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The Straight and Narrow

by Richard Hays

Charlie woke to find himself pretzeled in the grey corner chair of a drab hospital room. He had grown accustomed to the curtains that tracked around the bed, the dry-erase board on the opposite wall listing Jason's current nurse, and the rolling tray next to the bed that always seemed to collect junk throughout the day. Jason had been in and out of this hospital four times over the last year, had even spent his 26th birthday, just six months earlier here as he nursed a nasty infection from which he narrowly escaped.

Charlie remembered the first visit and the relief he felt that they were at the hospital. He experienced the feeling again when the doctor stood over Jason in his bright white coat, gleaming a smile as he signed Jason's release forms. Today, there was no doctor in the room, just Jason propped up in bed whispering, "Charlie...you awake?" Jason was normally of average build but had now withered away, as if he had been shrink-wrapped by his own skin. His face was pale and he had small red spots scattered up his arms, just some of the symptoms of his Leukemia.

"How are you feeling?" Charlie asked as he rolled out of the chair onto unsteady feet.

"A little wiped out," Jason replied brushing his right hand through his blond hair. He was proud of his hair. It had thinned through treatment, but had somehow been spared. The doctor had said it didn't happen to often, but some people were lucky enough to keep their hair. Jason used to say it was a sign that he was going to beat this thing. He hadn't said that in awhile.

Charlie pulled a chair up to the bedside, then leaned over and straightened Jason's blanket. "I thought I might lose you this time."

Jason dropped his shoulders as he leaned back into the pillows and with a sullen tone of uncertainty mumbled, "Not this time."

Charlie reached out to gently set his right hand on Jason's exposed forearm, but pulled it back before he touched. Jason reached up and set his hand on Charlie's. "I'm still here," he reassured, then rested his hand back at his own side on the bed.

"I know," Charlie replied through a forced smile as he pulled a crumpled Kleenex from the pocket of his jeans and dabbed his eyes. "It's just hard to bear seeing you like this." He pushed the Kleenex back into his pocket and added, "I know you don't want to hear this but they called your father."

"He isn't *coming* is he? I don't want to talk to him," uttered Jason.

"I think you should give him a chance...family is important."

"Maybe to you. That man can carry his bag of guilt with him to the grave."

Charlie thought about the last *real* conversation he had with his own parents...he was 19. That was five years ago. He had spent several nights pacing his apartment reciting an unwritten speech intended for them. He would stop at the bathroom mirror each time he passed. A deep breath—then looking into his own eyes he would start, "Mom, Dad, I know you have expectations...no...Mom,

Dad, God works in mysterious...Mom, Dad, I'm gay!"

Once he had built up the courage he stopped by their house in the evening and sat them down on their black slip-covered couch. He faced them and listened to his voice tremble a minor resemblance to the speech he had thought was perfected, his gaze fixed on the city street outside the picture window behind the couch, never once looking either of them in the eyes. He could feel his father scanning him with the cold, hard stare Charlie had received each time he had done wrong, only this time it was more intense. Charlie held his focus out the window. It was much darker outside than when he had arrived. The streetlights would be coming on soon but were all extinguished for the time being. For just a quick second Charlie lowered his eyes, not enough to look directly at his mother, but enough to catch a blurred image of her on the edge of his field of vision. She was resting her elbows on her thighs and was leaned over with her face buried in her hands.

There was a long silence before she stood up overly straight, as if she was standing at attention, taking silent orders from God. Finally, she politely stated that they would have to pray for guidance before discussing the matter any further. Both his mother and father then dismissed themselves from the room. For two days Charlie waited and wondered what horrible family justice awaited him, then he got the call for dinner.

No one dared to disturb the silence at dinner. Not a sound was made barring the occasional fork scraping a plate and the gush of water as a glass was refilled. Charlie looked up from his plate to find his father locked in a cold stare at him. After dinner they moved into the living room and sat Charlie on the same black couch in front of the window. With the curtains drawn shut they gave him the sermon he'd hoped wouldn't come.

"Charlie, your father and I have prayed on this the last two nights and God has told us that he gave you this curse as a test of faith. He has made you to suffer like Moses and his people were made to suffer. The choice of salvation or damnation is in your hands. You must come to terms with the wrongness of this way of thinking. Once you do God will accept you and guide you so that you may enter his kingdom. If you pass his test you will be blessed with a greater appreciation for his love."

Charlie's father peered through his wire rimmed spectacles deep into Charlie's eyes, "Does Jason know about your—confusion?"

Charlie remained silent for a moment staring at the small space between his parents, entranced with the picture hanging on the wall behind them. It was an angel, draped in white ascending through a mist of clouds into a bright beam of Heaven's light shining down from the top right corner of the picture. He weighed what they were telling him and what he was sure were real feelings, not just choices. He answered his father never taking his eyes off the picture, "No, Jason doesn't know...and don't worry dad, *he's* normal!" then marched to the door.

He would of course talk to his parents many times over the next five years, but it was always the same polite banter. It was easy to understand how Jason or anyone else might see Charlie's relationship with his parents as good. It always had been until that night. And even now it wasn't that it was bad necessarily, it just wasn't deep. Charlie kept quiet, as they had suggested, not so much for them, but to preserve his friendship with Jason. If any conversation began leaving the shallow end of the pool, his parents would drag it back in. Charlie could see this avoidance allowed his father to lose himself in a cloud of imaginary ignorance and his mother to try to forget a little more each day that she may never have grandchildren to show off like her church group friends.

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Anurse shuffled into the room, introducing herself then running through a check of Jason's oxygen levels and blood pressure on the monitors. Charlie backed up against the wall to give her some room to work. "Is there anything I can get you," he asked Jason.

“Not right now,” Jason replied, “but that light above me keeps flickering off and on every few minutes.”

The nurse spoke up from behind her clipboard and nodded her head upward once toward the lights just above the bed, “Looks like one of the fluorescents is going out in that section. I’ll call maintenance when I get back to the desk and have them come up and change it for you.”

Just then the doctor entered the room. He looked at a couple of the monitors and then asked Charlie if he could step out for a few minutes while he performed his examination. Charlie complied and went across the hall to a waiting area to watch TV. Thirty minutes later the doctor and nurse came out of the room. Charlie jumped up and crossed the hall thanking them as he passed. The doctor handed some paperwork to the nurse as he nodded to Charlie. Charlie slid into the room and sat down next to the bed again, leaning against the bedrail with his hands dangling over the side. They both sat staring at each other silently for a few moments until Jason blurted out, “I won’t see him. He wanted out so as far as I’m concerned he’s out.”

Charlie slid his arms along the rail closer together and clasped his hands, “Let’s just deal with that when he gets here.” He twiddled his thumbs for a moment then broke the momentary silence, “Hey, do you remember that time we ran away?”

“Yeah, we might have gotten further if we’d brought some food.” They had been seven at the time and had already been best friends since Kindergarten, growing up in the same Minneapolis suburb together. Charlie thought often about those innocent times...before his feelings for Jason began to change. Those days felt distant, removed, as if someone else had lived them as he observed. He couldn’t remember what it was like not to want more from Jason, only that there was a time when saw Jason as just a friend, like any other boys growing up together.

Jason put his left hand behind his head and leaned back. His face dimmed a bit as he added, “I guess we still haven’t gotten very far, have we?”

“Well let’s change that...when you get out let’s go somewhere,” Charlie suggested.

Jason pulled his arm from behind his head and laid it down at his side while letting his head rest deep into the pillow and said, “I need to deal with one thing at a time.” He closed his eyes and placed his hands together on his stomach.

Charlie could see that Jason was uncomfortable with the idea. Jason didn’t change the subject when he wanted to avoid discussing something like Charlie and his family did. He usually just found ways to stop talking all together. Charlie moved back into the grey corner chair and watched him sleep.

An hour later the door to the room opened. Jim Hayden, Jason’s father, stepped through the doorway wearing a gray suit that fit him perfectly. His lip curled slightly in an under emphasized Elvis pose when he noticed Charlie in the chair. Charlie jumped up and scurried to him, holding his index finger in front of his mouth. Placing his hand on Jim’s shoulder, Charlie politely guided him out of the room.

Once outside the room Jim asked, “How is he doing?”

“He’s ok...what he needs is rest right now. There is a cafeteria on the third floor. What do you say to a cup of coffee, my treat?”

“I suppose.”

Charlie filled him in on Jason’s medical status on the elevator ride down. When they reached the cafeteria Charlie bought them each a cup of coffee. They snaked their way through several rows of empty dark gray tables finally deciding on one in the far corner of the room, next to the window. Jim hung

his suit jacket on the back of the chair brushing his hand down the back of it and readjusting it to assure it would hang flat. Rain pattered against the window from the black clouds above. He tore open two packets of sugar at once and dumped them into his cup. "He still doesn't want to speak to me does he?" Jim asked as he watched the pure white granules melt and disappear into liquid blackness as he stirred.

"No, he's still pretty angry. I've tried to get him to talk to you, but how do you expect him to react. You left his mother for another woman...and I won't even go into the rest," scolded Charlie, looking into his cup and taking a sip of coffee immediately at his last word. He noticed a sadness seem to cloud over Jim's blue eyes, the same color blue that Charlie had drown in so many times when looking into Jason's eyes.

Jim took a sip of coffee then set it down. He stared at the table and began picking at a piece of napkin glued to the dingy grey tabletop with a dab of maple syrup as he spoke. "He doesn't know what happened. I tried to tell him once, but he was so angry. It seemed like he needed to someone to blame, so I let him."

Charlie cocked his head back a bit as a look of confusion came over his face. "There wasn't an affair?"

"Oh, there was an affair, but it had ended months earlier. We were trying to make a go of the marriage. It was those damn letters." Jim stopped to take a long sip of coffee and then set the cup back on the table leaving his left hand wrapped around it.

"Letters?" Charlie asked.

As Jim continued to speak his right thumb circled the rim of the cup as if it were looking for a way out. "She found some old letters I forgot I had. She was on her second bottle of wine when I got home that night. I stepped into the living room and she threw the letters in my face, the wine glass at the wall, and told me to get my things out before she came back in the morning. Then she ran out the front door crying and drove away."

“D”on't you think it's about time you told him? You may not get too many more opportunities.” Charlie shuddered as though someone had dropped an ice cube down the back of his shirt. It was the first time he had let himself verbalize or even think to himself that Jason could be gone soon. Until now he had pushed the realization of Jason's mortality to the back of his mind and locked it into a shadowed corner closet, created to house his thoughts of *confusion*, more specifically his feelings for Jason. The door was unlocked now and both his feelings and his fears were intertwined and trying to surface. He felt a quick moment of nausea then fought the thoughts of both back into their dungeon.

“Yes, but we both know he isn't going to talk to me.”

“Let me talk to him and I'll see what I can do.”

Three hours later Charlie was sitting next to the bed holding Jason's right hand between his own hands, studying their entangled flesh, when he realized that Jason had opened his eyes. Jason scrunched his eyebrows and slowly pulled his hand away, resting it back on the bed, "You're scaring me, Charlie. Did the doctor tell you something I should know?"

Charlie, a bit startled at Jason seeing the display, fumbled a nervous, "No. Everything is fine. I was just...trying to wake you up.

Jason pushed the button to raise himself to a half seated position. "Is that what it was?"

Charlie gathered himself and then said, "Your father is here." Jason sighed and rolled his head toward the wall to his left. It wasn't the huff that Charlie had expected, but still wasn't a positive sign. "He's come

a long way and would really like to speak to you.”

Jason continued glaring at the wall as if trying to see what was on the other side, “I know what he wants.”

“I don’t think you do,” Charlie replied.

Jason lifted his left forearm and began thumping the side of his fist on the bedrail. At first he spoke softly, becoming more firm toward the end, “He could have stopped her, but he didn’t. He let her get in that car and drive away. He wanted her out of his life so he could be with his hussy...well he got what he wanted.”

“Have you ever just let him talk to you about it?”

The thumps quickened, “Her life was there to be saved. All he had to do was keep her there.”

“In hindsight I know he would agree with you. There were a lot of bad decisions made that night. You don’t have to forgive him, but at least listen.”

The thumps stopped. Jason looked Charlie dead in the eyes. A few stray tears streaked down Jason’s cheek as he uttered, “It’s easier to hate him.”

Charlie fought back his own tears at seeing Jason so torn up. He thought how wonderful it would be if cancer were contagious. He could crawl into Jason’s hospital bed, hold him close, breathe in the air escaping Jason’s lungs and join him in the glow of God’s light. “Talk to him Jason, please. I think it will help you both,” Charlie pleaded.

Jason’s eyes flew open wide and he began to struggle to breath.

Charlie hit the nurse’s button. Jason heaved his way into unconsciousness, starved for air, as a team of several nurses and a doctor came bursting through the door. Charlie backed into the corner of the room to stay out of the way. Jim came into the room just behind the doctors. “What’s going on? Is he ok?” Charlie wiped his eyes and continued to stare at Jason through a space between two nurses who were at the edge of the bed.

The nurse pulled the tubes from Jason’s nose and replaced it with an oxygen mask. The doctor glanced back and forth from the monitor to Jason. With the mask in place Jason began breathing easier. Once things calmed down, the doctor came over to Jim writing on his clipboard. “I understand from the nurse that you are Mr. Hayden, Jason’s father, right?”

“Yes, what happened?”

The doctor signed his name and lowered the paperwork to his side. “Your son’s cancer is progressing; it has been for some time as you probably know. We have him stabilized, but I have to tell you this is a turn for the worse. He is getting weaker and I don’t see much possibility for improvement here. You never want to give up hope, but you also need to prepare yourself. At this stage there is not a lot we can do other than try to keep him as comfortable as possible.”

Charlie turned away from the two men trying to muffle his sobs. Jim closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath before gathering himself. He shook the doctor’s hand and thanked him, then walked over to the bed and silently stared at Jason. Charlie walked to the other side of the bed and joined him. Jim’s voice cracked, “I’m running out of time.”

They both stared at Jason lying helpless in bed. Charlie thought of how he had kept his *confusion* in check for so long. He hadn’t told anybody else, not even Jason. He hadn’t done it because he thought he needed to do so for God to accept him. He was sure his parents were wrong about that. The God he

loved loved him back. But they were right about suffering making him able to appreciate love, but it wasn't God that made him suffer, it was those he loved most.

He had locked his feelings for Jason away tight in that blackness. Jason seemed suspicious at times, but if he was, he waded in the shallow end as well, unwilling to be sure. They had been best friends for a long time, not an easy thing to give up. It also helped that Charlie had become proficient at steering a conversation away from anything sensitive. He had seen his own parents do it a million times and Jason didn't offer much resistance to switching subjects.

"I don't want to upset him when he wakes, Charlie. So I'll wait outside. But I'm not going to wait much longer," Jim said, then walked out the door. Charlie sat in the grey corner chair fighting a losing battle against fatigue. He fell asleep for an hour. Jason was still asleep breathing very shallow breaths when Charlie woke up. He moved into the chair that was pulled up next to the bed.

Jason woke up a half hour later. He scanned the room moving only his eyes as though unsure of his surroundings. When he saw Charlie seated next to him, he pulled the mask off his face a few inches to speak. "How bad is it?" he mumbled, then placed the mask back on his face.

"The doctor says it's bad, but they don't know everything. A couple of days of rest and I bet you're outta here," Charlie proclaimed unconvincingly.

"How are you doing, Charlie?"

"I'm fine."

Jason reached up and grabbed Charlie's hand and pulled it to his chest. He lifted the mask a little with the other hand as he spoke, "I couldn't ask for a better friend, Charlie. I know what you've sacrificed for our friendship, and how I've ignored that sacrifice." Jason set the mask back down and took a few breaths before lifting it up again. Charlie eyes were welling by the time Jason continued. "You know I'm not gay, but if I were you'd be the man, so to speak." Jason's chuckle was muffled as he set the mask back on his face and placed Charlie's hand back on the bed rail. A tear trailed down Charlie's face following the lines on his cheek to the corner of his smile.

Jason lifted the mask again and said, "I want to talk to Dad. Is he still here?"

"I'm sure he is. I'll send him in...If you need anything I'll be just outside." Charlie pulled a new tissue out of the box on the bedside table and wiped his eyes with it as he left the room. Jim was sitting on a waiting area couch just across the hall. He saw Charlie come out and got up to meet him in the hallway.

"How is he?"

"He's awake and wants to see you."

"Really...he said that?"

"Yeah, he's ready. Good luck."

Jim's face lit up, but quickly dimmed as a nervous look overtook it. He patted Charlie on the back then stepped toward the door, stopping in front of it. He ran his hand through his hair, and then, unsure what to do with his hands after that, he tried them in his pockets, then at his sides, and then disappeared behind the door.

Charlie took a seat in the waiting room and began watching a "M.A.S.H." marathon on a small television mounted in the corner near the ceiling. After seeing Hawkeye down his tenth gin in six episodes, Charlie

saw Jim step out of the room. Charlie got up and met him in the middle of the hall. "How did it go?"

"It went well. He's a good kid." he said, stuffing a damp cloth into the pocket of his slacks. "He was pretty tired so I told him to get some rest and I'd run and grab some food since I haven't eaten since noon. Can I pick you up something?"

"That would be great...whatever your having is fine."

"Will do," Jim said as he began walking down the hall. Ten feet down the corridor he turned around as he threw on his suit coat. Walking backwards he got Charlie's attention, "Oh, and Charlie...Thanks."


Charlie lifted the corners of his mouth in an awkward smile and gave a half wave, then went into the room. Jason was already sleeping. Charlie sat down in the chair next to the bed. He turned the TV on with the volume so low he could barely hear it using the built in bed remote and found the "M.A.S.H." marathon again. It was in the middle of the episode where Hot Lips gets attached to a stray dog in the camp and breaks down when it gets run over by a jeep.

The monitoring equipment started to beep. Charlie looked at Jason and saw that with each breath the small pit just under his adam's apple sank in. The door burst open as the doctor and nurses entered. One of the nurses removed the covers and opened his gown to find that with every breath the skin on Jason's chest sank deep into every crevice of his rib cage as well. For a moment the nurses frantically adjusted the equipment. The doctor was listening to Jason's chest when the beeps stopped, replaced by a steady linear alarm. Everyone backed away from the bed.

"What the hell are you people doing!" Charlie yelled as he moved toward the doctor. "Do something, dammit!"

After a few moments the doctor glanced up to the clock on the wall, "Time of death...10:58pm."

Charlie stood speechless. He could hear the doctor trying to explain that Jason had signed a DNR form that morning during his examination, but it would be several minutes before he would actually realize what the doctor had told him. Little existed in the room for him at that moment except Jason. Everything else seemed like shadows floating about the room. He moved to Jason's bedside, barely lifting his feet with each step. Once there he stroked Jason's blond hair a few times, trying to etch in his memory the luminous sensation that ran through his fingers as the light flickered once above him. He wandered out of the room and sat down on the couch in the waiting area, leaning forward with his hands crossed on his stomach. After a few disoriented minutes he began pulling himself together. He felt nauseated thinking about Jim wandering in with that same smile with which he had left, the one that he had earned and waited for over years of guilt. Charlie would have to be the one to wipe it off his face.

Charlie noticed a magazine on the coffee table in front of him. It said "Top Ten must see destinations in the continental United States." He thought for a moment what it would be like to choose one and move away from everything, to start over without the fears he had kept locked away for so long. He glanced down the hall again and saw Jim getting off the elevator holding a brown fast food bag with wet grease blotches seeped through the side. Charlie stood up and sighed before taking a step toward Jim. He stopped and reached down to pick up the magazine, then rolled it up and stuck it in his back pocket as he began moving once again toward Jim. 

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