

Pole Dancing

Goodbye Dear Friend

by

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The people were loud. The music was deafening as everybody waited for the count down to midnight and the Happy New Year scream.

“Great party. Having a good time?” Jason heard a girl’s voice blast into his left ear.

“Yeah. Awesome,” he mechanically yelled while moving past a crushing press of sweating, jelled, after shaved, mascaraed, gymed, waxed bodies and toward the parking lot exit where he hoped there might be an escape from the swirling, crowded social chaos and to some welcomed fresh air. He felt like in the middle of a snow globe that had just been shaken.

Jason could never be pegged as the party type. In fact, he only showed up at this one because the company had rented a whole restaurant and his boss said, “You’re going to be there, right?” Throughout college, first at City and then State, where he majored in accounting, Jason could easily be pegged as a loner; not the loaded guns in his bedroom-pulling off the legs of flies-stalker of celebrities-pathological loner type, but just a plain guy who had a tough time talking to people and being expected to show extrovert traits.

Growing up a fatherless only child who got picked on by bullies for being a scrawny kid nobody wanted to be friends with, he felt socially like a Walkman. As a way to cope, he stayed by himself and learned to find solitude his trusted companion. Born a hundred years

earlier he'd have been a farmer happily milking cows and collecting eggs. Jason was not an alpha male.

Being a loner did have drawbacks. There were times Jason wished he had a friend as he daily checked Facebook and Craigslist. Cyberspace was easier than real life encounters. But, the people on the Internet were too often flakes or social misfits. At times, totally frustrated, he vowed to give up his hunt and resign to be lonesome for the rest of his life.

Then, two years ago, when at a low point, someone entered his life. Jason finally did establish a beachhead and found a friend that he enjoyed being with and somebody who wanted to get to know him.

But he would pay a price.

As Jason sat on a stack of tied together collapsed and flattened shipping boxes in the rear of the restaurant's car-filled parking lot hearing the grating rock music, singing and yelling inside the 40's retro-style eatery, his mind went into play back mode. He thought of his friend, Henry.

They were Woodstock and Snoopy, Butch and Sundance, Ben and Jerry, Bevus and Butthead. Henry was his wingman and very own personal Obi-Wan Kenobi. Right then, as he stared blankly at the cell phone in his right hand, Jason wanted so bad to text Henry. Problem is, his friend had been dead almost a month.

Their first meet-up took place twenty-three months before, during Jason's days at what he labeled a suck-ass desk job for a downtown company ruled by a boss who hadn't done the human evolution thing yet. He said to anybody who'd listen that he could still hear the manager's breast-beating incarnation of Godzilla even in sleep.

“Hurry up.” “Put that report on the web today.” “I want everyone in the staff room right now.” Then there was the scraping nails on the chalkboard favorite, “We’ve got to get rid of the deadwood around here.” This was Jason’s first full-time job after graduating from college and he hated it.

Lunchtime turned out to be the only burst of sunshine in a daily offering to darkness. That’s when he charged down the elevator from his sixth floor’s emotional battlefield four times a week to the gym across the street. Unenthusiastically, Jason first joined their stationary bicycle/aerobics class shortly after getting hired to shake off Jennifer, a co-worker and the office nymphomaniac. Many had dubbed her “Man-eater Jennifer” and the joke in the office was that she had landing lights on her bed. She kept up a drive to get him to enroll in the 45-minute class with her so she could “check out the guys.” A year later and even though Jennifer ran off with a disk jockey she met on a sex-chat site, Jason stayed in the class pedaling away with better lungs, stronger legs, and used to the pounding music.

Around Thanksgiving and about the same time period Jennifer left the class, Henry showed up wearing an eye-catching red and blue striped Barcelona soccer jersey and had a toned body just about every guy wishes for—Spartan chest, Popeye arms and a narrow hourglass frame. Jason easily spotted him. Taking up the bike station along side his, Jason estimated the newcomer with the full head of black hair equaled his height of six-feet, looked around the same age—twenty-four-years-old—and weighed in the range of his own 170 pounds. Jason pictured Jennifer pulling the new arrival off his bike and into her cave.

At their first chance to chat after one tough workout a couple days later, introductions seemed natural. Jason’s exercise mate started the ball rolling.

“Hi, my name’s Hongzhu Li, but you can call me Henry. I just started working at the 27 Market Building across the street on the seventh floor.”

“Seventh floor, huh?” Jason responded impulsively, and then added to emphasize they had something in common, “I’m on the sixth and it looks like we work in the same building.”

From that day on, they went to and left the gym together. As weeks passed and they talked more, Henry’s sense of humor moved more front stage.

“You should check Craigslist to find if there’s a part-time emperor job open. Maybe some small country could use you,” Henry cracked sarcastically once when Jason started recounting his job miseries as they walked back to work.

Then there was the Happy Hour bar that Henry dragged him to about two months after they met where he chided, “Go get a job at a mall flying little remote-controlled toy helicopters, if you’re going to be such a whiner about your boss.”

While Jason found it fun mixing it up with Henry, early on he picked up on a serious side that said the guy was a hybrid mix of sharp-tongued wit and unpredictablness. He also discovered Henry had social activism flowing through his veins.

“Weekends, I go to the homeless shelter over on 6th Street and serve food. Wanna’ come along sometime?” Henry said with an air of challenge in his voice. The idea of volunteering in a homeless shelter seemed not only alien to Jason, but also totally gross. Whenever encountering homeless people, he avoided them like they had a flesh-eating disease or were capable of unimaginable violence. Months later when he did reluctantly take Henry up on the offer and join him one Saturday, Jason knew his real purpose for the tag along had more to do with spending time with his recently acquired friend.

Still, the trip to the center took guts for Jason. Going up the front steps of the building that once housed a men's clothing store, he couldn't help notice a guy in red shorts and an oversized white down coat peeing into an empty urn next to the door. Once inside the large open space hall, Jason immediately knew he had sweating palms and chalk-dry mouth discomfort being around so many down-and-out people; some with no teeth, some with missing limbs and many looking like they hadn't had a bath in weeks. His heart started pumping with pounding bangs against his chest. Really trying hard to quiet his fears, he walked with Henry in stunned silence watching how naturally his friend moved around serving food, handing out clothes, listening to stories, and showing pat-on-the-back kindness to each person. It seemed all knew Henry by name.

Jason and Henry had lots in common. They both graduated from State and both claimed a life-long effort to stay away from social gatherings and sometimes debated who really could own the title of being the most shy.

"Growing up in China, some of my early school teachers used to call me *Xiao Mei* because I was so shy," Henry confided once over a Friday's third cold beer. "That nickname which sort of translates to 'little pretty' in American English, became hell for me," he grimaced.

"I can hear that name's painful sound in my ear now," said Jason sympathetically, after he took the first swallow of his fourth beer and looking straight at the mirror behind the bar so he could see both himself and Henry. "In high school they called me 'nerd' and I really hated it. That name was weapons grade damaging to my self-esteem," Jason exhaled as he closed his eyes to shut out the images.

With more time, Jason and Henry found they had a growing list of things in common. Both were hopelessly rooting for the underdog Chicago Cubs, their favorite neighborhood

restaurants were identical, they shared a lustful passion for all sweet deserts, and each could name the characters in every Harry Potter movie. They even liked Lady Gaga. While Jason did readily admit Henry seemed just about as shy as him, he marveled when his friend showed he could fake having an outgoing personality that allowed him to make people feel like they were in a comfort zone.

He once watched in disbelief as Henry took a seat at a political fund-raiser's table of a dozen conversation-challenged dullards and within minutes had everyone giggling at his jokes. He easily filled the silent gaps with sexual innuendos and outrageous tales about his daily rides on public transportation where he masterfully relayed accounts of witnessed fondling, masturbation, exhibitionism, and the overheard sordid plans for sizzling intimate encounters. After that, Jason became convinced Henry had an implanted talent for making people forget egos and self-importance.

Henry's capriciousness probably further cemented their relationship. All his life, Jason had wallowed in sameness and banal day-to-day activities. He was an accountant. Henry was a graphic designer and his non-sameness seemed refreshing. But, one day Henry did unexpectedly ask a question after a gym workout that startled him.

“How did we become friends?”

At the time, Jason thought that an off-the-wall question about their friendship, wondering what it meant and if it had a deeper meaning. He decided to ignore the quiz and forget it, having become imperviously used to Henry saying things that were a bit strange.

For instance, there was the time when Henry saw a costumed gaggle of the outrageous Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence gathering close to where they stood at a bus stop and asked one, “Why did you become a nun”? Then there was the time he spotted a group of unsmiling

dark-suited men in front of Macy's wearing plastic-covered nametags saying they were in town for the American Psychological Association's Convention. He asked the grumpiest looking one, "Do you have an imaginary friend?"

Henry could be *so* unpredictable.

When Jason got a new higher paying job closer to his house, and even though they lived on different sides of the City and Henry had his own separate circle of friends, both found it took no effort to stay in touch. They continued to chat on the phone or see each other. Sometimes they'd hike, hit a corner-drinking joint they both knew, work on political campaigns, attend concerts or just instant message throughout the day.

Jason had little doubt it felt like he was becoming closer to Henry. With the warmth and glow of a relationship that had a texture so comfortable, he began to question his own sexuality. Jason had never thought much about being gay and, in fact, felt pretty sure he was straight. He had always pictured himself attracted to the opposite sex. While nothing turned out big time, and all were lacking in the affection department, there was Alexa with the big breasts in elementary school, Janis with no breasts in freshman year of high school, and then Louise during senior year whose father owned a McDonald's franchise.

More recently, Emma who lasted seven months, and Rachael who didn't last that long, did arouse him. The times together with each of those women were fun and cozy, even though sexless. But, with Henry, he had experienced so much depth and connection. They could talk about anything. It felt like they were soul brothers. Finally, the rush of feelings about Henry began to own him and on pure resolve, once after going to see a movie together, Jason decided it was time to devise a plan. On Christmas Eve he'd find the perfect occasion to tell Henry directly and frankly about his feelings. While not totally sure the thoughts bubbling

inside were affection, he knew he had to let Henry in on what—for him—felt like a wish for intimacy.

Then, on Christmas Eve night when he intended to make his feelings known, Henry called to say he wouldn't be coming over because he felt ill. He sounded awful on the phone—congested, sneezing—and whispered breathily that he had caught a cold. Jason didn't meet him for a week and when they finally did get together at Henry's apartment, he about fell over when seeing how sick Henry looked. His skin appeared pale, his lips were chapped and the glimmer in his eyes had vanished. With that visit, Jason unknowingly saw the beginnings of Henry's health change.

The hacking, wheezing, high fever respiratory infection that seemed to hang on way too long, took a full three months for recovery. That cold really weakened him, too. When April rolled around and spring brought renewed energy now that winter was over, Henry began complaining about a series of different symptoms like painful sore throat, blurred vision and bouts of diarrhea. In May, Jason noticed small purple skin spots on Henry's face and that same month, Henry announced his intent to stop going to the bicycle aerobics class. At last, after an emergency room visit and follow-up rushed conference with a specialist Jason drove him to, Henry gave a Sunday noon call the first week of June asking for a same-day meeting in Golden Gate Park's Japanese Tea Garden. Jason knew something was up and that the call sounded like it had a hint of urgency.

It turned out to be a surprisingly warm, pure blue sky late afternoon and multiple colored buds were on the trees everywhere. Joggers and bikers whizzed around and several couples were walking in erotic skin-to-skin formation. The smell of flowers bounced in the slight

wind and those familiar shrill bells of ice cream carts in the distance crawled the auditory canals of all within earshot. Summer definitely had arrived in San Francisco.

Taking a seat on a bench near the edge of the park's little man-made pond best known for welcoming ducks, seagulls, pigeons and turtles, Jason and Henry made deliberate small talk for a few minutes. They both knew they were occupying the bench for a reason. An agenda waited. Suddenly, in a low and soft murmur while looking straight ahead and avoiding eye contact, Henry said, "I've just been diagnosed with AIDS."

Jason heard the words and it seemed like everything from then on went into slow motion. He wasn't sure what had just come out of Henry's mouth, but he stopped breathing.

"Are you kidding? You telling me one of your jokes again?" Jason managed to say, trying hard to make an intellectual response.

"No-o-o, it's AIDS and I am going to die from it," Henry said in what sounded like an emotionless, flat pitch.

"But, how?" Jason swallowed back in low voice. "How did you get it?"

"Ha! I knew you'd ask that. I am the one who knows the exact date and time when it happened and how. But, it's too late to go back and undo that," came the rapid-fire reply.

Jason figured the non-verbal resolute tone and stiffened body posture warned asking any more questions would be a bad idea. From a history of previous discussions, he knew when his friend did not want to talk about something. End of conversation.

With his shocking announcement over—they'd only been together about ten minutes—Henry slowly stood and said, looking at the lake, "I gotta' get back home now." Speechless, Jason jumped up to touch Henry's left arm to pull him toward him.

"What do you mean? Don't leave yet. We just got here," Jason begged.

Henry made no reply and just stood limp and motionless, as Jason then wrapped both arms around his neck in an affectionate embrace. Burying his own face in Henry's hair just above an ear, he held tightly for an immeasurable amount of time and all the while could feel his friend's body quiver like he was crying.

"Really, I have to go now. Thanks for coming out to see me. Catch you later," Henry said in a monotone as he pushed away with both hands.

"Do you want me to walk you to the bus stop? I can drive you home."

"I don't think so," Henry replied coldly without making eye contact. Then, he turned to briskly start walking in the direction of the park's exit.

"Come on, let me walk you to the bus," Jason yelled, as he ran to catch up with Henry who by then had moved so unbelievably fast he had gotten a good head start on him.

"No, I said. Are you deaf? I'll call you later," Henry sternly shot out into the air without turning back as Jason obediently stopped and watched him move farther into the distance and become swallowed up on the afternoon crowds.

Standing there in silence, Jason was at a total loss. He'd never seen Henry act this way and tried to figure out his new anger-like behaviors. When he had absorbed the best he could what just happened, he turned and slowly walked back to his car. Jason knew he'd be driving to the one place in the City where he always went to think and contemplate problems that overwhelmed him.

An hour later lumbering along the wind-blown sands hills of Ocean Beach, Jason found himself preoccupied with a well-spring of new and nameless emotions that went with knowing he'd heard his friend say he was going to die. He felt hollowed out. "Who the fuck dies of AIDS anymore?" he angrily shouted as he stood on a pier overlooking an equally irate

ocean with waves violently traumatizing the rocks below. At that time in his mind AIDS was the “gay disease” that only killed baby boomers—people from his parent’s generation.

At home, a restless evening’s computer search came up with plenty of disturbing evidence that cried otherwise. First he found the Centers for Disease Control identified acquired immune deficiency in 1981—five years before his birth. Next, in the US, 56,000 people get infected with HIV each year and then he stumbled on a quote from the Surgeon General in the early 90’s predicting everybody in the U.S. will know at least one person dead from AIDS. That forecast happened, but Henry was Jason’s buddy. Henry had become his best friend.

A week later Henry accepted Jason’s invitation to meet for lunch. All seemed back to normal and neither made any mention of what happened in Golden Gate Park the Sunday before. Still, Jason could easily see as they ate lunch together on that day and the following weekends Henry looked to be in pain and dropping weight fast, even though at one point he claimed his doctors had him on what they called a “cocktail” of experimental drugs that would “cure” him. He also heard Henry say, “Ouch!” a lot when he had to stand and sit. Henry’s clothes were becoming too big for his shrinking body. Astonished, Jason observed Henry still went like a guided missile to his job everyday.

But, Henry’s condition did continue to deteriorate. He missed more days of work, made more doctor trips and started going to the hospital just about every week. He looked really tired.

Finally, when certain he couldn’t work any longer Henry requested Jason drive him to a 4PM appointment in late September at his employer's HR office to complete the resignation paperwork. Jason later told Henry that day would always be etched in his memory.

As they walked in measured steps from the parked car to their Market Street destination two blocks away, Jason recalled his now fragile friend's body held tight to his arm. That complete confidence and control Henry showed when they first met had gone.

In spite of everything, though, Henry's unpredictable wit stayed and punched out as strong as ever. Once they got inside the building, Jason wasn't expecting that wit to come rolling toward him on such a serious occasion.

"When I introduce you to the personnel manager, do you want to ask her if she's a pole dancer?" Henry said with one of his mischievous grins as the elevator doors slid shut.

Jason just grinned and said resolutely, "Focus," as he watched the little lights above the doors signaling how many more floors to go while silently imagining he'd soon be meeting a wildly looking sexy personnel manager. Jason also had something else on his mind causing him to feel too anxious to laugh or show any emotion. There might be a chance of possibly running into his miserable former boss—this was the building where he once worked and it gave him the creeps to be back. His eyelids were having little flitching seizures.

Stepping out of the elevator at the seventh floor and turning right to the first set of doors in the long orange-carpeted hallway, together they pushed open the dark brown oak double-doors of Henry's workplace. Once inside, a sudden deafening rapture of best wishes from dozens of people came hurdling around them. Many rushed toward Henry to hug him. This was the biggest emotional farewell Jason had ever seen. Three huge chocolate frosting cakes sat on a table nearby and over Henry's desk hung a long red paper banner with yellow-lettered words that read, "We will miss you, Henry." Michael Jackson's *Another Day Has Gone* blared from a speaker somewhere and air-filled pink balloons were bopping and floating around. For about thirty minutes they got led around the large florescent lit and multi-cubicked

room shaking hands, exchanging phone numbers, nibbling at finger foods, and Henry getting updates on the latest office gossip.

Time to head toward the frosted window door of the Human Resources Office, Jason turned the brass handle so that they could step into the room where the personnel manager told Henry she'd be waiting when he called to set up the appointment. Jason looked around the small quiet inner-office trying to spot a hot female who might be a pole dancer, but all he saw were more cubicles. Suddenly, from a side door on their left, emerged a slowly walking woman with an outstretched arm for an introducing handshake and saying she was the personnel manager. Jason tried to hide his jaw-dropping double take. There stood a short, heavy set, white-haired and somber official looking person who didn't fit the pole dancer type.

"How are you, Henry?" she said with a low-pitched voice Jason thought sounded either bored or pre-occupied. He wanted to turn away out of fear Henry might blurt something embarrassing and ordered his eyes to look out the nearest window.

Introductions as well as the purpose of the meeting out of the way, the personnel manager said stiffly to both of them, "Please take a seat here," as she pointed to three plump and well-worn red-colored leather chairs lined up side-by-side to face the front of her desk in a room separated from the cubicles by an extra-wide wooden Japanese screen. From the look of the woman and her rigid attitude, Jason new there wasn't a doubt this would be a sobering meeting. Just to be safe as they both sat down, though, Jason decided to give Henry one admonishingly strong stare to let him know that to make any comments about pole dancing was not a good idea.

Dressed in a wrinkled dark blue suit that perfectly accentuated the white specks of dandruff on her shoulders, the tired looking woman then blandly informed a genuinely shocked Henry that his co-workers had gotten together and contributed their accumulated sick days so he now had enough personal leave salary to last through the next three months. Henry made a surprisingly meek try at telling the unsmiling figure sitting on the other side of the desk he could not accept, but she jackknifed her chin downward, leaned forward and firmly let him know there'd be no undoing the group's decision.

"Henry, they want to do this. They need to do this. Please do understand now," she said in a commanding tone Jason thought sounded remarkably like his high school history teacher's brusque voice when verbally trouncing him for not turning in homework.

As they drove back to Henry's apartment, neither said a word for a long time. That scene with the co-workers kept whirling in Jason's head. The huge red banner. The chocolate cakes. The bouncing balloons and blaring music. Michael Jackson. So many people crying. That personnel officer's cold handshake formality. The images were stuck. He had never before faced the task of saying goodbye to a colleague about to die and it had him feeling awful.

Still, determined not to let Henry see his emotions building inside, Jason clumsily started talking about the weather and global warming. Henry apparently wouldn't allow the mindless ramblings of well-learned avoidance behaviors, though.

"December 25th's in three months. Think I'll be a Christmas angel?" Henry coaxed, leaning the back of his head against the passenger's window so he could fully stare at Jason from his part of the car's front seat.

At that, they both started laughing. Permission granted to let go. Rolling up to the next stoplight, Jason rotated toward Henry and, with his shoulders evenly diagonal to the steering

wheel and the seat, he then gave a warning meant to sound like an impending cataclysmic disaster was on the way.

“When you get to that place up above and I talk to you, you better answer. Got me, dude?”

Whether or not they believed keeping up their layered conversations after Henry’s death was possible, both did a subdued chuckle at the thought of it as Jason turned back to face the steering wheel. When Jason’s Toyota Prius pulled up in front of Henry’s brown brick apartment on Pine Street, Henry raised the palm of his left hand so that it faced Jason.

“I don’t need any help now. I can manage it from here,” Henry said with resolution, clearly demanding Jason stay put so he could independently move on his own out of the car.

Jason felt a wave of helplessness swallow him as he watched Henry then feebly push from the seat and climb the ten cement stairs leading to the stained glass lobby door where, without turning around to wave, he disappeared inside.

Driving home in the misting rush hour traffic, Jason felt eerily aware he’d just been with someone who had a short time to live—and knew it. Thoughts raced. What would be his role now? He had no other friends as close as Henry. How could he make his last days more comfortable? Passing a small restaurant on Geary Street with a sign on the sidewalk reading, “Today’s Special: Milkshakes,” Jason did a spin back to when, as a kid, his only model of support in painful times turned out to be his mother. Whenever time to see the family doctor bent on making him a human pin cushion—he still felt sure the guy had sadist tendencies—his mother tried to make it all better by serving up milkshakes to help quickly ease the ordeals. Even these days, whenever a body ache pops up, Jason does a mind travel to those sweet childhood concoctions.

It's time to pay back," he said through a tightened smile into the rearview mirror while switching lanes to make a right on red. For the first time in years, Jason felt a stinging wetness filling his eyes.

Immediately after arriving back at his studio apartment and pacing the still cold hardwood floors, he continued to think about the turn in his relationship with Henry. Feelings of helplessness continued to hit hard. He knew even the right amount of drugs or alcohol could not make the pained thoughts go away. Jason kept thinking about the fact his friend wouldn't be around much longer and wondered what it would be like feeling alone again.

Hours passed as Jason sat facing his laptop with no appetite for dinner, sullenly snacking on chips, checking e-mails, paying bills online and randomly looking at websites. One site caught his eye. It had a link that inadvertently pulled him to an organization dealing with loss of significant relationships. "I can't believe I'm looking at this," he said under his breath as he tapped the keys that took him to several stories from people who emotionally supported someone at the time of death. Most accounts talked about the necessity of remaining strong and not abandoning no matter how much it hurts. Suddenly a surge of unexpected resolve shot through Jason's brain. "I can and *will* take care of him.

Around midnight he formulated a plan. He'd phone Henry right away to ask if he could come visit twice a week.

The late-hour request could be seen a rash, and there was a chance Henry wouldn't go for it. But, he felt convinced that verbally committing to visit at least a few hours a week would be a good way to show he wanted to be there.

He made the call.

“Henry, I’m thinking I’d like to come over every Wednesday after work and then on Saturdays in the afternoon . . . to drop by and hang out. Would that be okay?”

“You nuts?” came the too-fast reply. “You just want to watch me die. Am I right?” Henry laughed into the phone.

“Yep. That’s right. I figure it might be fun,” Jason said returning the unsurprising and expected sarcastic wit.

After a little cajoling, at the close of the call Henry sounded happy about the arrangement. They agreed to the “stop by after work every Wednesday and come over Saturday afternoons” plan.

The next weeks Jason made several trips to visit Henry and with each time he got a better grip on his own emotions. While the temperature in the small apartment hovered around eighty degrees—Henry turned up the thermostat claiming he always felt cold—Jason clipped Henry’s fingernails, combed his still very thick hair, washed dishes and vacuumed floors. Sometimes they just sat and watched TV without talking and other times had intense discussions about the day’s news.

Jason observed Henry’s emotions flopped all over the place. Some visits he’d be totally himself and others, Jason never knew what to expect.

Sometimes he’d be boiling with rage—“This is fucked up.”

Sometimes he’d be entirely accepting—“I’m a dead man and ready to go now.”

Sometimes he’d be delirious like on the week before Thanksgiving when he said, “I’m going to dress up as a clown for Halloween.”

Once on a Wednesday when Jason arrived about an hour late, Henry tore into him with fury when he walked in the door. “You don’t care about me. Nobody cares. I hate everybody.”

Jason had no problem with the mood swings. The doctors clued him in on the fact that Henry’s brain had become infected, but watching his health continue to go downhill as he wasted away turned out to be the toughest part. Each visit he had a new symptom. Henry couldn’t eat and no matter how much Jason tried to persuade, he had no interest in food.

It was on Sunday, December 6, when Henry could take care of himself no more, a decision had to be made. The doctors and Henry’s friends agreed he had to go to a Hospice. The very following day on a Monday afternoon, Henry did the move-in to his new living space.

On Wednesday when Jason came to visit, he found the Hospice a surprisingly cheerful place. He really did not know what a hospice is supposed to look like, but found from his Internet research that a Hospice residence is usually a place where a terminally ill person goes to receive treatment aimed at making the last medicine-free days emotionally and physically comfortable. What he discovered in the middle of a quiet residential neighborhood of one-hundred-year-old houses, turned out to be a three-story Victorian run by Buddhist monks, and there were ten occupied beds with really sick people in each room. The lobby entrance had a checkered black and white tiled floor and there were bouquets of flowers everywhere. When heading for the stairs, he noted his shoes made squeaky sounds on the spotlessly clean floor. Getting to the third story of the house using the winding carved wood staircase, he saw Henry had his own room with a large bay window overlooking a lushly green garden. Jason noticed right away the sense of relief that came over his friend after he moved there. All the anger, confusion, sadness and fight were gone and it seemed he had moved to the Hospice to go

about the assignment of dying. Jason didn't stay long for that first visit as Henry said he felt a little tired and about thirty-minutes after he got there, he repeated calmly with a yawn, "I need to take a nap."

The next time Jason visited, the following Saturday and two weeks before Christmas, Henry was upbeat and talkative. They laughed and exchanged stories for two hours. Jason even thought that just maybe Henry was making a recovery. When readying to say goodbye, however, something happened. As Jason prepared to leave, Henry suddenly got up from his chair, gently grabbed him by the arm and stopped him at the door.

"Can you take a movie of me on your cell phone?" he asked with an earnestness Jason hadn't heard at any other time.

Before he had fully taken in the question, Henry turned away to jump onto his bed. At that point, standing tall, he started pulling together his energy so Jason could record him dancing while laughing all the while.

"Ready?" said Henry as he looked down from his perch on the bed.

Clothed in loose-fitting light-blue cotton pajamas and his gray corduroy slippers, Henry then jumped around for two minutes on the squeaking spring mattress as Jason recorded every turn, whirl, spin, swivel, pivot and then the final bow.

At the time, his request seemed strange, but later he knew what Henry was up to—there'd be visual testimony of his friend's death-mocking laughter to keep forever. Jason figured it out as he played back his recording while slowly walking down the three flights of winding steps . . . and then again while sitting in the car before heading back home.

The next day, Jason's phone shouted at an hour unheard of for a Sunday morning. A man with a kindly sounding voice filled with compassion spoke slowly. Henry died at 7:55AM.

As he put the phone down Jason got it again. Henry must have been aware the day before that would be their last meeting. He put on the unpredictable bed dance to announce his journey would soon be over.

Henry's ninety-seven pound body was cremated on Monday. No memorial. No service. Five days later his sister took the ashes back to the family's resting place in Beijing.

Listening to the raucous New Year's Eve sounds of revelry inside the restaurant when one is supposed to be feeling happy, Jason made a decision to stop dwelling on his friend. It was time to think about the appointment set for Saturday, January 3rd. That would be the day when he'd begin volunteering at the homeless shelter on 6th Street. Henry had influenced him.

Still holding the phone carried outside while making his party time escape to the parking lot, Jason shifted weight on the squashed boxes. He took a long gaze at the cell's address function. A new year was coming. The time to let go had arrived. Waiting a few minutes to make sure he was doing the right thing, Jason pushed the delete button after he found a certain digital entry. It was Henry's number. He wouldn't be calling him anymore.

He now knew his friend left just in time to be a Christmas Angel.

END