

BFF

Ted and I finished our weekly 45-minute walk at Manchester Center and settled into a booth in the empty food court. A few lights were on, but shops were still closed. Our walk had been exceptionally quiet. The twinkle in Ted's eye was gone, and a cloud hung over his face. I said, "Buddy, out with it. What's bothering you?"

He said, "I've got cancer."

"Cancer? Are you sure?"

"Pancreatic. My doctor told me I've got six months to a year."

"Can't you get radiation or chemo?"

"That would give me an extra six to twelve months and only postpone the inevitable. The doctor told me to go home, eat anything I want, and do whatever I felt like doing."

I was trying to make sense of it. I could tell he was having the same problem. "Man!" I said.

Neither of us could speak for a while. Finally, Ted smiled and said, "We haven't done our memory routine for a while. What categories you want to use today?"

He was setting me up to recall incidents when we made a special connection. We listed categories, then took turns pulling up memories. I said, "Well, how about our earliest memory, a bad memory, our most dangerous, and a funny one?"

Ted said, "Okay. Earliest is no sweat. The first time we met was in junior high PE. I came out of the shower and some bullies had me cornered, towel whipping me."

"You were bare assed with nothing but a wet towel to defend yourself."

"You saw what they were doing and decided to get in the game. You whopped the biggest boy in the group real hard. He grabbed his butt and screamed. You popped him again, and he ran out of the shower to the locker room."

"They all ran."

"I got a few welts out of it," Ted said, "and from then on, we were friends. Not long after that, we were closer to each other than we were to our parents. Your turn. How about the worst memory?"

I said, "The worst memory was when my first baby came. Before she arrived, the wife and I decorated her room, chose a new crib and toys. We pictured holding her, playing with her, dressing her up, showing her off to friends.

"When she came early—a ball of flesh with soft, fuzzy hair under a plastic dome in PICU—I couldn't stop smiling. Three days later her heart gave out. She was gone so quickly. I hated God, to give us this child and take her three days later. At the graveside with Beth, I remember your hand on my shoulder."

I still couldn't shake it. My life-long friend just got a death sentence.

He said, "One of the funniest has to be my wedding. The church manager planned it. Everything went like clockwork until my 5-year-old nephew came in with the rings on a pillow. He did not want to be there, but the coordinator started him down the aisle. He took three steps and sniffled, three more steps and a sniffle. He sniffled all the way to the altar. People chuckled every time the sound echoed in the sanctuary."

He paused. "You're next. Most dangerous. You've got several choices, including the time we rolled my dad's car and hung upside down until paramedics cut us loose."

"That's near the top, but our hiking trip along the Sierra Trail up to the Oregon border topped that. About mid-point, a freak snowstorm hit. In minutes, the trail was hidden by snow,

and we knew we were in for it. We pitched our tent by a boulder and gathered wood for a fire. The snow never let up, and the wood only lasted one night. We used one of our sleeping bags for fuel.

“At the end of the second day, you said, ‘The only thing that’ll keep us from freezing to death is body heat. Strip.’ And into the sleeping bag we crawled, zipped it up tight, and prayed.

“The next morning the storm stopped, and enough snow melted so we could follow the trail again. Search and Rescue never got to us, but we finally made it out. We looked like a couple of mountain men in pictures they took for the local rag.”

I switched to Ted’s side of the table and placed my arm around his shoulders. “There must be something I can do. Anything. Name it.”

“There’s not much anybody can do. Years ago my doctor looked at my family health history and saw that my grandfather and one of my aunts died of cancer. He said then I was at risk. I thought nothing of it—until now. When my aunt died, I was at the hospital. Standing in the hall, I could hear her moaning sounds for a long time. My uncle didn’t know the machine dispensed the morphine at a preset pace, so every time she made a sound, he hit the button, again and again.”

I asked, “Do you think it’s inevitable—dying in pain?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want my wife to go through what my uncle did.” He paused and turned to me with a hint of a smile. “You look like you saw a ghost. I’m the one who’s sick, not you,” he said.

“You don’t look sick,” I said. “You look like you could still mix it up if they had football for seniors. We worked together pretty good in high school. You were no faster than me, but you had better hands. Coach told me my job was to confuse the opposition till you got open. You got a lot of press out of it, which you deserved.”

I was not surprised when Ted said, “Knowing I’m not long for this world, I can’t stop thinking about the after-life. I know you’re not religious, but I believe we have a soul. Things happen after we die. The thought makes me a bit nervous.”

I searched my mind for any word I might give him, but I refused to quote some trite lines I had heard, or to spout something I didn’t believe.

Finally I said, “You know I love you. You know my heart. I know your heart. If love ever counts, I hope it counts now.” I wasn’t ashamed to let Ted see me cry. I couldn’t help it. He placed his hand on mine. He was comforting me . . . and we sat in silence.

Then as if by a signal, we stood.

He said, “Next Friday?”

I said, “Sure.”