

A SECOND CHANCE

“Hey Smudge, why the long face?”

Putting his arm around his daughter Walt Robinson looks over at Josh. “Not a good day, Rabbi,” he says quietly. “... cheerleading squad was chosen this afternoon.”

“And you didn’t make the team, Camryn,” the Rabbi says, the compassion in his eyes replacing the smile on his face.

“Right, Rabbi Josh,” the teen says. “Guess I’m just not blonde enough.”

“And that’s all?”

“Well no, the good news just keeps on coming. “Let’s see, my boyfriend broke up with me Saturday so now I don’t have a date for the Halloween dance. I’m bombing Spanish which I didn’t want to take in the first place, and the band director said they didn’t have any more openings.

“Seems I just don’t fit anywhere.”

Hi, Tony here. We’re at Walt Robinson’s house tonight. Walt, Ace, Rabbi Josh, Reverend Randall, Father John, Bullets, and Joey are watching the Boys in Black playing in the Monday night game. Some of the guys occasionally get together to catch the game and tonight Walt’s playing host.

Seems Walt’s daughter, Camryn, has been getting the short end of the stick lately. She’s sixteen, a junior at Southside High, and a really sweet kid. Her nickname is “Smudge.” Seems one Ash Wednesday a couple years ago, she and her family received the traditional blessing, ashes on the forehead, only it looked like someone used a shovel and her little brother called it “a big smudge.” The nickname stuck, and it’s a credit to her good nature that Camryn plays along even though I

think she'd probably like something a little more exotic, or romantic. Give her time.

Anyway, the Boys in Black are already up by twenty-one points and knowing these guys, right now picking up Camryn's spirits is more important to them than the game.

What do you say we listen in?

"So, let me see, the way you figure it, you're vanilla in a 'rocky road smothered in hot fudge world,' huh, Smudge?" John Randall says, chuckling softly.

"Yea, and I'm not the whipped cream and the cherry on top," Reverend Randall. At the rate I'm going, I'm gonna end up an old spinster playing the kazoo at Tuesday night bingo at the home for old maids."

"Don't forget the bag lady mumbling to herself in really bad Spanish," chuckles her dad.

The mental picture draws a laugh from the teen. "Ah yes, daddy, won't you be so proud?"

Walt pretends to loop his fingers through an imaginary pair of suspenders. "Someone who could speak Spanish and play the kazoo," he says in a bad hillbilly accent. "Why, I'd be so proud of my little girl. "I'm a tellin' ya', my chest'd be all puffed out like a road kill raccoon on a Georgia highway on a hot August day."

Laughter abounds - Camryn herself laughing the hardest. Humor is something you can count on with this red-head and her dad. They're a rare duo.

"You're being too hard on yourself, Camryn," Josh says.

“Yea, kiddo, ease up a little.” Uncle Joey says.

“Yea, I know. It’s just everyone else seems to have it so together,” Camryn says, dejection still heavy in her voice.

“You know, from the time I was a kid I always wanted to be golf professional,” Joey says. “I thought it would be the greatest job ever. I got in it and found the reality a lot different. And not in a good way. I was terribly unhappy for a long time. And when I quit the business, it took me ten years or so to find where I really belonged. Smudge, if I kept trying to push myself into a slot where I didn’t fit, I’d be miserable today.”

“Yea, Uncle Joey, but at least you figured it out. Me, I don’t seem to fit anywhere.”

“No, maybe not yet, but give it time,” Ace says, a gentle smile of understanding on his face.

“I don’t know,” the redhead says, her voice trailing off.

“Answer me a question, sweetheart,” Rabbi Josh says, popping the tab on a can of cola and handing it to Camryn. “Can you name something that started off an absolute disaster, and ended up an incredible success?”

“I don’t know, Columbus discovering America, maybe?”

“Good answer. But I was thinking of something else. Have you ever heard of leprosy?”

“You mean the disease, the one in the Bible?”

“That’s the one.”

“Well, sure, it was terrible, people died from it, right?”

“Right. And those who had it were shunned, driven out of society. And the saddest part of all was that it was their responsibility to banish themselves. They couldn’t go anywhere in public, not to the market, to temple, to a friend’s house, anywhere. Talk about being rejected.”

“Okay, but how does it relate to me?”

“Well, here’s what I want you to do,” Josh says, winking at Father Bob. “Go over to the computer and type in the word t-h-a-l-i-d-o-m-i-d-e, okay? “

“Okay.”

Sitting down at her computer, the glow from the screen illuminates the teen’s face as she types in the letters. A few seconds pass. “Found it,” she announces. Pausing, a look of disbelief morphing slowly to horror crosses her face. “Oh gross, how terrible,” she says, drawing back from the screen.

“What do you see?”

“Oh how sad, Rabbi. It’s this picture of a little baby and it doesn’t have any arms or legs, just little things that look like ... flippers.”

“And?”

“It says that this thalidomide was a drug used in the 1950’s to treat morning sickness, but it caused terrible birth defects and they pulled it off the market and banned it.” Pausing to look at more pictures, indignation replaces the shock on her face. “I would hope so,” the teen says, half to herself.

“They banned it, right? But you know what they didn’t do?”

“What?”

“They didn’t throw it in the trash.”

“Why not, if it did things like this.” Camryn says, pointing at the computer screen.

Smiling gently, Josh nods in the direction of the screen. “Read on. What else did they find?”

The room falls silent for a few moments as Camryn reads further. And then, a jerk of her head. “They found it cures leprosy,” she says quietly, her tone bordering on amazement.

“Exactly, sweetheart. The disaster becomes a miracle; a savior for people who once had no hope. And that’s the point. Even given its initial failure; they didn’t toss it out. They simply put it on the shelf until one day someone found its true calling.”

“And you’re saying that this drug, thalidomide, is an example what Uncle Joey’s talking about?”

“Well, metaphor’s a better word. But, yea. Trying to put yourself into somewhere you don’t fit.”

“Or trying to use a talent for one thing, when it is better suited for another?” she asks.

“Exactly.”

“So, does the girl’s softball team need another player?” Ace asks. “I hear you weren’t too shabby with a bat and glove a few years ago.”

“Who knows, maybe French is your thing, or Russian,” says Josh.

Shaking her long red hair, Camryn smiles softly. “Who knows, we’ll see. Maybe one day, I’ll own Antoinette’s,” she says, batting her eyes at the Rabbi. “Bon soir, monsieur.”

“How about the school play? You’ve got a flair and a great sense of humor, kid,” chuckles Bullets.

Smudge pauses a minute, a devilish smile creeping across her face, Picking up a softball lying on a table, she presses her index finger to her lips, looks at the ball thoughtfully, and exclaims; “Alas poor Yorick ...” And then pantomiming someone shooting a basketball, she dribbles the ball, takes two steps to her right and ‘shoots’ the ball into the wastebasket next to her dad’s desk. Raising her arms and grinning from ear to ear she says, “She shoots, she scores!!”

And the room dissolves in laughter ...

Getting off to a poor start goes way back. Peter, the head of the Church, denied three times that he even knew Jesus. Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles started out as a coat rack at the stoning of St. Stephen. When you get down to it, God, Himself, gave up on man ... almost. Thank heavens for an ark, the rainbow, and that dove.

Jesus cured a blind man and the Pharisees demanded to know whose fault the man’s blindness was. Christ’s answer was illuminating; “He was born so that the glory of God may shine through him.” Jesus, Himself, told us what is too often seen as a tragedy may in the end be an incomparable blessing.

“The stone that the builders rejected became the cornerstone ...” Words from the Good Book. Ask yourself, if failure seems to be your constant companion, if you’ve given up on your faith in yourself, and your God, and your world seems filled with loneliness, sorrow, pain, disappointment or a sense of hopelessness ...

... might not it be time to fall back on those values you learned as a kid. You know the ones, honesty, respect, courage, and faith ...

... and give yourself another chance? ...

... Thinkaboutit ... I'm Tony Baggz