

making
a
difference

a story of practical compassion

catherine b. fitzgerald

BALBOA
PRESS

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Reunion

December 27

Kayla called to me as I carried in the sheet cake. “Hey, Jim—can you help?” She was standing on a chair, trying to reach the center light fixture to tie up a bunch of balloons. It was still early, and no one else was there. I went over and grabbed the balloon strings while she stepped down.

“Thanks, Jim,” she said. “I hate being short.”

“Nobody is tall enough for these ceilings,” I said, dragging a table over. I pulled off the plastic tablecloth and jumped on the table, tied the balloons to the light as neatly as I could, and called it good. “Anything else?”

“No, just help me clean up this mess. I’ll recycle everything, if you’ll just do the sorting. They’ll be here in half an hour.”

“Don’t stress over it, Kayla. If we’re not ready, we’ll just ask them to help.” I looked around the room as I picked up the empty packaging and plastic bags. She had decorated in white, silver, and two shades of blue. “I hope people like the winter theme,” she said. “I just couldn’t look at any more red and green.”

“Looks great, Kayla!” She wasn’t convinced. “I don’t know, Jim. It still looks like a back room in a small-town family restaurant.”

“The food will be great, and that’s the most important thing. To guys, anyway,” I said.

Right on cue, Thanh’s mother came in from the kitchen to set up the buffet line. Wonderful smells wafted in the door with her. “Smells delicious!” I told her. She still doesn’t like to speak English, even though she came from Vietnam 25 years

ago. But I could tell by her smile that she understood what I said.

“Who’s coming this year, Jim?” Kayla asked. “I set up for 35, like you said, but which 35?”

“The usuals, mostly—Megan, Chelsea, Jennifer, Brianna, Bishoy, Justin and Nancy, José Miguel, Brad, Vlasic, Kirit, Luis, Aaron . . .” Kayla was opening the sheet cake box and only half listening. “Oh no—they gave you the wrong cake!” she said. “It’s supposed to say ‘Madison High Reunion’ on it!” “No, I told them to write ‘Happy 30th Birthday’ because we’re all turning 30 this year. One of those milestones I thought we should celebrate together. Hope that’s okay with you.” “Well, whatever,” Kayla said. “As long as it tastes good, like you said. Did you bring candles to put on it?” “No, I didn’t go that far.”

Justin and Nancy came a few minutes early. Kayla went over to Nancy right away, gave her a hug, asked her how she was doing, and took her to the cake table to help set up. “How *is* Nancy doing?” I whispered to Justin. He looked a little stressed. “Well, I know Ryan’s on her mind, but she’s not saying much. It’s only been three months. I guess it’s kind of hard to talk to your current boyfriend about your dead ex-boyfriend, especially if he’s a hero. They were almost like brother and sister. I don’t know what to say to her—good thing Kayla’s here to take over.”

When Ryan was killed working for a charity in Afghanistan, it hit a lot of us hard. “I know Nancy misses Ryan, but at least she has you. That’s got to mean a lot to her,” I told Justin. “Well, maybe,” he said.

Vlasic was next in the door. He came over to Justin and asked, “So how’s business at Geezer Hardware? You and Nancy still work there?” “Sure,” Justin said. “We like working for my dad.” “Your new radio ads are great,” Vlasic said. “‘Need one screw? Buy one screw.’ That’s a terrific slogan.”

“It works,” said Justin. “That’s how we survive the competition from the big-box stores.”

The room filled gradually. People arrived in ones and twos until all of a sudden at 7:15 there was a big rush. Everyone knew that Nancy was Ryan’s ex, and there was a trace of awkwardness in the air. When most people were there, we held a moment of silence for Ryan. That seemed to help resolve the discomfort—at least we had acknowledged it was there—and then we started to get into the spirit of things.

We spent the first half-hour exchanging high fives, taking selfies together and posting them online, catching up on the latest news.

Bishoy came over to harass me. “Hey, Jim!” he said. “Climb any big stones lately?” He was wearing a thick wool sweater over a fleece pullover and two or three shirts, which gave me a good opening to harass him back. “Not lately, but I’m thinking about doing some ice climbing this winter. Wanna come?” “No way,” Bishoy said, shuddering. “Maybe in July.” I knew he’d say no—he grew up in Egypt, and he has a hard time with winter.

It was fun seeing people—we only get together once a year. I always get a few “Mr. Taxman” jokes. “I’m off duty until January 2,” I tell them. I work in the city, and when I’m home visiting my parents over the holidays, I try to forget about being an accountant. It’s a good living but not much fun.

I got a lot of questions about my parents. My classmates all know them—they both worked at the high school until they retired about five years ago. “They’re getting ready to move to a condo by the mall,” I said. “The house is too big and too much work for them now.” “I don’t want to lose touch with them! Can we still call them?” Jennifer asked. “Sure—they’d love to hear from you.” Megan overheard us and said, “Be sure to wish them a happy anniversary for me!”

Practically everybody from the school—especially the women—remembers that Mom and Dad were married on New Year’s Eve. “It’s their 40th this year,” I told people, hoping to generate a little more buzz.

Around 7:45 the buffet line opened by popular demand, and Thanh took over at the mike. He’s a stand-up comedian at a club in the city—not a bad career for a former class clown. He started cracking corny, old-fashioned jokes—the minister-priest-rabbi standards, some “why did the [fill in the blank] cross the road” jokes, and one long-winded story that ended in a horrible pun that made everyone groan. After everybody got food and settled down, he ran through some routines he uses at the club. He’s good. Not that he makes a living at it—yet. For real money he waits tables in another part of the city.

Thanh got married last spring, and his wife was already pregnant. She’s Vietnamese American too, and she seemed gentle and self-effacing. I saw Kayla talking to her and introducing her around, making sure she was included in the conversation. Later in the evening, Kayla came over hiding something in her hand. “Get this,” she said. “I asked Thanh’s wife for her contact information so I could keep in touch, and she wrote her cell number on the back of her business card.” She turned the card over to show me the front: Ahn Duong, Junior Partner, Intellectual Property Rights Division, Heston, Brown, & Barney. “I think this woman is tougher than she looks!” Kayla laughed.

Every year Thanh likes to read the names of our classmates from the yearbook, and anyone who knows anything about them shouts it out—or we look on social media. We never get more than halfway through the alphabet, though, so this year Thanh started with the L’s.

Megan and Chelsea were bff’s before anybody knew that meant “best friends forever,” but that doesn’t keep them

from being competitive. As Thanh went down the list, they competed, game-show style, to see who could come up with new stuff first. “Xavier Lewis?” Megan found him first. “Married with *two* kids!” Everybody clapped and whistled. “Angela Martin?” “Engaged to an old college friend,” Brittany called out. “Source?” Megan demanded, fingers on her phone. “My mom found out from Angela’s mom at the gym.” “No fair!” Chelsea shouted. “Amanda Mehta?” Nobody knew anything. Not on social media. Thanh played it like an auctioneer: “Going once, going twice, gone. Okay, next: Craig Morrison?”

The major news most of us knew already, but it was a fun tradition. Eventually Megan and Chelsea declared a draw and sat down to eat. “Okay, next!” Thanh yelled anyway, determined to finish the alphabet. “Come on, you guys! Less than 10 left! Jacob Weber?” “He signed up for Doctors Without Borders,” Luis called out. “He’s not on social media, but I saw his bio and his picture on the Doctors Without Borders site.” A few “awesomes” popped up around the room. “Anything else?” Thanh yelled. “Going once, going twice, gone! Next . . .”

I was stunned. Jacob, with Doctors Without Borders? Jacob, who I used to just hang with, doing nothing? Jacob, who loved the outdoors as much as I did? Jacob, who I thought I knew?

I pretended I was paying attention, but I couldn’t get my mind off Jacob. I already knew he was a rising star at the biggest medical center in the city. He’d stopped texting Justin and me years ago, even though we were so tight all the way through middle school that everybody called us the Three J’s. I had to admit I had a bit of an attitude about Jacob—I thought he was just in medicine for the money. I felt kind of bad about that when I found out he was going for Doctors Without Borders—and I felt way outclassed. I mean, what did I have to

offer the world, compared to Jacob—or even Ryan? But I had to pull myself out of my thoughts for the moment and put my attention on the rest of the roll call.

After Thanh finished the alphabet and declared victory, we went back to the buffet for seconds and pretty much cleaned it out. People split up into little groups, playing “remember when” or “what if.”

Travis came late. He didn’t usually come at all, so he got a good welcome. Somehow he had gotten himself elected to the city council, and he has a lot of civic responsibilities. He picked up a few leftovers from the buffet and sat down in an empty seat across from me. “Hey, Jim,” he said, “good to see you. Where’s Marisa?” “We broke up two years ago,” I said, matter-of-factly. He gave a low whistle. “Sorry, man, I didn’t know. That was a long run—what was it, 10 years?” “More like 12,” I said, wishing he would change the subject. “Didn’t I see her little brother here?” “Yeah, José Miguel. He’s over there at the cake table, with his new girlfriend.” “So *he* still likes us, anyway. I’m sorry Marisa’s not here—she’s one in a million.” Now I *really* wanted Travis to change the subject. That didn’t seem likely, so I got up to get some cake. “Want me to get you a piece before it’s gone?” I asked Travis. “It’s supposed to make 48 servings, but I think that’s 48 *small* servings.” “Sure,” Travis said, and I escaped to the cake table. Hopefully someone else would talk to Travis and get him on another topic.

I wanted to check in with José anyway. Usually when I’m visiting my parents he calls me up and takes me to the gym as his guest once or twice, but not this year. My guess was it had something to do with this new girlfriend. “Hi, Jim,” he said. “How’re you doing? Oh—I’d like you to meet Sierra.” And to Sierra: “Jim is Marisa’s ex.” Marisa again!—well, what could you expect?

Sierra was as good-looking as José and seemed friendly

and fun. I could see why José was interested in her. “I heard your car broke down and that’s how you met José,” I said to Sierra. She laughed and said, “I think it’s called making lemons into lemonade!” “A fringe benefit for being the service manager—I get the first chance to ask the customers for a date,” José said. Sierra smiled over her shoulder as she walked off to get more green tea to go with her cake. “Sweet, isn’t she? She’s only 19,” José whispered to me proudly. So she was three years younger than José, which made her the youngest person in the room. Nineteen—wow! I was 19 once. It felt like a lifetime ago.

I get a funny sensation sometimes, standing and talking to José. We’re about the same height and build, and it’s almost like looking in a mirror. He’s Mexican and I’m biracial—my mother is white and my father is black—and we look like we could be related. When Marisa and I were going together, I called him Hermanito, “Little Brother,” and sometimes we passed ourselves off as brothers, just for fun. But everyone at the reunion knew we weren’t real brothers, and without Marisa, there was no fun in pretending.

“Hey, Jim,” José said, “I’m trying to get an ultimate Frisbee team going this year. Are you interested?” “Ask me in a few months, okay? I’d have to decide if I’m up for that much driving—four hours round trip from the city is a lot.” I didn’t want to say that I doubted my knees would hold up. José’s knees are a lot younger than mine. “Is Sierra signing up?” I said. “I haven’t asked her yet—I’ll tell you later.”

I brought Travis his cake. Fortunately he had gotten absorbed in a conversation with Chelsea. Anything anyone in the room wanted to talk about was bound to be interesting. Everyone there had a favorite travel destination, a favorite cause, or a favorite organization they volunteered with. It was a very colorful and lively bunch. I’m probably the least colorful of the group, at least in terms of my profession. I don’t

have a real passion, either, just things I like to do, mostly outdoors. That was why I became an accountant—to fund my recreational pursuits. But I hadn't quite thought through how it would feel to be completely sedentary for 40 hours a week most of the year.

Somehow the topic of our class motto came up. Ten years ago, we'd set "Everest or bust!" as our rallying cry. Vlastic banged on a table for attention and issued an ultimatum. "So, are we going to climb Everest or not? Because if we are, I think we should do it ASAP, and if we're not, I think we should change our motto." No one seemed to want to give up on our original motto, so Vlastic called for a vote. "How many people want to climb Everest this year?" No one raised their hand. "That's what I thought. So we need a new motto, right?" Brad stood up and yelled, "Or a new mountain. Let's climb Kilimanjaro instead!" "Kilimanjaro? Why Kilimanjaro?" Vlastic asked. "It's shorter and easier to climb, and you're less likely to die trying," Brad said. "One of my college buddies did it last summer, and it sounded cool."

Not everyone liked the idea, but nobody had a better one. Quite a few wanted to go for it. José was ready to sign up right away. Sierra didn't look excited about the idea, and Justin's and Nancy's annual vacation was already committed to Habitat for Humanity. But Megan and Chelsea were enthusiastic, and so were six or eight others. Vlastic had been hanging on to his signing bonus from the military for years, to use toward the down payment on a house—but he'd broken up with his girlfriend so he figured he didn't need a house. "You're only young once, right?" he said. That was the mood in the room, and the idea of climbing Kilimanjaro caught on fast.

Most of our conversation for the rest of the evening focused on Kilimanjaro. Everyone was looking for information on their phones, asking Brad what he knew, and imagining

what it would be like to fly to another continent and climb its highest mountain.

Brad and José and Vlastic became The Committee. “So when are we going?” Brad shouted, rapping on the table for attention. “This year or next?” “This year!” everybody yelled back. “What month?” This time the responses were all over the map. A couple of websites said there were fewer mosquitoes in June and July so you were less likely to come home with malaria if you went then. So June seemed like the earliest we could go—if we could even book a tour for a group on such short notice. “What’s our budget per person? \$5,000? \$4,000? \$3,000?” “Let’s see who’ll give us the best deal,” Vlastic yelled. So we decided not to decide. But just before we left the restaurant, we shouted our new motto: “Kilimanjaro or bust!”

I signed myself up as a tentative yes. I figured I could probably pull it off financially—but did I want to?

Africa. To see Africa. What would Dad think of that?