

Prologue:

Thursday March 12

“Hello. This is Hugh.” Just hearing his deep baritone answer the phone with the same greeting he has used for as long as I’ve known him caused me to start feeling better right away.

Hugh and I have had a friendship that dates back to our teens so many, many years ago.

We were both thirteen when fate caused our two paths to collide. Hugh happened to walk into the school gym just as Brian, David and Gary, the fearsome trio whose schoolyard reign of terror caused many an anxious moment, were about to reposition certain body parts of mine because I had the audacity to refuse their demands to hand over my lunch.

Even at that young age Hugh exhibited an uncanny ability to understand human psychology. He rushed over to my side, immediately identified Brian as the gang leader, pushed him to the ground and, in a chillingly menacing voice that I vividly remember to this day, told David and Gary what their fate would be if they came one step closer.

As is the case with all bullies, when challenged, they turned and fled with Brian picking himself up off the ground and stumbling after them.

Our friendship began in that moment and has lasted to this day.

We were an improbable pair. Hugh was, and still is, tall, good looking and athletic. I am, um, none of the above and yet from that unlikely beginning we became inseparable.

Throughout high school and into early adulthood we did everything together. Hugh’s large circle of friends became my friends and for the first time in my life I felt accepted.

Suddenly I found myself included in party invitations, burger outings, dates, poker, movies, sport and all other events befitting members of the inner circle.

We became each others sounding boards for all matters. We sought each others advice and input on dating, schoolwork, acne and every other topic of teenage importance.

I often wondered why we were friends. We were so different. He was so accomplished and I always felt we were unequal's. He seemed to effortlessly excel in everything he did; school, sports, music, attracting friends. I, on the other hand, seemed capable only of mediocrity. I achieved average results in most of those things and, as a wise person once said, "average simply means you are the best of the worst or the worst of the best."

As the years passed and we transitioned through adolescence, early adulthood, marriage(s), careers, families and into the present day of middle age the bonds of our friendship grew stronger despite long gaps in contact as our lives took us in different directions and the sheer busyness of life frequently nudged the friendship out of immediate focus.

We both knew that despite these interruptions in continuity, we were always there for each other, in an instant, if needed.

We were often out of contact for a year or more and yet each time we did reconnect it was like a magical reunion that caused the time gaps to evaporate as if we had never spent a day apart. We just simply picked up where we had left off. We both knew the rarity of this type of relationship and, while we never discussed this, I'm sure Hugh felt as blessed as I do for the friendship that has transcended more than four decades.

As close as we were as friends in the similarities of our dreams and desires for our lives, we were as opposite as possible in what we accomplished in our lives.

By the time we were twenty-five Hugh had started a technology company and sold it to an investment fund for a gazillion dollars. I was struggling to pay my phone bill.

By thirty Hugh had been married to Brenda, his high school sweetheart, for seven years and they had produced a Hugh clone named Michael and a beautiful daughter, Jill. I was close to the end of my second marriage.

By forty Hugh had started and sold two additional companies and was semi-retired, consulting to businesses around the world and running the foundation he and Brenda had established to teach entrepreneurship to young adults. I was struggling through my third

business, having shut one down and given the other to a person who was willing to assume the debt.

By fifty Hugh's life was a whirlwind of luxurious holidays, family functions, grandchildren, two best-selling management books and he was constantly feted as a guest lecturer at organizations all over the world. My business was barely paying its bills and there was always too much month left at the end of the money. For me a holiday was taking a day away from the office to catch up on repairs to the house.

Despite the disparity in our life accomplishments, our friendship had always remained strong. I was truly delighted by Hugh's successes and he was never judgmental of my failures. He had always told me that if I wanted his advice I need only ask and that he would never offer me any unsolicited advice.

True to his word he had listened intently each time I had explained my next grand plan and had always been there to offer comfort and encouragement when my grandiose ideas failed to reach my expectations.

We shared in each others joy. I was the best man at his wedding. He was the best man at all three of mine (he told me he owned a wash and wear tux that he had bought just for my weddings).

I am Michael's godfather and was in the waiting room at the hospital when Jill was born. I don't have children so he named all three of my dogs.

I attended the celebrations each time he sold a business. He was at the grand opening of each of mine.

We also shared in each others sorrows. He was a pall bearer when my parents passed away. I was with him when he identified his father's remains after he had been struck by a drunk driver.

He was there when I was diagnosed with a devastating, life threatening illness and his was the first face I saw when I opened my eyes after life-saving surgery.

And tragically, I was by his side, along with Michael and Jill, when, three years ago Brenda succumbed to the breast cancer she had fought so valiantly for six years.

A year later Hugh had packed his broken heart and moved to New York, where both Michael and Jill lived with their families. We have not spoken since then.

“Hi Hugh, it’s Earl,” I breathed into the phone. “It’s great to hear your voice, how are you?”

“Earl? What a pleasant surprise. I’ve been thinking that I should call you. It’s been so long. How are you?”

“I’m terrific,” I lied. “I thought two years was long enough so I decided to check in on you. God knows if I’d waited for you to call I’d have died of old age.”

Even in my fifties I still can’t help being a smartass.

We spent ten minutes or so getting caught up on each others lives and then Hugh asked “So Earl, it’s terrific hearing from you, I’m delighted you called. Now what’s the real reason why you are calling?”

I wasn’t surprised by the question. I have never been able to keep anything from him.

I took a deep breath, paused and slowly exhaled. “Hugh,” I began, “I really need to talk to you.

“I am at a point in my life where I just don’t know what to do. It seems my whole life has been a series of things blowing up in my face and no matter what I do I can’t seem to break the cycle of never succeeding at anything in the long term.”

“I know,” he said. “I’ve been expecting this call for a long time. I’ve watched you struggle for so many years and I worry about you a lot. How bad is it?”

“I don’t know if it’s any worse than it has always been, it’s just that it never seems to get better and my ability to deal with the never-ending stress is not what it used to be. I always used to believe that if I just hung in there things would get better but now I find myself anticipating the worst in everything I do. Frankly Hugh, I’m exhausted. I don’t like the thoughts that keep going through my head, you know, the thoughts that keep telling me that it will never get better and that I would be better off dead.”

“Earl,” he interrupted, “are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“I’m not sure I know what I’m saying, Hugh. I feel that I have no control over my life and I seem to have lost all faith in my ability to do anything. My self confidence has nose-dived into the ground and I don’t know if I have the strength to keep fighting, or if I even want to.”

“Earl I know you won’t believe this but I know exactly how you feel. And, I promise you, there is a way out. If you remember, a long time ago I promised you I would never offer advice unless you asked for it. Please tell me you’re asking now.”

“I am asking” I said, “I might even be begging.”

“Well” Hugh interjected, “we promised each other years ago that we would always be there for each other and we always have. In the time of my greatest need, when Brenda died, you were there and you were my rock. Without you to lean on I don’t think I would have survived those terrible days.

“Now it’s my turn. I will be there in two days. I need you to book two rooms at a hotel and promise me you will move into one of those rooms for three days, with no outside interruptions, while we figure this out. Do we have a deal?”

“Sure,” I replied feeling both hopeful that there may be a solution and guilty that Hugh was going to fly all the way here just to listen to my sad tale of woe.

I gave him the name of the hotel where we would meet, said goodbye and hung up.

“If you enjoyed reading this chapter of my book Life Sinks or Soars – the Choice is Yours and would like to purchase a copy, please email me at rael@raelkalley.com. Thank you.”