



Finding Jackson Lindbecker

by Sarah Kruel

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Jackson parked his truck sideways across three spaces. He didn't want anyone slamming into the shiny black doors. Nobody cared because there were plenty of parking spots at Clambo's. The car hops came on roller skates and brought out the orders on trays so everybody left lots of room.

He turned in his seat to get a better view of the skating waitresses. He spotted her immediately. She skated fast and then did kind of a sliding stop at a car. She wore the bright yellow shirt and shorts and the yellow paper hat that said Clambo's. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail with the hat pinned on the top of her head at an angle. Her legs were long and tan. She stopped at the old green Chrysler that Vin Davis drove. She was too far away for Jackson to hear what she was saying but he watched her move and laugh. She skated back with Vin's order, and now she was coming toward him.

He knew her name because it was stitched right across the pocket of her shirt – Betty Jean. She had been working at Clambo's all summer long. Betty Jean. He said the name out loud as she skated toward him, not so she could hear it, but softly to himself.

"Billy, Billy take me to New York."

She said the same thing every time and then he always said,

"You're in New York."

It was true of course but not what she meant.

Then she would put her hands on her hips and laugh and say, "New York City, Billy."

He loved the way she said New York. New Yawk. God, he'd love to take her to New York, or any place. It was impossible for him to keep his eyes off her. He pictured himself untying the ribbon on her pony tail and letting the golden hair cascade over her shoulders. Her eyes were big and green and her lips were full. When she laughed, they parted and showed her very straight, white teeth. She was beautiful. She was perfect.

Sometimes when he drove up, the guys would yell out "Here comes Billy," and they'd laugh and hoot because they all knew his name wasn't Billy. It was Jackson Lindbecker, but she just started out calling him Billy. He had no idea why, but it made him smile.

She took his order and came right back with it. Then she was off again to another car. He drank the cherry soda and ate the Clambo Burger. So soon she sailed back and took his tray away. That was it. It all happened so fast. He just sat there for a while, then drove slowly away.

He went to Clambo's as often as he could. Sometimes he was too late and her shift was over or it was her day off. He had thought Wednesday was her day off, but not always. Now that it was haying season, there were plenty of days when he couldn't get there because you could never count on the weather. You had to bale and get the hay in as quickly as possible before a thunder storm came along.

Spring/Summer 2008	<p>His father and his Uncle Kenny owned the farm together, and Jackson had been helping out since he was a kid. When he was real young, he fed the chickens and collected the eggs after school. In the summertime he picked vegetables from the huge garden behind the house, but after he turned twelve, he did a lot more than that. That was the year his father fell off the barn roof. He was up there replacing some shingles that blew off during the hurricane, and just slipped and slid right off. He broke a lot of bones and had a couple of operations, but everyone said he was lucky to be alive. At first the doctors thought he might be paralyzed but over time he recovered most of his movement. He was just in a lot of pain if he walked much so he couldn't work anymore. Mostly he just sat in the house. He read a lot and he liked it when Jackson played chess with him. He always kept the board set up and ready for a game.</p> <p>After the accident Jackson's Uncle Kenny did all the work except what Jackson and his brother George did. Sometimes a guy would come along looking for work and they'd hire him during hay season or for cutting corn, but those guys were drifters. They usually didn't stay long. Finally they had to rent out the two biggest lots to Sam Wilkes. He raised hay to sell and was happy to have more acreage. That meant more income for Jackson's family and less work. It was still hard though. The two big tractors and the baler were really old and one of them always needed repair. Luckily Kenny was a pretty good mechanic, but it was only a matter of time before they were going to need to be replaced. No way could they afford that expense.</p> <p>George was gone. He joined the army right after he graduated high school, so it was just Uncle Kenny and Jackson. That's why going to Clambo's was especially hard to do. Sometimes it really pissed him off. He just wanted to go out and do what he wanted to do. Go to Clambo's whenever he felt like it or just sit in the parking lot of The Donut Hole and talk with Vin and Jeff Billings and Duser McCoy – check out each other's trucks, talk about girls, whatever.</p> <p>More than a week passed before he was able to get to Clambo's again. It was August fourteenth. Summer was almost over. He showered quickly and jumped in the truck. It was late afternoon when he got there and it was busy. Lots of guys stopped by after work, and there she was, laughing and flirting with everybody, even the old men. Nothing had changed but he was restless. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel and exhaled a loud deep breath. He never even had a conversation with her – just that stupid thing about New York. Now she was coming toward him. His heart was pounding and his cheeks felt hot.</p> <p>He ordered a milkshake. Then before she could even say "Take me to New York, Billy," he blurted out "So when are we going to New York?"</p> <p>The words hung there between them. It was as if someone else had spoken them. He had changed the script and pushed beyond the boundaries of whatever relationship they had. She looked at him with a long steady gaze, and then she was laughing again with her head thrown back.</p> <p>"Oh Billy, Billy, you're so cute."</p> <p>Like he was a kid. He could feel the red heat at the back of his neck. He was definitely not cute. He was big and square-bodied – an average guy that no girl ever turned her head for. What had he expected her to say? Now that he had made his stupid remark, he was speechless. His throat was dry, and he seemed incapable of any movement or thought. In that long, horrible moment she was off again, gliding on her skates to get his order.</p> <p>He followed her with his eyes as she darted over to a Volkswagen in the far corner of the lot. What was she saying to that guy? Probably the same silly talk. Then she was heading back again with the shake. She set the tray on his window and he mumbled "Thanks," keeping his focus on the tall paper cup. He stirred his</p>
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straw slowly through the thick cream. He didn't even want the damned thing.

How could he be so stupid? He slammed his open palm against the steering wheel, accidentally hitting the horn. It blared loud and he pulled back as if he'd touched a hot stove. Some people honked when they wanted the carhop. He never did that, but now here she was coming again because he hit the damned horn.

"You all finished, Billy?"

"Yeah."

She took the tray and skated away. It was over again. He started up the truck and drove out of the lot onto the highway. As soon as Clambo's was out of sight, he gunned it. His shirt was soaked with sweat, and he could feel it running down his face. He hit his hand on the steering wheel. Then he slammed it on the horn on purpose again and again, blaring loud staccato notes as he flew toward home.

He parked by the side of the old farmhouse. Every ounce of his body was tight. He pictured Betty Jean telling her girlfriends what he had said. He pictured them all laughing hysterically with their heads thrown back and their long hair blowing in the wind.

Carson trotted over to the truck, barking and wagging, and looked up at Jackson sitting there. He was a good dog. Jackson got out and stroked the dirty yellow head. Carson followed behind him to the porch. He dropped down on the steps and pulled the dog close, holding him in his arms. Carson panted hard and licked his face. They sat like that for a while, the warm body squirming against him, but not really trying to get away. Jackson held him tight and their breaths rose and fell together. Finally he let the dog go and stared out across the lawn to the open fields.

His mother would probably be inside making dinner or baking something for church. He knew his father would be sitting near the chess board hoping he would offer to play. Right now he just couldn't make that offer. He couldn't pretend that everything was okay. His insides were torn apart. He stood up and started down the steps away from the house. Then he heard Uncle Kenny's truck coming toward the house. It was easy to recognize because the muffler was shot and the engine roared. He stood and waited for him to come into sight.

His uncle rolled down the window and yelled out to him, "Hey boy, what ya doin? Come on and gimme a hand with feeding."

Jackson wished he had gone into the house before Kenny arrived. Kenny always had a chip on his shoulder. There was always something he thought Jackson should be doing. He would probably be happy if Jackson quit school like he had and worked the farm with him full time, but that wouldn't satisfy him either.

Kenny was an angry man. Angry that Jackson's father got hurt. Angry that he had to work so hard every day by himself. Angry that he was growing old alone and unhappy. Jackson knew there was nothing he could do about it, but sometimes he felt sorry for him and they would sit together and talk about stuff. More often he tried to get his chores done and get away. This night he wanted to be alone, but it was easier to help with the feeding and keep quiet.

"What's the matter boy? You look bad."

"Nothing."

He got in the truck and rode with his uncle to the barn. They fed the steers in

silence. Then he went to the hen house and threw out some corn. It only took a few minutes. They walked slowly back toward the trailer together. It was hot and the air was heavy. There would probably be a thunder storm before the night was over.

“Come on, kid. Have a beer with me.”

Kenny made it sound like he wouldn't be having a beer unless he had some company to join him, but that wasn't the case. He'd be having several with or without Jackson. He followed his uncle into the trailer and took a soda from the frig. Sometimes he'd take a beer but not usually.

They went back out and sat on the picnic table that he had helped Kenny build a few years ago. Kenny lit a cigarette and blew the smoke slowly, forming a tight round ring with his lips. Then he tipped the can of beer and swallowed hard. Jackson watched him scan the hay fields that they would be cutting tomorrow. They didn't speak. After a while Kenny went back into the trailer and came out with another beer and another soda.

“Hey boy, whatd'ya say we get that dog of yours and go shoot us some squirrels.”

“Naw, I gotta be going.”

“Whatd'ya mean. You got nuthin' to do.”

“I know, but Ma'll be looking for me.”

“Ah, come on.”

Jackson didn't answer him. Kenny drank the second beer quickly and walked to the trailer again. This time he brought out two beers and set them down hard on the table. He shoved one toward Jackson. Jackson signaled no with his hand up. Kenny snorted.

“You sure ain't like I was when I was your age. I'd be grabbing that beer and drinking it right down. What'sa matter with you anyway?”

Now it was starting. Kenny liked to talk that way and make comparisons between them. It seemed like the best time in Kenny's life was when he was sixteen. He loved to talk about the Ford convertible he had and how he raced it out on state road 83 and one time clocked it at 110. He told him about being a star pitcher on the high school baseball team. Jackson had heard it all before, but he wasn't sure how true it was because Kenny had quit school when he was halfway through his junior year. His father quit too. He was smart and could have gone to the university but Jackson's grandfather needed his sons to work the farm.

It had been a good life Jackson thought, but he was just a kid. They raised beef cattle and grew hay and corn for their own stock and to sell. When Jackson's grandfather passed away, the two brothers kept on farming. Kenny married Denise a few years after Jackson was born. They built a nice small house back away from the barns and main house. Then when Jackson was about eight Denise left Kenny and never came back. Nobody spoke much about it. Kenny sold the lot and house and lived in the old farmhouse with them. After a while he bought a double-wide and put it in the back behind the barns so he was still close by.

It was getting late. Jackson stood up to leave.

“What's your hurry there, Jackson boy? Stick around and keep your old uncle

company.”

At least he hadn't brought up the idea of squirrel hunting again. That was something Jackson would not do with Kenny. He was a good shot when he was sober but when he wasn't, like tonight, he could be really stupid. Somehow Carson usually got blamed for the missed shots and Kenny was a damn mean drunk. He thought nothing of kicking Carson in the ribs. One time he knocked him in the head with the butt of the shot gun. That was the last time. There was no way in hell he'd take Carson out with them ever again.

He remained standing but didn't leave. An image of Betty Jean came into his head, and he realized that since they sat down at the table he had not thought about the afternoon at Clambo's, but now the gut-wrenching humiliation was back. She had laughed at him and called him cute like a little kid. He took a step away from the table and felt Kenny grab him by the wrist and pull him back. He needed to get out of there, but he swung around and pushed back on Kenny's shoulder.

“Whatd'ya think you're doin', boy?”

“I gotta go.”

Kenny grabbed Jackson's shoulder and held it hard with his thumb pressing deep against his collar bone.

“Where ya gotta go?” he taunted.

He was tired. Kenny was drunk – probably had a few on his way back from the feed store too – but he was sick of making excuses for him. Most of the time he tried to be respectful but tonight he was beyond that. His fingers closed into a fist and he swung hard against Kenny's chest. Kenny fell back and lay still on the ground. Then as quickly as he fell, he was up, staggering toward him. Jackson turned to walk away but Kenny threw himself on Jackson's back and they crashed together on the ground. Kenny straddled him and pounded him hard on the chest. He had one arm pinned to his side. Jackson fought back with his free arm. He slammed it like a club against Kenny's neck. Then Kenny's fist smashed into his cheek and he could feel blood running across his face and into his mouth. Jackson didn't care. It felt good to pound on him. He pressed his thumb against Kenny's throat hard and the uncle drew back.

They both lay on their backs looking up at the sky which was darkening now. A faint crescent moon showed itself against the dusk. Their gasping breaths came in unison, slow and loud. Then he must have passed out or maybe he fell asleep. When he opened his eyes, Kenny was gone. He touched his face and grimaced in pain. He closed his eyes again and lay still for a while. Finally he got up and walked back to the house.

From the window he could see that his mother had cleared the dinner table and was watching television with his father in the livingroom. He went inside and washed up in the bathroom. His cheek had begun to swell and his lip was cracked, but it didn't matter. The pain was worth it. He stared at his face in the mirror for a long time. It was about time he gave Kenny what he deserved.

His mother had left his supper in the refrigerator. He took the cold plate out and tried to eat a little, but he wasn't hungry. Then he heard his mother's steps heading toward him. When she saw his face, she gasped and her face contorted as if she was the one in pain.

“It's nuthin' Ma.” I tripped over the ladder by the hay barn.”

He didn't usually lie to her but this time it seemed like the thing to do. She didn't

say anything more, didn't even tell him to put a bandage on it. She just stayed quiet and went back to the livingroom. She didn't want to know about any trouble she could avoid he thought. He scraped his dinner into the garbage pail. He understood.

Saturday was hot and sunny. When Jackson went down to the barn Kenny was already on the John Deere, mowing the first field. He started up the old Farmall and headed to the far side of the lot. It was big, maybe forty acres, so they worked separately on the two halves. Around ten they took a break like they always did, sitting under a big oak tree. Kenny had a red kerchief tied in a band around his head so the sweat wouldn't run down his face. He untied it and rubbed it across his wet neck and cheeks. They stayed silent, taking long gulps from their water jugs. Then Kenny reached over and put his hand on Jackson's shoulder.

"I'm just a fuck up, kid. You know that."

Jackson tensed under his touch. Kenny was a fuck up. There were reasons though. If Pop hadn't had that fall, things would have been so much better for everyone. Kenny was happy back then. The farm had been his life but now it was just a way to survive. Now his happiness came in a can of Budweiser.

When Pop had been in the hospital, Kenny had gone to see him every night. Jackson could remember him crying like a baby when it happened. Now it seemed like Kenny stayed because he loved Pop, but he resented him too. Those feelings, all tangled up inside him, had trapped him in a life he didn't want but couldn't leave.

"It's okay."

Jackson took another long swallow from the jug and they headed back across the fresh cut rows of hay to finish their job.

George had been in Afghanistan but now he was back in the states and stationed in California. He'd spent a couple of days at home on his way out there but that had been almost a year ago. Now he was coming home for Thanksgiving. Jackson was looking forward to the visit. He had always been the kid brother tagging along, wanting to go where George went and do what George did; wanting to be just like him. He still felt kind of like that.

He came the day before Thanksgiving. He flew in to Stewart and drove up from there in a Mustang he rented at the airport. Ma was so happy. Pop was happy too but he didn't show it so much. Ma was crying and hugging George. George kept laughing at her and telling her he didn't want to make her cry. When all that was over Jackson stepped up and tried to shake his hand, but George grabbed him and gave him a big tight hug. Then they all sat around the kitchen table for a while. George told them about California. He liked it there. He looked real good and happy too.

Then Ma started fussing that she hadn't made a special meal because she was baking pies all day. She didn't know he was coming so early. George laughed and said that's why he didn't tell her and he was taking everybody out for dinner. Kenny too, but Kenny was gone when Jackson went down to tell him.

They went in the Mustang. Pop sat up front with George in the bucket seat, and Jackson got in the back with Ma. He wished he was up front but he knew Pop couldn't get in the back seat. The interior was leather and the stick shift had a

leather knob. What a car. Wide tires and alloy spoke wheels. And it was fast. Ma kept telling George to slow down but he just kept saying he was under the speed limit.

“So what’s your favorite restaurant, Pop?” George asked.

Jackson thought Pop would say for Ma to pick it but he didn’t.

“We don’t go out much but I like Clambo’s the best.”

George started laughing again.

“Pop that’s just a fast food joint. Don’t you want to go someplace better than that? I’m treating!”

“They’ve got the best burgers you’ll ever have. Right, Jackson? Jackson goes there all the time.”

“Yeah, they’re good but I don’t go there that much.”

He hadn’t been to Clambo’s since August fourteenth. And he sure didn’t want to go there now, but Pop seemed real eager about it.

“Well whatd’ya think, Ma?” George asked.

“It’s your father’s choice. Whatever he wants.”

Jackson slid down in the leather seat and closed his fists tight. There was nothing he could do. He couldn’t say he didn’t want to go there when Pop was saying it was his favorite place. They rode in silence for a while and then Clambo’s came into view. There wasn’t any car hop service now because it was too cold. For the winter months they just had the small diningroom inside.

George took Pop by the arm and they walked together to the door. Jackson and his mother followed behind them. The place was practically empty except for a few guys sitting at the counter drinking coffee. They hung their coats on the big coat rack by the door and seated themselves at the first booth. Clambo’s wasn’t the kind of place where a hostess would seat you. You just picked out a table and sat down.

He wanted to know if she was there but when the waitress placed the menus on the table he quickly opened one and stared down into it. She wasn’t Betty Jean, that was for sure. She laid out the paper placemats and smiled at him.

“Where you been, Billy?”

He looked up at her. Nobody but Billy Jean called him that. She laughed.

“I remember you. You used to come here all the time in that big ol’truck of yours. And you always parked in Betty Jean’s section. Where you been?”

Pa was studying the menu but George and Ma were looking at her and listening.

It seemed like a long time before he spoke.

“Oh I’ve been around. Busy.” He hesitated. “But my name’s not Billy. It’s Jackson.”

“Oh. Okay Jackson. I thought it was Billy.” She shrugged. “Are you all ready to order?”

He had thought about going back to Clambo’s so often but it was never like this, stuffed into a booth with George and Ma and Pop. The waitress was maybe a little older than Betty Jean and not so pretty, but okay. She wore a thick wool sweater and jeans. Nothing like those yellow outfits the carhops wore in the summer. Everything was different now.

Then George spoke up.

“So who is this Betty Jean?”

He was talking to the waitress but he winked at Jackson as if to let him know that he figured she must be somebody he liked a lot or maybe even a girlfriend.

“Oh, one of the carhops. She’s gone now.”

Jackson smiled to himself. Yeah, he thought. She’s gone now. It was the night before Thanksgiving and he hadn’t seen her since August, hadn’t even been to Clambo’s since that day. It was hard to say why, but he felt better than he had in a long time.

“Where did she go?” he asked, not because it made any difference but just because he felt like asking.

“I’m not sure. Back home I guess.”

So it was just a summer job. He had wondered about that. Wondered a lot of things about her, but it didn’t really matter. She was gone and it was okay. Even though he had thought about her every day, it all seemed like a long time ago now.

The waitress brought their dinners. Pop had the Clambo Burger Special with fries and cole slaw and so did Jackson. They were the best burgers around. Pop was right.

When they left the restaurant George tossed the keys to Jackson.

“I know you wanna drive it. Go ahead. Take us home.”

Jackson stood still for a minute with the keys gripped tightly in his hand, looking at the car. He hadn’t expected the offer.

“Yeah.”

He jumped into the driver’s seat quickly as if he were afraid George would change his mind. When he turned on the lights, the dials on the dashboard lit up like a jet ready for take-off. He backed up carefully and turned out onto the highway. It took a few minutes to get used to everything, and then it was just him and the car, alone, shooting through the darkness. He was no longer aware of Pop in the front seat beside him or George and Ma in the back. He felt the car’s power charge through his arms and his whole body as he grasped the steering wheel and pressed down on the gas pedal. He was strong and free. One day he would have a car like that.

When they got home, Ma and Pop went right to bed. George got a beer and sat down in front of the TV. Jackson turned it on but George started to talk so he kept the volume low. He wanted to know how Pop was really doing and Ma too and the

farm and Kenny. George knew how Kenny could be.

Jackson didn't think about those things too much, but now that George was asking, he had to. Pop wasn't really all that good even though he never complained. And the farm – well, they were getting by – renting out those big fields to Wilkes and all, but he was pretty sure Kenny wanted out. He'd probably go work at the lumber mill if he could and get a steady check. Maybe that would be better. He wasn't sure about Pop.

Jackson drifted away, thinking about how things were going, how maybe they should be. Suddenly he realized George was still talking.

"You gotta get out of here. You can't stay in this place all your life – working with Kenny and sitting on the back porch with Pop. They gotta sell this place and get out too." He said it again. "You gotta get out. What are you doing? Do you even have a girlfriend? You just work and polish that damned truck of yours. There's more Jackson. There's more. Nothing's changed for you since Pop got hurt."

* * *

On Thanksgiving Day they always had dinner in the afternoon. The turkey had been in the oven since early morning and the smell of it filled the kitchen. They waited around the house and watched the Macy's parade while Ma cooked.

Finally at about four o'clock Ma put all the food out and they sat down. There was Ma and Pop, George and Kenny and him. Ma invited Mrs. Bunnell from down the road but she went to see her daughter in Syracuse. Ma said a few words of grace which she never did any other day. He watched the bowed heads as his mother spoke – quietly and quickly –so as not to hold them up from their desire to fill their plates and their appetites.

His father sat erect in a stiff-collared white shirt with a dark blue tie. George had pressed his jeans with a crease and had his shirt sleeves rolled up. No tie. Kenny looked like he did most days but it was clear that he had shaved that morning and he had on a clean tee shirt. His mother wore a silky gray dress that she had bought for some wedding a while ago and the gold bracelet his father had given her back before he got hurt.

Pop carved the turkey. He had a hard time with it though so Kenny took over after a while. Ma looked happy as she watched the men heap their plates with the food she had prepared and saw that they were content. They ate with eyes cast down and spoke about the goodness of the meal, and especially the turkey and Ma's secret recipe stuffing.

He knew the pies that she had baked yesterday would be next. Apple and mince, even though everyone usually just wanted apple. Mince was a tradition, she said. She brought out one of each and, like always, big slices of apple were served up to everyone as requested. Ma cut herself a little slice of mince, probably thinking that once it was cut there was a chance somebody would have some as a second piece.

Jackson chose a piece of the mince. He could see that his mother brightened. As he slid it onto his plate, he realized that he had never before tasted the mince. It was okay, a little strong, and definitely not as good as the apple. He had picked those Macs from the tree out by the main road. Yeah, apple was better. He would have some later or tomorrow.

After dinner Kenny sat down in front of the TV again and flipped to a football game. Jackson's father watched too, but Jackson could see that the long day had tired him and knew he would soon be dozing off. George helped his mother carry the dishes to the kitchen and gave her a quick kiss. Then he was off in the

Mustang, going to meet some friends, probably at the Wonder Bar.

Jackson finished clearing the table.

“It was a great meal, Ma.”

“Thank you Jackson.”

He gave her a hug and a kiss.

“I’m going to go feed.”

He watched her putting leftovers away in little plastic containers and wrapping up some of the turkey in foil packages to freeze. She stopped and held up the wishbone. They placed their fingers on each side and snapped it, as they had done many times before. He held the long piece.

“You won. Make a wish.”

“Yup. I will. Just have to think about it a little.”

“Well, don’t forget.”

He grabbed his jacket and went outside. Carson bounded up beside him and together they headed for the barn. It was cold and quiet. The sky was dark. Carson went on ahead of him, and then suddenly he was off yelping and running toward the fence line. Jackson tried to see where he was headed but it was too dark. He could hear him though, growling like a watch dog. Carson wasn’t much of a hunter but tonight something had gotten him going.

Jackson kept walking in the dark, getting closer to what he now knew was a struggle between Carson and some other animal. He went into the barn and turned on the outside light. Carson was right around the corner. His teeth were locked tight onto the neck of a raccoon. The coon had stopped struggling and lay limp but Carson continued the fight. Only when Jackson arrived did he loosen his grip and look at him. Jackson stared back at the strong, proud creature standing over his victim like a warrior.

The sight of the dying animal disturbed him. The sight of Carson with his jaws clamped on the coon’s neck disturbed him even more, but it was exhilarating as well to see that side of the gentle dog. Tonight he was a hunter, fearless and determined.

Jackson sat on the ground next to the dog and the coon. Carson lay down and put his head on his lap. Jackson stroked his back and watched the coon take his last breaths. The quiet of the night returned. Finally he dragged the dead coon into the woods and covered it with pine branches. Tomorrow he would bury it.

Back at the house he watched his father sleep. He looked peaceful, leaning back in the chair with his legs up on the hassock. Jackson walked in through the kitchen. The warmth felt good, and the smell of the roasting turkey still lingered in the air.

His father twitched and opened his eyes.

“Guess I dozed off.”

“Yup. You did.”

"I'm awake now. I'll play you a game," he said motioning to the chess board.

"Sure Pop. Let's see how long it takes for you to whip my ass this time!"

They laughed together and Jackson got another chair from the diningroom. Pop was always intense when they got down to playing. Jackson was a mediocre player but Pop was really good. One thing was for sure. Pop never felt sorry for him, never let him win to make him feel good, and the truth was he never had won. It was always just a matter of how good a game he played and how long he could hold him off.

Pop took a lot of time before he made some of his moves. Jackson got restless waiting and glanced at his watch under the table. It wasn't that late. It got dark early now that daylight savings was over. Then he surveyed the board and saw that he was still holding his own. No words passed between them and it was finally his turn again. He maneuvered his remaining bishop to confront Pop's queen. At least Pop would need to use the next turn to avoid losing her instead of moving forward with whatever strategy he had planned.

Pop moved the queen to safety, and Jackson positioned the bishop to confront again. The moves came more quickly now as Jackson had his father on the defensive. Another move and another. Finally the silence was broken as Jackson said, almost inaudibly, "Check" and then after a few moments, after his father studied all positions, "Checkmate." There was disbelief on both sides. Then Pop looked across at him and extended his hand. Jackson grasped it tightly.

"Well played, son."

"Thanks, Pop."

He got up and returned his chair to the diningroom. Pop looked kind of happy but maybe a little disgruntled too – or just tired. He wasn't sure.

"I'm turning in, now," he told his father who was repositioning the pieces for another day.

Jackson walked up the back stairs to his room. Carson was already asleep on the foot of the bed. He pushed the dog over and lay down beside him. He wasn't tired, but he stayed very still beneath the cold sheets. He was proud. He had won the game, beaten his father. He could probably do it again. It was a good feeling. And yet, there was sadness too. A lot of things turned out like that he thought. Just the way things are.
