of yellow, lemon shaped soaps her sister used to scent her clothes in the drawers. He thought about Nancy's brown eyes, brown hair, and skin that always looked like she had just been out in the sun for an hour. Her smile, her laughter, her jokes; how had he misinterpreted her friendship for love? Why did he think she could love him?

Jack would take his coffee and pie to the parlor, sit down by the front window, and look across the street. He remembered when the house across the street got a new family, the Kempers. It was clear they were not from Jack's part of the country. They

had two kids, a boy about twelve and a girl about eight. The little girl was very friendly and talkative. She said her mother didn't know how to cook, so they ate baloney sandwiches and canned soup or Chef-Boyardee for dinner. They also slept in the nude, the whole family. The parents spent a lot of their time indoors nude, as well. After these rumors got around, Jack got interested in befriending the new neighbors. He had his mother make breakfast muffins that he could take over there at the crack of dawn, hoping to catch a glimpse through the glass in the door of Mrs. Kemper without her robe. When that didn't work, as she was always in her robe, he tried to sneak over there at night and peek in their bedroom window. It took a lot of liquid courage to go on these missions, which he tried over and over.

Finally it was warm enough outside for the Kempers to open their bedroom window and leave the curtain open to let the breeze in. One night, Jack had been out for a few drinks and got home about midnight. He could see the Kempers' bedroom light was still on, so he got the bright idea to take a peek at Mrs. Kemper. After several more stiff drinks from the bottle of Wild Turkey he had in the car, he crept across the street and to the side of the Kempers' house. The bedroom window was a little too high to see in, so he went around to the back of the house where there was a second window, higher up, but visible from far back in their yard. He kept backing up, in the dark, straining his neck, ready to stop at the spot with the best view, taking a swig from his bottle every step or so. The lightning bugs were getting in his face and landing on his shirt so much he had to keep batting at them, causing him to not pay attention to what was underfoot. The dew had settled on the grass, causing Jack to slip, lose balance and

fall backward. He hit his head on a tree and passed out. Because of the liquor and the blow to the head, Jack lay there all night.

The next morning, the Kempers' dog found him and alerted the household with unrelenting barking. The Kempers called the county sheriff, but before he arrived Jack woke up, cold and wet, with a terrible headache and a shirt covered in dog pee. He crawled part of the way up the Kempers' back yard, until he could get his feet under him, then he scurried, home shame-faced. He could hardly remember how he ended up like that. The sheriff knocked on his mother's door and asked to see Jack. He supposed his appearance had been enough punishment. He hadn't broken any laws, so he was warned to sober up and stay out of other people's yards.

Jack remembered how embarrassed he was the next day. Worse, his mother was embarrassed. He hadn't thought about her reaction to his antics. She was always there, always loved him and taken care of him, and now she was hurt. She was sitting at the kitchen table, coffee cup in one hand, a handkerchief in the other, quietly crying. He was too ashamed to speak to her, and slipped outside before she saw him. He hated himself for that. It was worse than the time he upset Mr. Norton.

The Norton family lived three houses down the street from Jack. When the oldest daughter was getting married, her mother decided to have the reception at home. Mr. Norton brought in cases of booze days ahead, and set up a bar on the kitchen counter. Mrs. Norton hired a black lady she knew from Cerson's Department Store to help the day of the wedding. This lady was the elevator operator at Cerson's, and Mrs. Norton had made her acquaintance when she was there to pick up the drapery work she did. Her name was Jane, and she came to the house in the afternoon and stayed there

when the family left for the church. She was doing all the last minute things, laying out the food, putting sherbet in the punch, stacking the clean glasses, and putting the ice and mixers out with the booze.

Although Jack wasn't invited to the wedding or reception, he heard about it from someone and knew there would be good bourbon on hand. He decided to stop by the house for some free refreshment, and was pleasantly surprised to find Jane there, alone. She was a nice looking woman to drink with. He said he was a friend of the family and just wanted a quick drink. It wasn't his first drink of the day, and he knew Jane could smell it on him. She did her best to not insult him, but refused to have a drink with him. She must have been afraid of the drunken white man at the door. He didn't like to think of himself as scary or capable of assault. He was that day. He wouldn't give up, pushed himself through the kitchen door and went straight to the bourbon. Jane protested, but that was the least of her problems. Jack got amorous, wanted a little kiss, and backed Jane against the cabinets, putting his hands in all the wrong places. At that moment, Mr. Norton walked through the kitchen door. From the door, he must have heard Jane's protests, "Now stop that, I have work to do. Stop that I said. I'm a married woman. Don't make me yell!"

Mr. Norton grabbed Jack by the neck of his shirt and jerked violently, causing Jack to choke and fall backwards, off balance. Mr. Norton dragged him by his shirt, Jack's feet making a futile attempt to keep up, out the kitchen door, across his side yard, across Zimmermans' back yard, across Hansteins' back yard, across MacNagels' back yard and dumped Jack into his own fishpond. The things Mr. Norton said, and the names he called Jack, were all deserved. After that, Jack felt like trash, shit, a drunk,

just like his father. Things would be different if Nancy had loved him. But that never would have happened. He wasn't worth loving, skinny, red hair and freckles. Even the maid didn't want him. The only women who paid him any attention were the bar flies he bought drinks for. They didn't look half bad in the dark bar, as long as he had plenty to drink and didn't see them too close up.

While Jack waited for the new owners, he wished he could walk to the kitchen for a cup of his mother's coffee. He looked around and could almost see her hanging sheets on the clothesline. One time he and some boys were sitting in the driveway, drinking beer and staring at the fish in the fishpond. Clean sheets on the clothesline were flapping in the breeze that day. The clothesline was about twenty feet long. It had three rows of line strung between two metal posts, with a horizontal post welded to the top of each upright post making a "T" shape. The boys were listening to one of Jack's wild stories and sharing his beer when one of the boys decided to shimmy up one of the posts and swing from the "T." Another boy, not to be outdone, climbed up the pole and attempted to stand on the "T." He ended up sitting on the "T" instead. Feeling young, Jack ran to the other end, shimmied up the other post and sat on the opposite "T." Unfortunately, over the summer wasps had made a home in the hollow metal pipe.

All the horseplay had agitated them into a fast moving swarm, flying out of both ends of the pipe and straight to Jack. They stung his arm once or twice as he flung himself off the pipe. Thinking he was safe on the ground, he exclaimed, "Damn wasps, I'll kill those sons of bitches. I'll burn 'em out!" But the wasps weren't done with Jack. As fast as he spoke, he began to yell, "shit, oh shit" and grab for his back. "Somebody help me." He yelled. "Pull off this damn shirt! Ouow! Shit!" A couple of the boys told him to

lean over, and they ripped the shirt over Jack's head. There were a dozen or more wasps on his back, which they quickly batted off with his shirt.

Jack's back was covered with giant, red welts. People didn't go to the hospital for things like that back then. Jack's mom spread a paste of baking soda all over his back, and covered it with ice-cold wet towels, while Jack lay on his stomach listening to the radio and being fed. She did that for two whole days, and when she was able to use just calamine lotion, he could sit up to eat. He did burn out the wasps later, and welded caps on the ends of the clothesline posts. Of course he decided to do that with laundry hanging on the line, and set the clothesline and one of his mom's sheets on fire as well.

For awhile Jack had watched his mother struggle with the laundry and the clothespins. He thought about the stroke she had not long after the wasp incident. She seemed to recover well at first. But then she started having trouble in little ways, keeping the house and cooking. Jack did more and more around the house for her, but his drinking made him undependable, and he knew it wasn't right. He swore he would stop drinking. He would attend AA meetings at the Salvation Army building in town. His mother deserved that much. He owed her.

His mother got weaker and less coordinated over time. They said she had several smaller strokes. With each new responsibility at home and each AA meeting, Jack thought less about drinking. A year or so after her first stroke, Jack's mother could no longer walk. She needed a wheel chair. She had cared for him until he was over middle age, and now she was old and needed his care. Their roles reversed. Jack built a ramp so he could push her wheelchair out to the driveway, where they sat by the fishpond drinking ice tea. He cooked for her and kept the house clean. He washed her

clothes and hung them on the outdoor clothesline. She said she loved the way her clothes smelled after drying outside. He went for groceries when the home nurse came to give her a bath and check her medications. He kept a daily log of every pill and what she ate to show the nurse.

Jack became a sponsor at AA. He even learned to make lemon pie and “hangover” coffee with his mother’s coaching. His blessed mother, Emma Hiller, died peacefully, of natural causes, at home with Jack holding her hand. Nobody saw much of Jack for about three months after her death. Then he listed the house for sale and moved into the Salvation Army dorm. He became an employee there, helping guys get sober, checking residents in and out, sweeping the floors, cooking, and telling wild stories to the lonely men who drifted through the doors. He was well-suited to the job. The men remarked about his compassion and great coffee. He didn’t attempt to build or repair anything without help, and he never touched another drop of alcohol.

Now he waited for the new owners. He prayed the new boy in the house would have a better life than he had. He hoped they liked the fishpond, and wouldn’t fill it in. Jack put his shoes and socks back on. It wouldn’t do for the new owners to see him with bare feet or worse, his feet in their pond.

A car pulled into the driveway. The boy was the first one out of the car. He was about five years old, skinny, had red hair and lots of freckles. “Wow,” he said, running toward Jack. “A fish pond, and lots of goldfish!” He smiled at Jack. “Is this your pond?” Jack smiled back at the boy.

“It’s yours now,” said Jack. When the parents got out of the car, he could see they were young, and the mother was very pregnant. *Thank you God, he thought. This boy won’t grow up alone. And he likes the fishpond.*