

Only The Beginning

by
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Ben

My name is Ben. I'm 83 years young. Okay, I'm 83 years old. Get over it. Age is merely a number, a fading reflection of our life journey. Like all old people, I have a story to tell you. You see, I'm old enough to understand that such stories blossom from the seeds of reality. And truth. How could it be otherwise? Yet I find myself at a time in my life when I don't think I know the difference any more. To be fair, most of what I'm about to tell you is, in fact, absolute truth. At least, in my mind it is. What's left is probably a distorted recollection of memories quickly fading into oblivion. Maybe that's why I'm telling you this story. Before I forget any of it. Or all of it. At *The End*, does it really matter? I mean, if I'm telling my story exactly as I remember it, isn't that enough? I guess you'll have to decide for yourself.

I've been the music teacher at this high school for 62 years, since it opened its doors in 1907. These days, most people see an old and decrepit building, ready for the wrecking ball. Maybe they see me the same way! Funny, but I still see this place as it looked the day it welcomed its first students. And its first and only music teacher. Me. Ben Alexander. No doubt my corridors are peeling, in need of plaster and paint. And some of my plumbing doesn't work like it used to. Or like I wish it still would. My windows are clouded, too, blurring vision from either side. But we still have a purpose in life, this old and decrepit red brick building and I. Maybe you haven't yet learned that you should never judge a book by its cover. I know, I'm starting to ramble. Get over it. That's what old people do.

All around me I see change. Frightening change. For oldsters like me, change is difficult. I see a populace waking up to the realities and ravages of war, inspired by young people like you. I hear about riots at college campuses across the country. Television airs coverage of helmeted, angry police attempting to restore order by clubbing fleeing college students in the streets. In their classrooms. Even in their dorms. I feel the fear and frustration gripping our souls. And I know it's time for me to hand my baton to a new and younger teacher. But the very thought of leaving this place, my home for 62 years, saddens me deeply. And I'm not just talking about the building. Frankly, I'm tortured by the thought of retiring. What a dirty word! But the time to face my reality has arrived. As I write this story, I'm also composing my letter of resignation. Perhaps 21 years too late for some, but just the right time for me, thank you! And, I'm about to begin the search for my replacement. A task I undertake none too lightly.

Allen

Allen Jeffries, here. Turned 21 last week, a Masters degree in music freshly hung on the wall. In the bathroom. You know, I've always thought of myself as a pretty laid back kind of guy. Nothing seemed to bother me. Until now, that is. But if you listen to the people around me, they would tell you that everything that happens to me is funny. Maybe that used to be true. But these days, it's gone from funny-ha-ha to funny-boo-hoo in a tragic sort of way. Suddenly, I seem to be spending all my time worrying. About what? About life! About the draft! About the absolute lack of jobs in music, if you catch my drift. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. You see, Ann, my wife, gave birth to our first baby six months ago. Genevieve. Pronounced '*Zhawn-Vee-EVV*,' with the accent on the last syllable, if you don't mind! Like in France. Which is a little strange, because neither Ann nor I can claim even a drop of French blood in our families. So, what's my problem, you ask? My problem is that when I look in the mirror every morning, I see my reflection staring back at me. And I wonder, who is this long-haired, bearded hippie, oblivious to the demands of the real world? In other words, raising a family. So while my friends still find me rather comedic, in truth I'm struggling to find my place in a world I seem unprepared to understand.

Here's a perfect example. Only a month ago, I turned on the radio and heard a new band, Chicago Transit Authority. I went right out and bought the album with money I, uhh, borrowed from Genevieve's piggy bank. Shame on me, right? But I was blown away by a rock band with horns. Finally! You've probably already guessed, and rightly so, that I'm a horn player. Yep. Trumpet. This new band is setting the world on fire! I became obsessed with the dream of playing in a band like that. So I got on the phone and asked a few of my college bandmates to join my new Chicago-esque band. They didn't think twice.

"Count us in!"

Now, I'm obsessed by something else, though. Facing the reality of financially supporting a wife and baby. In fact, I've spent the last few weeks sending out resumes to schools within a five-state radius of where we live. There are no music job listings in any of the journals, so I made my own list of schools and mailed out a blind cover letter, introducing myself, asking for a call if a vacancy pops up. No luck, I'm afraid. And no jobs out there, either. These are tough times. It's already the second week of August, no less, and baby Genevieve is demanding milk and honey. I've gotta do something. Quick. But what can I do? I've never felt so lost in my life.

Ann

Hello, there. Yes, I'm Ann Jeffries, Allen's wife. I suppose I'm the pragmatist in the family. On one hand, I'm eager for Allen to realize his creative dreams and musical potential. On the other hand, I'm all too aware of needing to provide for a young and growing family. Don't get me wrong. I'm more than willing to endure all of Allen's trials and tribulations, not with anger, but with loving guidance and supportive patience. After all, I'm the Mother of our child. It's up to me to keep this family together, no matter what it takes. If you would have asked me a year ago if I ever thought about having a baby at the age of 19, I would have admitted that it never crossed my mind. But when Allen and I met, it truly was love at first sight. Destiny. Out of our hands. What attracted us in the first place is that we're opposites. Whatever strengths he lacks, I seem to have. And vice-versa. That's what makes us a great team. I try my best not to add any pressure to his world, and he tries his best to be the provider he knows he must become. He'll get there. Sooner or later. But I sure hope it's sooner. If something doesn't open up, it'll be another year before new teaching positions are posted. Let's not even go there, if you don't mind. Every day, I see the pressure taking its toll on Allen. The laughs we were so accustomed to sharing now seem few and far between. Thank goodness for Genevieve. She's become the focus of our attention, the light of our lives, the very reason for our dreams. Indeed, she seems to hold us together in ways that no one could ever have predicted. Our sole purpose in life is to raise a happy child, loved unconditionally by us. What other purpose could there be?

Now that Allen is performing again, I'm afraid his creative pleasures are overpowered by the unseen pressures of what has to happen before he takes to the stage. How many fans really comprehend the behind-the-scene trials and tribulations their favorite band must endure on a nightly basis? Allen's gigs usually begin at 10 o'clock each night. That means loading all their equipment into our old VW bus by 6 o'clock, traveling to the venue, unloading to the stage, setting up, running the sound check, warm-ups, on and on, before the crowd ever arrives. No roadies for these guys. Roadies cost money, which they don't have. When they finish performing at 2 o'clock in the morning, the process shifts into reverse. Allen usually manages to roll into bed by 5:30 in the morning, exhausted beyond belief. And let's not overlook the daily rehearsals to learn new material. And for all this, the band makes about \$350-a-gig. Split seven ways. Less gas expenses. And motel rooms when necessary. And you wonder why he's feeling the pressure of supporting his family? To his credit, he never complains, though. All he has to do is get a hug from Genevieve and a Father's smile returns to his face.

Allen

Sometimes, you just sense it's time to quit. Know what I mean? As much as I love playin' in this band, the venues aren't exactly what you'd call upwardly mobile. We took tonight's gig just for the money, which is never a smart idea. Especially when the money isn't that good. Even worse when you get stiffed. But here we are, a septet of long-haired rockers playin' in a biker bar packed with a couple hundred very drunk and stoned patrons. The beer is bubbling. The weed is wafting. The waitresses are half-naked hustlers. A few strung-out ladies of the night are slow-dancing together in their own little corner of the world. Pool tables and card tables are in high demand, bets being placed in a frantic bidding war. Regardless, the seven of us continue playing, oblivious to our sorry surroundings. What choice do we have, other than to concentrate on the music we're playing? At the moment, it's the song, '*Beginnings*.' By Chicago Transit Authority, of course. For us, it's just another paid rehearsal. We're actually in the middle of singing the lyric, '*only the beginning*,' when all at once, electricity fills the air, like a bolt of lightning. Looking down from the stage, I see a muscular, bald-headed bouncer locked in a threatening stare-down with a beefy, tattooed biker in full leathers. The crowd is closing in around them, pool cues and beer bottles already raised high, everyone excited by what they all know is about to explode in a frenzy.

We've been through this routine before. This time, though, we know exactly what to do. We've even rehearsed our escape! As if on an orchestra conductor's wave of his baton, we seven manage to drag our equipment out the back door just as all hell breaks loose. Not a second to spare, either. Into the bus in a flash. As we pull away, warring combatants are already flying out the front door. Beer bottles and pool cues break across heads. Then, gun shots echo from inside. Sheer bedlam. We're only a mile down the road before we hear the sirens and see the flashing reds coming from the direction we're heading. Thankfully, we're driving away while they're speeding towards. It takes a few minutes before we feel the relief of escape and manage to share some nervous laughter. Once closer to home, we stop for a much needed pot of coffee and a box of jelly doughnuts. Sitting there, shaking our heads, I suddenly realize I'm the only one thinking the obvious. Of course, I'm the only one with a wife. And a child. And real life financial responsibilities. That's the very moment I know, in my heart, that this might be my last gig with the band. Strangely, I feel neither sadness nor regret. Only a desperate need to get home. To Ann. And Genevieve.

Ann

Allen rolled into bed earlier than usual this morning. I could tell something was wrong. But 3 o'clock in the morning wasn't the time to talk about it. So here I am, sitting in our tiny kitchen, my tea cup in hand. Genevieve is sitting in her high chair drinking her mid-morning juice from a sippy-cup. No more bottles for her! The ringing telephone startles me from the peace of the moment. I reach around behind me and remove the phone from its cradle, wondering who might be calling in the middle of a quiet Monday morning.

"Hello?"

"Is this the residence of Allen Jeffries?"

"It is," I answer tentatively. "May I ask who's calling, please?"

"Is this Mrs. Jeffries?"

"It is," I respond apprehensively. "I mean, I am. Mrs. Jeffries, that is."

"Mrs. Jeffries, my name is Ben. Ben Alexander. I'm a high school music teacher who received Allen's cover letter announcing his availability for a teaching job."

Confused, I don't speak, waiting for an explanation. I wasn't even aware Allen had sent anyone a cover letter, let alone announce his job search.

"Mrs. Jeffries, I'm calling to talk to Allen about a teaching position here at our school. Might I speak with him?"

In a moment of shock, I'm sure my eyebrows jump up as my mouth flies open in surprise. Startled by my reaction, the sippy-cup pops out of Genevieve's mouth and falls to the floor, causing her to cry loudly. In a mild panic, I return my attention to the caller, trying to calm Genevieve at the same time.

"Oh, uhm, yes, certainly! Oh my goodness. I mean, can you please hold for a moment while I get Allen?"

"Of course! Sounds like you've got quite a little bundle of fun there, Mrs. Jeffries. I envy you, actually."

At that moment, Allen stumbles into the kitchen, looking sleep deprived and groggy the morning after a gig, still in his pajamas. I hide the telephone receiver behind my back, hoping the caller won't hear me as I attack Allen with an intense whisper.

"There's a man on the phone, a Mr. Alexander! He wants to talk to you about a teaching job!"

With that, I thrust the phone at Allen as I scurry out of the kitchen with a whimpering Genevieve now in my arms. Turning to leave the room, I see Allen roll his eyes, sit down, and take a deep breath before putting the phone to his ear. I can tell he's nervous.

"Hello, Mr. Alexander. This is Allen."

"Hi, Allen. I'm sitting at my desk reading the cover letter and resume you sent me. That was weeks ago, I'm afraid. I know it's the second week of August, but a music position has just opened up unexpectedly, and I'd like to invite you for an interview. If you're still interested, that is?"

"Sure! I mean, *of course* I'm still interested!"

"I'm so glad to hear that, Allen. Do you think you could make it here this week? Maybe Wednesday morning at nine?"

“Wednesday? Sure! Wednesday works for me!”

“Wonderful! I’m looking forward to meeting you, Allen. I’ll have the school secretary call a little later with directions how to get here. See you Wednesday, then, okay?”

“I’ll be there, Mr. Alexander. Just don’t start without me, okay?”

Allen places the phone back in its cradle at the same time I walk back into the kitchen.

“So, how did it go?”

Allen answers in disbelieving amazement as I sit down opposite him, Genevieve smiling and cooing at her Dad.

“He wants me to...interview...for a teaching job...”

“Really? When?”

“Wednesday...”

“*Aaand?*”

“And I said yes. Wait a minute, I didn’t even think to ask where the school is!”

“Does that really matter, Allen?”

“Ann! What if it’s hundreds of miles from here?”

“It’s the middle of August, Allen! We’re living in this cramped one-bedroom apartment, with no job, no money, and a baby who demands milk and honey! Who cares where the school is?”

“But what about the band? I can’t just...”

“The band will just have to go on without you, Allen. You have a Masters degree now. You worked hard to earn it. Teaching jobs aren’t just scarce, they’re non-existent. It could be next year before another one opens up!”

Allen quietly reaches across the table and takes my hand in his, looking deep into my eyes as Genevieve’s eyes follow our conversation.

“And we’re broke...”

I almost don’t know what to say before the words fly out of my mouth.

“And you need a haircut, Allen! That beard’s gotta go, too!”

“But...”

“No buts about it, Allen!”

He knows better than to argue.

Ben

After talking with Allen, I have no doubt that he's exactly the person I've been searching for. Reading between the lines, his words tell me a story that reminds me of my own story, too many years ago. I've read his resume over and over again, as well as newspaper clippings about his many musical accomplishments. I've spoken with all his references and professors by telephone. They all said the same thing.

“Well, Allen might be a bit of a rebel, that's for sure! But you'd be crazy not to hire him. His musical talent is a given. But more important, he's a leader. People are attracted to him like a magnet. He inspires others without even trying. And that, Mr. Alexander, is a rare and valuable trait.”

That was all I needed to hear. And the word *'magnet'* struck a chord in my mind. Speaking with his lovely wife, and hearing their baby in the background, I immediately knew these kids need a break in life. The same kind of break I needed 62 years ago when I was offered, and accepted, my one and only teaching job. Yes, my mind is made up. I'm going to offer Allen my job. Because I know he'll give our young students what I can longer offer them. Youth. Inspiration. Passion. And time. Yes, time. You see, my time is coming, but for a very different reason. Allen's time is now. If I have anything to say about it, and I certainly do, I won't let him leave here Wednesday without first signing a contract to begin his teaching career, here, two weeks from now. That's how sure I am.

Allen

Ooohhh, boy! The school secretary just called. It turns out the school is a good 500-miles from where we live! Driving our beat-up old VW bus means it'll take us at least a day-and-a-half to get there. And the peace signs painted on the front and back guarantee we'll get pulled over at least a few times along the way. But I have a funny feeling about this interview. Just a sense, deep down, that Mr. Alexander is going to offer me the job. Notice that I said, *'it'll take us a day and a half to get there.'* You see, there's no way Ann would even think about not coming along. After all, she's my compass, my moral support. My partner in life. And she knows Genevieve is a constant reminder that we're all on this journey together. Especially since I'm feeling pretty naked today, long hair and beard already gone! I feel like a plucked chicken. In other words, my confidence is a bit shaky, I'm afraid. Unless you've had a beard, you wouldn't understand that facial hair provides a wonderful mask to hide behind. Not only that, but it becomes a protective part of one's personality. So, as of today, I have nothing to hide behind. I'm naked to the world.

Right now, though, I'm changing the oil in the bus, checking the tires, doing whatever I can to make sure we make it to the interview safely and on time. We've decided to leave tonight and drive for five or six hours to get a head start. Plenty of room to sleep in the bus along the way, if need be. After all, Genevieve loves camping in this old VW. She's a real trooper, that one! We'll check into a motel tomorrow night and get a good night's sleep before my 9 o'clock interview Wednesday morning. I can't stop wondering what I'll do if I'm offered the job. I mean, *when* I'm offered the job. That's how sure I am.

Ann

Miracle of miracles, we made it to the motel last night around midnight. The bus ran fine, thank goodness. And believe it or not, we didn't get pulled over once! That in itself was a blessing. Genevieve was an absolute angel, as always. It's as if she understands everything that's going on. Even at six months, I have no doubt she *gets it*. She seems to know she's the key to solving our life puzzle. Don't ask me how I know. I just do.

I'm already up and out of bed this morning, giving Genevieve breakfast in the motel room. Allen is still sound asleep, of course. It's only 7 AM. Late morning for me. Way too early for Allen. I nudge him gently.

"Wake up, sunshine."

He doesn't even stir, so I nudge him again, this time with a little gusto.

"Allen, get up. It's after seven o'clock."

Still no response.

"Allen!"

That does the trick! He turns over, though still in a fog.

"Okay, okay, I'm up! What time is it, anyway?"

"It's quarter past seven. You've got less than two hours before your nine o'clock interview!"

Allen crawls out of bed and shuffles into the bathroom. Genevieve is sitting in her portacrib, watching me open the suitcase on the bed to lay Allen's clothes out for him while he showers.

"Let's see," I whisper to myself, Genevieve listening intently. "Underwear...undershirt... black socks...white dress shirt...red and blue tie...black shoes...blue blazer...gray slacks...*gray slacks...GRAY SLACKS?*"

Allen stumbles out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel.

"Allen? Did you pack your gray slacks?"

"Uhhh...I...uhhh...*thought* I did..."

Shaking my head in disbelief, I reach down and pick up the dirty old jeans he wore yesterday on the drive here.

"Somehow, I don't think these fit the bill, Allen," I softly scold. But I'm smiling. This, after all, is par for the course.

Allen gives me that hand-caught-in-a-cookie-jar look. I drop the jeans on the floor, open the phone book on the night stand, search the Yellow Pages, pick up the phone and dial a number. After a long minute, still no answer. I muffle the phone, just in case someone answers while I whisper to Allen.

"You finish getting ready, Allen. I'll figure something out."

He walks back to the bathroom. I'm just about to give up when I hear a voice on the other end of the phone.

Allen

Contemplating my much-less-hairy self in the mirror, I hear Ann's voice through the bathroom door. Someone must have answered the call she made. Still wrapped in a towel, I saunter back into the room just as Ann is hanging up the phone.

"Get dressed, Allen. Put your jeans on for now. There's a little tailor shop nearby. Man by the name of Sal is waiting for you. Said he'll fix you up in no time!"

"What a woman," I marvel.

I glance at the clock. 8:20. I look at Ann and raise an eyebrow. She raises an eyebrow in response.

"Uhm, NO, Allen."

"Guess not, huh?"

Ann just shakes her head. Hiding a smile. I high-tail it out to the parking lot and drive away in our old, beat-up VW bus, emblazoned with hand-painted peace signs on front and back. Blue smoke spews from the tail pipe. Five minutes later, following Ann's written directions, I arrive at Sal's Pro Shoppe. Pro Shoppe? I thought this guy was a tailor. Frowning, I get out of the bus. The shoppe door opens. Out steps a chunky man with a thick mustache and even thicker, wavy, salt-and-pepper hair. Holding two cups of coffee, he hands one to me.

"So! You must be Allen!"

"So! You must be Sal!"

Instant friends. Sal puts a big arm around my shoulder. As he does, I realize that this chunky man is actually constructed of rock-hard muscle.

"C'mon in, kid. I gonna take good care-a-you!"

Once inside, Sal takes one look at my torn jeans and laughs while shaking his head.

"We gotta some work to do! But I gonna fix you up!"

Still laughing, Sal walks over to a rack and removes a pair of red, green and blue checked golf pants.

"Put 'em on!"

"Uhh...do I have to?"

Sal laughs again before taking a sip of coffee.

"Don' worry, they gonna match your blazer real nice. I gonna fix you up!"

With nothing to lose except my pride, I step out of my jeans and into the ugly pants. I look in the mirror. The pants are six inches too long, and way too big in the waist. I look back at Sal timidly.

"Step up here on my little stage, Mr. Music. I gonna fix you up!"

It takes a moment for that to register in my brain.

"Wait a minute! How did you know I'm a musician, Sal?"

"My lil' birdie tol' me..."

Pins hanging from his pursed lips, Sal pins up the pants and marks them with white chalk.

"Okay, off wit' the pants. I gonna fix you up now!"

Out of choices, I take the pants off and hand them back to Sal, who sits at his sewing machine and goes to work. I glance at the clock hanging on the wall. 8:50. Sal hands the sewn pants back to me.

“Put ‘em back on. You all fixed up now!”

Sal must see the worried expression on my face.

“Okay, Sal. Thanks. How much do I owe you?”

This time, Sal glances at the clock. 8:57.

“Don’ worry ‘bout it, kid. You gonna be late. Jus’ get the job, okay? You gonna pay me later. Now go get ‘em, Mr. Music!”

Surprised, I give Sal a hug before I stumble out the door and into my bus, driving away as fast as the old VW will allow. I arrive at an old, decrepit, red brick school at 9:03. Leaving the bus sitting out front, I bound up the brick stairs two at a time. Out of breath, I barge into the school boardroom, a small group of friendly looking people sitting around a conference table loaded with coffee and doughnuts. A bent, ancient looking man stands with the help of his cane and approaches me.

Ben

“Ahh, you must be Allen. I was just beginning to worry about you. Good news, though. We didn’t start without you.”

“I am so sorry I’m late, but...”

“Don’t worry about it, Allen. Just relax. I’m Mr. Alexander. But please call me Ben...”

I place a thin arm around Allen’s shoulder, leaning in to whisper something in his ear as I manage to step in front of him protectively.

“...but I think it might be a good idea if you pull up your fly, Allen.”

I see the panic on his face, knowing what he must be thinking.

‘Oh...my...God...I...can’t...believe...this...is...happening!’

Birdie Costanzo, the President of the Board of Education, breaks the ice with a wink.

“Allen? Those are without a doubt the ugliest pants I’ve ever seen!”

Everyone enjoys a hearty chuckle. Except Allen, who is mortified.

“Please tell me you didn’t get those pants at Sal’s Pro Shoppe!”

Dumbfounded, Allen can do nothing but stare at her. She smiles broadly now.

“Sal’s my husband, Allen. Believe me, you’ll never live this down. Nor will he!”

I take Allen’s hand and lead him to an empty seat at the table where a cup of hot coffee and a jelly doughnut await him. He sits, still red in the face. But then he laughs. One of the gang already. After a mere five minutes of general questions, the satisfied board members stand, meeting over, shake hands all around, and depart the boardroom. Allen and I remain seated, ready for business. Relaxed, Allen speaks first.

“So, are you retiring from your teaching position, Mr. Alexander? Sorry, I mean Ben?”

“Much more important than that, Allen. You see, I want to bring you here...as a magnet.”

“A magnet?”

“Yes. A magnet, Allen. You see, too many of our students are dropping out of school because we’re not giving them good enough reason to stay. Some of these kids are our best and brightest. Frankly, I can’t blame them. So I want you, my young friend, to be their reason to come back to school and stay the duration.”

“And what makes you think I could be that magnet, Ben?”

“Look, Allen. I won’t beat around the bush. These kids are talented. They need someone close to their own age, someone with a solid background in their own music. Someone to look up to. Someone other than this old, worn-out music teacher. Someone like you, Allen.”

“Whew! This is pretty far removed from what I expected to hear in my first job interview, Ben!”

“And rightly so, Allen. Believe me, I don’t make this decision lightly. I’ve talked with all of your professors and references. Do you know what they said to me?”

“Uh-oh...I’m afraid to ask!”

“They told me I’d be crazy not to hire you, Allen! So, if you want it, this job is yours for the taking.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“I’ll take it!”

“I can’t tell you how happy I am you’ll be joining us, Allen. Speaking of which, school starts in two weeks! Can you get moved here that fast?”

“You bet I’ll be here, Ben. Just don’t start without me!”

With that, I reach into my briefcase and remove a document which I hand to Allen.

“I took the liberty of preparing your contract in advance. I didn’t want to lose you, Allen. So if you’re ready to sign it, I’m ready to accept it.”

Allen quickly reads the contract, eyebrows raised, as if he understands a word of what he’s reading. Smiling, I hand him my pen. He smiles back and signs the contract. I slowly countersign it, retreat to the copy machine, then hand Allen a copy to take with him. The deal is done. That’s how sure I am. Again.

Allen

I pull up and park in front of Sal's Pro Shoppe. Sal is waiting inside, as if he knew I would return as agreed.

"So! You got the job, Mr. Music!"

"So! I sure did...Mr. Costanzo!"

"You're a smart boy, Allen!"

"And your lovely wife has a wicked sense of humor, Sal!"

I can't help but hug Sal. When I do, I'm convinced he's about to shed a tear.

"How much do I owe you for the pants, Sal?"

Sal rubs his chin in mock thought.

"Hmmm, lemme see. My lil' Birdie told me there was a small problem with the zipper. So I gonna take the pants back. No charge for you!"

"But Sal! You fixed me up, remember? Fair is fair!"

Sal rubs his chin again, scheming all the while.

"So! You left these jeans here this morning. I wash 'em, real good. We gonna do an even trade, you an' me!"

The store empty, I step out of the ugly golf pants, hand them to Sal, and put on my old jeans.

"So! It's a deal, Sal!"

15-minutes later, I'm back at our motel room. I open the door and walk in ever so nonchalantly with a big smile on my face.

"I got the job, Ann!"

"You did?"

"I did!"

All at once, Ann starts crying. Which makes Genevieve start to cry. I quickly walk over and embrace them both, patting Ann's back as she pats Genevieve's back, who stops crying and burps loudly. I laugh. Which makes Ann laugh. And kiss me. Then we both kiss Genevieve, one on each cheek. Life is good. That's how sure I am.

Ann

I'm afraid it's been a rough couple of days since Allen signed his contract. We're on the road, headed home, with 500 long miles ahead of us. Allen's driving. Genevieve is sleeping in my arms. I'm feeling forlorn, detached from reality. Without moving his eyes from the road, Allen speaks softly, more to break the silence than anything else.

"Eighty-five hundred dollars a year sure sounded like a lot of money at the time."

I continue staring blankly out the passenger window as I answer.

"I guess we should have known apartment rentals here would be a lot different than where we live. Can you believe the dumps we've looked at? Nine-hundred dollars a month? Cockroaches included at no extra charge!"

"That's more than I'll be making in salary for the year, Ann! Then again, the benefits seem pretty solid. Especially the health insurance..."

"...and summers off..." I add.

"...paid holidays, too," Allen reminds himself.

We stop talking, admiring the beautiful rolling hills we're driving through. Before too long, though, I break the silence.

"What are we going to do, Allen?"

"We'll figure it out, don't worry. Maybe I could play some gigs on the side?"

About an hour north of the high school, we pass a road-side sign.

NEW LUXURY APARTMENTS NOW LEASING NEXT RIGHT!

Allen slows the bus and turns right at the next street. And there, nestled in the pine trees, is a brand new apartment complex with two multi-unit buildings facing each other. We pull into the parking lot, full of cars. Allen stops. We look around. Then at each other.

"This is beautiful, Allen! But you have to know the rent will be way beyond our reach."

He eyes a sign in front of the first apartment.

FURNISHED MODEL

"Can't hurt to look," he ponders.

We park, get out of the bus, and walk into the model. A well-dressed older man with silver hair approaches us.

"Hi folks. My name is Art Hoague. What brings you out this way today?"

"Hi Art. My name is Allen Jeffries, and this is my wife, Ann..."

"...holding baby Genevieve," I remind him.

Art smiles as he and Allen shake hands.

"I'll cut right to the chase, Mr. Hoague. I just accepted a job teaching at a high school about an hour south of here. Problem is, apartment rentals there are more than I'll be making in salary!"

“Hmmm,” Art muses. “What do you teach, Allen?”

Allen is a little taken aback by Art’s question, wondering what it has to do with anything, I’m sure. But he decides to be polite and answers Art’s question.

"Music."

Art's face lights up with a wide grin.

"You know, I've been known to play the fiddle every now and then, Allen! These days, I mostly build apartments, though. In fact, this is my newest community. Come on, let me show you through the model."

I’m suddenly feeling very uncomfortable.

"We don't want to waste your time, Mr. Hoague. This is Allen's first job out of college and..."

Art quickly but politely interrupts me.

"You let me worry about that, okay, Ann?"

With that, Art leads the way. Gleaming hardwood floors throughout. Cozy but adequate dining room. Big living room with double bay windows. Simple but modern kitchen. Master bedroom with a walk-in closet. Master bath with tile floor and shower. Small second bedroom. Even a second bathroom! I'm afraid I can't help but imagine us living here. Our tour concludes at the front door, where we started. Art looks at us.

"So? What do you kids think?"

"It's absolutely beautiful," I admit, "but..."

Art interrupts me again, this time spreading his arms wide.

"My turn to cut to the chase, okay, Ann?"

I nod once in embarrassment.

"This model is the last apartment left in the community."

Suddenly, Art turns to Allen with a serious look.

"Do you mind if I ask you a very personal question, Allen?"

Allen pauses again, but decides at this point it doesn't matter anyway.

"Ask away."

"How much are they paying you to teach music?"

"Eighty-five-hundred dollars. A year," Allen answers with embarrassment.

Art frowns while scratching his head, deep in thought. As he does, Genevieve looks right at Art and smiles. Art’s face lights up. Genevieve smiles some more and coo's. Yes, he’s hooked. Art looks right at Allen.

"Allen? I'll rent you this apartment for two-hundred-eighty-five dollars a month. You pay your own utilities. Water's included."

I look at Allen in stunned disbelief.

"There's one condition, though," Art adds with a raised eyebrow.

Now I can only frown, waiting for the bubble to burst. Art just smiles some more.

"You have to promise to teach me to read music, Allen!"

Genevieve frog-kicks her legs and giggles, seeming to wrap her little finger around Art's heart.

"Are you serious?" Allen asks incredulously.

"You bet I am. Look, I'm a pretty good judge of character. You're obviously nice kids. You just need a break. Me? I sure don't need the money any more! But helping you would give me great pleasure."

Allen and I stand there, open-mouthed. Now it's my turn to take the bull by the horns.

"Deal!"

Art's face lights up. He sits at his desk and dials the phone, then hits the speaker button. We all hear the call being answered.

"What do you need, Art?"

"Hi Sally. Listen I've got a really nice couple here who'd like to rent our last unit. I'm going to send them over to the office right now to fill out the paperwork. Take extra good care of them for me, will you?"

"Sure, Art. What's their move-in date?"

Art looks at me questioningly.

"Two weeks from now!" I'm shouting again.

"Oh, my. That's fast. What's the rent, Art?"

"Two-eighty-five a month plus utilities, water included, Sally."

A long moment of silence on the other end.

"What's the *deal*, Art?"

"Well, Allen here is going to give me free music lessons."

Sally laughs.

"Olay, honey! What are their names?"

"Allen and Ann Jeffries..." I answer.

"...and baby Genevieve!" Allen adds quickly.

"Did you say *baby*?"

'*Uh-oh*, ' I worry to myself. '*The proverbial fly in the ointment.*'

"Send them right over, Art! I'll have everything ready by the time they get here!"

Art smiles and hugs me, Genevieve coo-ing the whole time.

"I guess I can go play some golf now!" Art says happily.

"Do you think Sally will mind?" I ask with a wink.

"Not after she cuddles that little one, she won't!"

Allen ends the conversation with a reminder.

"Music lessons start first week of September, Art. Be there, or be square!"

Allen

I'm driving. Ann is holding Genevieve in her arms. All is well in our world once again. We're homeward bound to pack up our tiny one-bedroom apartment and move 500-miles from the only home we've ever known, no time to spare.

"Can you believe what just happened, Allen?"

I shake my head, reach for the radio and switch it on. Guess what's playing. Yep, Chicago Transit Authority! The lyrics wash over us.

'When I'm with you, it doesn't matter where we are...'

I start drumming my fingers on the steering wheel as I drive. Ann can't help herself from bouncing in her seat. Genevieve kicks her legs in perfect time to the music. Ann and I sing the lyrics aloud each time they repeat. And I drift in and out of the song, thinking about everything that has happened this past week. More important, though, I think about the people we've met. Wonderful people who have taken us under their wings as we begin our journey.

'Only the beginning...'

Ann

Two weeks sure flew by in a hurry. We moved into our new apartment yesterday, Labor Day, after another 500-mile, day-and-a-half drive in the old VW bus, with no time to spare. It's 6 o'clock on this beautiful Tuesday morning. The sun is shining brightly through our large living room bay windows. I'm still in my bathrobe, sitting in our cozy dining room, drinking my morning cup of tea. Genevieve is drinking her morning juice. In her sippy-cup, of course. Playing softly on the radio is *'Wake Up, Sunshine,'* by Chicago Transit Authority. Yes, today is Day One of our new life. Allen's first day as a music teacher, his new career. I can only wonder how his day will go. I admit being nervous for him. And for us. We were broke before he took this job. Now, after the move, we're not only broke, but heading into debt. Our checking account is laughable. Six-dollars-and-forty-nine-cents. But I'm not laughing. Our savings account? Fifty-eight dollars. I just hope we can make it through the first two weeks, because Allen's first pay check isn't scheduled until then. Somehow, I know we'll manage. We always do. And always will, I suspect. *'Take a deep breath,'* I tell myself. As I've said before, I'll do whatever it takes to hold this family together. I always do. Deep down, I know Allen will be fine. Don't ask me how I know. I just do.

Allen

'Wake up, sunshine.'

Thinking it's Ann whispering in bed next to me, I smile. It's dark. Comfy. Quiet.

'Open up your sleepy eyes for me...'

"Just one more minute, okay, Ann?" I beg softly, hiding my head under my pillow.

Then reality hits me like a brick. I wake up with a start, throw back the covers, and jump out of bed. Unable to get my bearings, I look around the room groggily.

'Whose room is this, anyway?' I ask myself.

'Oh, now I remember!' I tell myself.

I open the curtains, squinting from the glorious sunshine outside.

'Wake up, sunshine...'

"Okay, okay, I'm up!"

Then I realize I'm talking to the alarm-radio on the night stand. I pad into the bathroom to shower and shave. Twenty minutes later, I'm walking into the kitchen, fully dressed in blue blazer, white dress shirt, red and blue tie, black socks, black shoes, and, thankfully, gray slacks. Ann and Genevieve are sitting at the kitchen table, drinking tea and juice, respectively. I bend down and kiss Genevieve on the forehead. Then I turn and kiss Ann on the cheek, mouthing the words *'love you.'* She smiles, mouthing the words *'love you, too.'* I turn to leave, stop in mid-turn, and look down at Genevieve raising her sippy-cup by herself in two hands. I grin and look back at Ann, who is nodding proudly. She picks up a packed lunch bag from the table and hands it to me. I kiss her again. This time, on the lips. Genevieve coo's softly. She knows. I grab a piece of toast and head out to the parking lot. I fire up the old VW bus and drive away, blue smoke spewing from the tail pipe. Today is the day. Day One. I wonder if I'm ready. And then I realize it doesn't matter if I'm ready or not. Too late for that. That's how sure I am.

Ben

Well, here it is, the first day of a new school year again. I used to look forward to first days as a time of revitalization. Unless you've been a teacher, you might not realize how the day after Labor Day actually feels like New Year's Day to us. A day of rebirth. But these last few years, actually the last dozen, have been not only different, but difficult for me. I've felt more like a hanger-on than a contributor. To be honest, I don't like the feeling. That's one of the reasons I finally reached the decision to retire. 62-years in the classroom is 21-years too long, as I've already told you. But there's another reason for my decision. A more important one, which I've only hinted at. Until now.

Meeting Allen Jeffries has reminded me of something I lost long ago. And someone. Actually, two someones. Like Allen, I married young. Like Allen and Ann, Maggie and I had our child six months before I was offered, and accepted, my first and only teaching position. But for reasons I may tell you about later, when I'm ready, my family became estranged, as it's now called. Indeed, I haven't communicated with my daughter in 40 years. The year Maggie died. I've finally reached the point in my own life that I can accept full responsibility for that ugly split. I know that I was wrong. I've always known it. But now I can admit it. Even to myself. Now that I'm finally retired, at age 83, it's time for me to find my daughter. To contact her. To beg her forgiveness. This is my mission in whatever remaining time I have on this earth.

So today, the first day of this new school year, I'm finally free. Free spiritually, and physically free to accomplish my final goal in life. And it's all because of Allen. I see myself in him. I imagine my wife in Ann, my daughter in Genevieve. I don't mind admitting that today, of all days, I'm a little worried about Allen. After all, I've been where he now is. But I also know that I made the right decision in hiring him. I can feel it in my bones, brittle though they may be. My only regret is that I won't be there to welcome him on this, his first day. Once he signed his contract two weeks ago, I left everything behind in search of my new life. Just as Allen is doing. The difference is, I haven't told anyone where I'm going, or why. Then again, there's really no one left to tell. No one who would care, that is. But I'm confident Allen will succeed at that school. Because I did. That's how sure I am.

Allen

An hour-and-a-half later, I'm walking from the parking lot to the school entrance. Along the way, I observe the crowds of students milling about, no doubt catching up after the long summer. As I watch them, I'm wondering why I'm all dressed up! These kids are from another planet. Actually, my planet! Torn jeans, tie-dyed tee-shirts, hair down to their knees. And those are the boys! The girls? Way too tight jeans, way too ironed hair, and way too revealing bra-less tops. Not that I'm looking, of course. Smiling, I make my way up the brick stairs into the old, decrepit, red brick building. The bell rings, as if announcing my heralded arrival. Yet the halls remain empty as I locate my home room. Standing at the door, I look across the hall and notice an older teacher standing in front of her homeroom.

"Mr. Jeffries?"

"Yes, good morning!"

"And to you, as well. You're probably wondering why the halls are still empty of students, aren't you?" she asks.

"Probably because it's a beautiful day outside?"

"Too nice to be stuck inside, that's for sure. Especially in school."

"Frankly, most of the teachers don't look too thrilled to be here, either," I notice.

"Well, I suppose that's true, sad to say."

"I guess the kids are waiting to make their grand entrance, as if to announce *'now you know who's boss here, teacher!'*"

We nod in agreement and smile as Mrs. Thiele turns and walks into her home room. Likewise, I turn and venture into mine. I sit at my desk. I Wait. And wait some more, tapping my fingers on the desk. Eventually, the students shuffle in and sit, slouching lazily in their old wooden desks, still catching up on their summer. Watching them, I think to myself, *'Let's see how this picture being painted in front of me plays out.'*

I stand and write my name on the blackboard.

ALLEN JEFFRIES, MUSIC TEACHER

I turn back around, again thinking to myself, *'Aha! They see I have no military plan of action! They're actually turning around in their seats. Observing the picture being painted in front of them!'*

The room is now deathly quiet. I laugh out loud. They laugh in return. I'm still thinking. *'Time to begin our dance macabre.'*

I smile. I speak aloud.

"Good morning. My name is Allen Jeffries. I'm the new guy in town, I guess. Music teacher."

A boy interrupts from his seat in the front row.

"You the magnet?"

"You heard about that, huh?"

Several of the kids chuckle and nod. I continue.

"I guess I am, then. So if you know anyone who wants to play some jazz, maybe a little rock music, even pop, send 'em in to see me!"

Jaws drop in surprise. Eyebrows rise in confusion. The first kid laughs.

"You got it, boss!"

I decide the time is ripe for a little bit of serious teacher-talk.

"I just want you all to know, I'm here for you. You can tell me anything, without getting a parental lecture in return."

A girl in the last row shouts out.

"I'm pregnant!"

'Damn, what do I say now?' I wonder.

"Congratulations!" I blurt out, not even realizing I've spoken.

The room erupts in laughter. The bell rings. They all file out noisily. Except the pregnant girl. I walk over and sit in the chair next to her.

"Are you really pregnant? Or was that just something you said to get everyone's attention?"

"I'm really pregnant!" She yells defiantly.

"Oh, I see," I answer softly. "Then congratulations are truly in order. My wife and I recently had our first baby, too."

"Yeah? Well, goody for you! Mine is a little different!"

"How so?"

"This ain't my first kid! I work at a pizza place downtown. My boss has a room upstairs. That's where he knocked me up! Like it or not, his baby's in my belly!"

I'm taken aback by what I'm hearing. I pause for a moment, then look right into her angry eyes.

"Well, despite the circumstances, the birth of your child is still something to be thankful for. I repeat my offer. I'm here, if you need to talk. I'll help you any way I can."

She stares back at me. Then takes a deep breath, fighting tears.

"I'm quittin' school today. My old man threw me out, so I gotta work at the pizza place. My boss says I can stay there for a while...until...you know..."

"The offer still stands," I say with sincerity.

She gets up and runs from the room, leaving me sitting alone in thought.

Louise

My name is Louise. This is my senior year here. Mr. Alexander has always been my favorite teacher. He really cared about his students. As people. I can't believe he's not coming back. But he told me someone extra special was going to take his place. I've been knocking on the rehearsal room door for a few minutes already, but no one seems to be here. Turning to leave, I see someone coming down the hall, walking faster as he sees me waiting at the door.

"Hang on, hang on!" he manages, out of breath.

I respond with a guilty smile, as if caught in the act of something he's not supposed to know about.

"Are you Mr. Jeffries?"

"I am!"

I smile nervously.

"My name is Louise. Mr. Alexander said I should come and talk with you the first day of school. So, here I am."

"Okay, I'm all ears, Louise. Well, not really. You know what I mean?"

I smile again, regaining my composure.

"I'm a singer, Mr. Jeffries. I *love* to sing! I *live* to sing! Mr. Alexander promised you'd be starting a band. So, are singers allowed?"

"Of course," he laughs. "Not only allowed, but encouraged."

I can't hide my excitement.

"So can I sing for you? Like, audition for the band?"

"Absolutely!"

Without giving him a chance to change his mind, I walk right over to the piano and start playing. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him walk quietly up to the fourth row on the risers and sit. When I'm sure he's ready, I start singing. With all my heart.

Allen

I'm startled when Louise begins singing an achingly beautiful love song about falling in love for the first time.

'Oh, my lord,' I think to myself. 'I see a young high school girl intent on impressing her new teacher. But I hear so much more. This kid is way above what I should have any right to expect!'

When the song ends, I sit quietly for a few moments. Louise manages to look up at me, fearing the worst, I'm sure.

"That was beautiful, Louise."

I pause, realizing I don't recognize the song.

"I've never heard that song before, Louise. Who sings it?"

She looks down at the keyboard.

"I do." she whispers.

"No, no, I mean, who wrote it?"

She looks back up at me.

"I did."

I'm a little more than skeptical.

"So . . . when did you write that song, Louise?" I press.

She looks right into my eyes as she answers.

"Just now, Mr. Jeffries . . . for you."

My jaw drops in amazement. And the look on her face makes me realize I need to change the subject. And the mood. Quickly. Time to add a little humor!

"Tell me, Louise, are there any more like you in this school?"

"Oh, yeah, lots more!" she gushes.

"Send 'em over, will 'ya?"

"Really?"

"Really! Like, today, okay?"

"Sure! So does this mean I'm in the band?" Louise nearly begs.

"Are you kidding? You're the front line, Louise! All we need now is the rear guard!"

Mrs. Thiele

There's nothing worse than lunch duty. It's noisy. Loud. Kids are in line eyeing the food, which is terrible, if you ask me. Others are walking back to their tables, carrying their loaded trays. Mr. Jeffries walks in a few minutes late and sits at the front table next to me, digging into his neatly packed lunch bag.

"Sorry I'm late, Mrs. Thiele," he apologizes. "This is all new to me, I'm afraid."

I smile at him and tell him not to worry.

"You know, I'm a little surprised I haven't seen Ben Alexander this morning," Mr. Jeffries wonders.

"Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?" he asks with a look of apprehension.

"The day you signed your contract, Mr. Alexander packed up and left town. Didn't tell anyone where he was going or when he'd be back. Kind of worried me, though, given his age. You never know, but if you ask me..."

All at once, in mid-sentence, I sense something happening at a lunch table in the back of the cafeteria. From this distance, I see a heavy-set boy deliver a wicked round-house punch to the cheek of another student sitting at a table all by himself. The attacker throws a second punch. The seated boy leans back in his chair, avoiding the punch. Shouts erupt from the lunch-eating students.

"Fight! Fight! Fight!" they scream.

I turn to Mr. Jeffries, who is eating his lunch, oblivious to what's going on.

"Do something! Hurry! You have to do something!" I yell, afraid of what's about to happen.

Allen

The crowd forms a semi-circle around the fight-waiting-to-happen. I see the second boy slowly stand. He's massive! Six-foot-six, 250-pounds, at least. He stands there, perfectly calm. An immovable boulder. He merely stares at his attacker, who screams maniacally as he jumps up and down, waving both arms frantically.

"C'mon, big man! Show me what you got!"

The second boy still doesn't move. He just smiles, ever so calmly, all the while staring at his attacker. Startled, I look over at Mrs. Thiele, frozen in terror. Before I know what's happening, the world morphs into blurry-edged slow motion in my mind. Mrs. Thiele is screaming, but her slow motion words are distorted in my head.

"Dooo...sommme...thiinnng..."

The cafeteria is erupting into chaos.

"Fiiight...fiiight...fiiight..."

The two boys are glaring at each other. For reasons I'll never understand, I fly from our table directly into the semi-circle, head down, one arm raised, like Mighty Mouse sent to save the day. I can even hear the cartoon melody in my head!

'Here he comes to save the day! Mighty Mouse is on the way!'

Suddenly back in real-time fast-motion, I end up standing between the two boys, holding up both arms, trying to be heard over the mob around us.

"That's enough! No more! I'm counting to three and I want you both to turn around and walk away! ONE..."

Neither boy moves.

"...TWO..."

Nothing. Then, in the instant before I reach *'three,'* the attacker spins around and stalks away, throwing tables and chairs over in his wake. He turns around one last time and screams. At me!

"You better watch your back! Today, tomorrow, it don't matter! You ain't gonna know what hit ya'!"

Warning delivered, he turns and stomps out of the cafeteria, leaving tables, chairs, and trays strewn across the room, which is suddenly deathly quiet. My adrenaline is pumping fiercely. I manage to turn around and look at the massive young man standing so calmly in front of me.

Nate

I'm just standin' here, looking at the new teacher. Thinkin' he handled himself pretty well. For a little guy. But you gotta give him credit. He coulda' run. But he didn't.

"Don't worry about him," I say softly. "He's high as a kite on somethin'. Won't remember any of this."

I take the new teacher's right hand in mine, shaking it gently.

"My name's Nate," I say.

"Allen. Allen Jeffries."

He appears strangely calm, as if nothing had happened. So I smile.

"Nice to meet you. Mr. Magnet."

The teacher smiles back and raises one eyebrow.

"Let me guess. Football?" he asks.

I shake my head. He looks surprised.

"Hmmp. Basketball then!"

I shake my head again. He rubs his chin, then snaps his fingers once.

"Wrestling! Right?"

I shake my head yet again. He frowns in confusion, throws his arms up in the air in defeat.

"Farmin'," I tell him.

He questions me with his eyes.

"I run my grandma's farm. Gramps is gone now, and I can't bear the thought of leavin' grams alone. Dawn to dusk body buildin', know what I mean?"

The Magnet nods his head slowly in thought.

"So tell me, Nate. Why didn't you hit that kid back?"

I can only laugh at his question.

"Didn't have to. He knew what was about to happen. So he ran. The end. Fight over."

This time, Mr. Magnet rubs the back of his neck while he shakes his head in confusion.

"Thanks, Nate."

"My pleasure. By the way, Mr. Jeffries, I'm a pretty decent bass player. Need one?"

Now it's his turn to laugh.

"You bet, Nate! Bring your bass to my office tomorrow, second period. Let's hear if you've got any chops, okay?"

I wink, then softly pat him on the back.

"You can count on it. And on me," I answer.

Allen

It's been quite a first day of my new career. More than I expected. It's 3:30 and I'm seated at my desk, my home room students sitting in their seats in rapt attention. A girl in the front row breaks the ice.

"Where did you learn to fight like that, Mr. Jeffries?"

"Fight? I'm no fighter. Quite the opposite. But someone had to do something before it got too ugly."

"Lucky for you Nate was there," a boy chimes in. "He's one tough dude."

"A gentle giant, Nate is. But, yes, it's a good thing he was there to rescue The Magnet from harm!"

They all laugh.

"But what about you guys? How was your first day back today?" I ask.

The laughter quickly turns to groans.

"Hey," I joke. "If I got through my first day, yours couldn't have been that bad!"

They all nod in unison. The bell rings. They shuffle out of the room, except one boy who approaches my desk.

"Mr. Jeffries? My name is Will. I play the guitar, and I was wondering..."

I interrupt him.

"You play the guitar, huh?"

Will nods.

"Do you play it well?"

"I do," he smiles.

"You free second period tomorrow morning?"

He pretends to think about it before answering.

"Well, let me see. Normally, I get paid by the set. But for you? I'll make an exception. So, yeah, I'm free second period tomorrow."

I have to laugh at that one!

"You got it, boss," I smile. "Meet you in the rehearsal room. And don't forget your guitar!"

Will reaches out and shakes my hand gently.

"You won't be sorry, Mr. Jeffries. You'll see. I mean, you'll hear."

Walking out of the school after a long day, I glance at my watch. 3:45. Man, time flies when you're having fun. I'll just make it home in time for dinner if I hustle. I warily look around as I descend the brick steps. I stop short when I notice someone in the distance, standing next to my VW bus. I hesitate for a moment, feeling a moment of panic. Then I see it's Nate. He raises his hand and waves, giving me the 'OK' sign. Then he smiles and walks away.

Ann

I'm beginning to worry that Allen isn't home yet. I tell myself I shouldn't be concerned, but I can't help it. As if hearing my thoughts, he opens the door and walks in after Day One of our new life. I'm in Genevieve's room when I hear him call out.

"I'm home. Anyone here?"

I step out the baby's room, closing the door gently, index finger to my lips as I turn to Allen.

"Shhh. I just got Genevieve down for a nap before dinner. If I didn't know better, I'd swear she was waiting for you to get home."

Allen steps out of his shoes and tip-toes into the living room. He hugs me tightly. Over his shoulder, he notices the dining room table set for two, complete with wine glasses.

"What a woman," he softly jokes, as always.

"Come, sit. Talk to me, Allen."

He smiles and sits opposite me. We clink glasses and sip the wine.

"What would you like to know?" Allen asks, already knowing what I'll say.

"Everything! How was it? Were you nervous? Did the students like you? Do you think you'll be..."

"Whoa, slow down, little lady," I interrupt. "Let's see, where to begin."

"At the beginning?" I demand impatiently.

"Well, my day began with the pregnant girl in home room whose boss knocked her up in the room above his pizza place where she works..."

Startled, I gasp, my eyes bulging in surprise. Allen presses on, though.

"...and this is her second kid. Her parents threw her out, and she quit school this morning to go to work. Boss says she can stay with him, at least until, well, until who knows what?"

"You're kidding, right?" I ask in disbelief.

"I wish!"

"So what did you do?"

"I tried to talk to her, let her know I would help her any way I could."

With that, I reach across the table and take his hand.

"What did she say?"

"In a nutshell, she said *'I'm outa here!'*"

I don't ask any more questions, letting him get it all off his chest.

"The day got better real fast, though. A girl auditioned for the band. A singer, no less!"

"Aaand?" I ask with raised eyebrow.

"You shoulda heard this kid, Ann! She plays the piano, too. But her voice? Better than any professional vocalist I've ever worked with!"

I smile broadly, nodding my head.

"From there, Ann, everything went pretty well. Until lunch, that is."

I tilt my head questioningly.

"You ready for this, Ann? I was a lunch monitor!"

I get a good laugh out of that one!

"Ahh, but the best is yet to come, to quote a famous song. Big fight breaks out in the cafeteria. Mr. Pacifist, here, jumped into the middle of it, trying to separate the two guys."

“Oh my God, Allen!”

“Tough kid trying to get a rise out of a big kid. A very big kid! He stands up, glares at the first kid. Doesn’t say a word. People are all around us, screaming ‘*fight, fight, fight!*’”

“Allen! What did you do?”

“Other than pray, not too much I could do! All of sudden, the tough kid gets cold feet and stomps out of the cafeteria, knocking tables and chairs over along the way, screaming like a banshee!”

“Screaming what, Allen?”

He leans back in his chair and takes a sip of wine.

“That he’s gonna kill me, for want of better words.”

“Allen! You’re scaring me! You can’t go back there! We’ll figure something out!”

He looks right into my eyes as he rubs the top of my hand across the table, shaking his head.

“You know what, Ann? I can’t wait to go back tomorrow. Really! Turns out Nate, the big kid, is a little boy in a big man’s body. A gentle giant. Best of all? He plays the bass! I think he’s probably pretty good, too.”

“So…” I venture softly.

“So, I think this is all gonna work out fine, Ann. If I survived Day One, I can survive anything. And you know what? I think I just realized I’m cut out for this. Who’d-a-thunk-it?”

I lean forward, place a hand on Allen’s cheek, and plant a soft kiss on his lips.

“I’d-a-thunk-it, Allen.”

Allen

Ann and I hear Genevieve at the same time, as if she was waiting for us to finish talking. She's not crying, though. It's more like calling for attention. We walk into her room together. Genevieve sees me and smiles, frog-kicking her legs in the crib. I pick her up and hold her right in front of me, eye-to-eye.

"Hi, Genevieve. And how was your day?"

Genevieve coo's smoothly, still frog-kicking her legs. I look at Ann.

"C'mon, let's go for a little walk together. Family time!"

I hand Genevieve to Ann.

"You two go ahead. I just wanna change my clothes real quick, okay?"

"Sure," Ann agrees. "We'll wait for you out front."

I toss my stuff onto the bed and throw my dirty, old, torn jeans on. I love these jeans. I am they. They are me! I run out the door and meet up with Ann, Genevieve waiting patiently in her stroller. We begin walking down the sidewalk together, one small happy family. It's a beautiful evening, the sun still warming us with inspiration. I reach into my pocket for no reason other than I always walk with a hand in my pocket. I feel something crinkly. Strange, but I don't remember putting anything in my jeans pocket. I remove a wad of wrinkled paper. In the middle of the wad is something else. Money. Five twenty dollar bills, new and crisp. I read the writing on the wrinkled paper aloud as we walk.

'So, Mr. Music! Or should I say, Mr. Magnet? I knew you was gonna get the job. Now you gonna enjoy a good dinner at a fancy place. My treat. I know you gonna do great things for these kids, Allen. Stop by the shoppe any time. By the way, I got a new shipment of ugly green, red and blue golf pants today. I know you gonna want a pair, right? Next time, please bring your wife and baby. I can't wait to meet 'em.

Your new friend,

Sal.'

Ann stares at me, her eyes welling with tears. Genevieve looks at her mom, then at me. Then back at her mom. Then back at me. I reach down and pick her up. Give her a big hug and kiss. She wraps her little arms around my face and snuggles, no more beard to get in the way. The moment passes. And the only thought in my mind is tomorrow. Day Two of our new life. Tired as I am, I can't wait.

Ann

Allen walks into the kitchen the next morning dressed for school. As usual, I'm sitting at the dining room table, enjoying my morning cup of tea. Genevieve is strapped in her high chair, drinking juice from her sippy-cup. In the background, the radio is playing softly. Another song by Chicago!

'This is all we wanna be, to do the things that we propose...'

Allen stops short, looks at me, then points to Genevieve, his eyebrows raised. I smile and nod. Genevieve spits out her sippy-cup, dropping it to the floor. She smiles, frog-kicking her legs, holding her arms out to Allen. He reaches and lifts her up to his shoulder, where Genevieve throws up her juice. A quick change of shirt for Allen before he returns to the kitchen, grabs a piece of toast, and I hand him his packed lunch bag. I guess we've already established a routine, here! Cleaning the floor of juice with a paper towel, I hear our VW bus pull away outside. Allen is on his way to Day Two of his new career.

Allen

By 8:30, I'm sitting at my home room desk, looking out over the kids who look like they're already over the first-day excitement. I smile to myself and to them.

"So! How are things going in student-land today?"

Loud groans fill the room.

"What, too much homework already?" I joke.

Boo's and hisses fill the room, thumbs turned down to the floor.

"Hey! It could be worse, you know! Just ask Will about all his music homework."

Will gives an embarrassed smile to his classmates before responding.

"Listen, I'll take that kind of homework any day of the week. It's the other stuff that's a pain in the . . . well, a pain in the you-know-what!"

Now, loud laughs fill the room. Until the bell rings, at least, prompting the students to file out of homeroom like automatons. I make my way to the rehearsal room by 9:50, giving myself about ten minutes before second period starts. I sit at the piano, playing some heavy duty blues riffs, when a loud knock on the door startles me. Looking up, I see the door opening, Nate peeking his head in.

"Nate! C'mon in, man! You're right on time!"

Nate casually strolls in, carrying a large upright bass. I give him a surprised look.

"I don't believe it, man. A real bass! Of course, it fits you well, Nate."

"That you playin' the blues just now, Mr. Jeffries?"

"Aww, just doodlin'. I'm not a very good piano player, I'm afraid."

Nate shakes his head in disagreement.

"Could'a fooled me, Mr. Jeffries."

"Maybe so. But I am a red-hot trumpet player, though!"

"Listen, I brought along a really hip drummer who'd like to audition along with me, if that's okay with you? Name's Sam," Nate offers.

"Absolutely! Bring him..."

Nate interrupts me with a nod and a wave of a hand as he walks out into the hall. Moments later, he walks back in with the drummer.

"Mr. Jeffries, I'd like to introduce you to my friend, Samantha."

Surprised, I stand and extend my hand to Samantha. We shake.

"Nice to meet you, Samantha," I say, trying to hide my surprise.

"You can call me Sam, Mr. Jeffries."

"I've got Sam's drums in my truck," Nate says loudly. "I'll go get 'em, okay?"

"Wait, I'll give you a hand, Nate."

Nate actually looks insulted by my comment.

"Mr. Jeffries, do I look like I need a hand?"

Nate stomps out while I chuckle at his humor.

"Tell me, how'd you get to be a drummer, Sam?" I ask.

"My dad was a drummer, Mr. Jeffries. When he died last year, I inherited his drum set."

"Oh, Sam. I'm so sorry."

"Yeah. War sucks, don't it?"

I nod once, not knowing what else to say. I pause in thought.

“Doesn’t.” I say.

Sam looks at me questioningly.

“War sucks, *doesn’t* it,” I correct her.

Sam ponders this for a moment, looking a bit confused. Then she smiles.

“Doesn’t just don’t sound right to me, Mr. Jeffries.”

Before I can answer, there’s another loud knock on the door. Thinking it’s Nate, I get up and open the door. Standing there, acoustic guitar in hand, is Will.

“Will! First acoustic bass, and now acoustic guitar? C’mon in and join the party, man!”

I turn to introduce Will to Sam.

“Will, I’d like to introduce you...”

Will interrupts me before I can finish the introduction.

“Hi, Sam,” he smiles.

“Hey, Will. Good to see you again.”

I look at Will, then at Sam. Then back at Will.

“Ohh-kay, then. You two have already met. Teacher puts foot in mouth yet again.”

They both laugh as we hear a kick on the door.

“That must be Nate,” Sam says.

Will reaches back and opens the door. Nate strolls in, easily carrying a full drum set and assorted cymbals. He sets everything down without a sound, not even breathing hard.

“Hi, Will. You gonna audition, too?” Nate asks.

“You better believe it!”

“Mr. Jeffries, Will can play,” Sam pipes in. “I mean, he can *really* play!”

Nate looks a little nervous as he removes his bass from its cloth cover.

“Mr. Jeffries, I gotta tell you somethin’ before we get started.”

I nod yet again, not knowing what to expect next.

“You see, Sam isn’t a student here. At least, not anymore.”

Sam lowers her gaze and looks at the floor.

“Yeah, I dropped out when my Dad died.”

I break the silence.

“All the more reason for you to be here now, Sam. Music will be your salvation.”

Now Sam breaks the silence in return.

“You’re a kind man, Mr. Jeffries,” she replies softly, trying not to cry.

There’s another uneasy silence in the room before Will finally speaks up.

“Hey, you guys. Before this turns into a hippie love fest, let’s get set up, okay?”

Nate and Sam nod. I find a spot to sit on the top riser. The trio of young musicians looks up at me and starts playing. Nate on acoustic bass. Will on acoustic guitar. And Sam using brushes and soft mallets on her drums. Within moments, my jaw drops in disbelief. I close my eyes. I lean forward, elbows on knees, resting my head in my hands. Drifting in a daze, I barely hear the door opening. Dozens of kids quietly tip-toe in and sit on the floor in front of the trio, whose eyes remain closed as they play. One kid turns the lights off, leaving the room in a surreal, yet comfortable haze. They all lower their heads and listen. Silently. Intently. And respectfully.

Ann

I'm in the kitchen, busy preparing dinner while Genevieve naps. I answer the ringing telephone before it wakes her up, wondering who could be calling me. Nobody knows me here.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Ann. It's Sally."

I pause for only a moment to place the name.

"Sally Hoague, sweetie. Do you have a minute?"

"Oh, hi Sally! So nice to hear from you. Of course I have a minute. Maybe even two! Genevieve is actually taking a nap while I prepare dinner."

"Oh, then I'll make it quick. How are you and Allen doing?"

"Well, we're both keeping busy, that's for sure. Allen is settling right into his teaching job. And loving it!"

"That's wonderful, Ann! And what about your beautiful little Genevieve?"

"Every day she surprises me with something new, Sally! But she sure misses her Dad being around during the day."

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Anyway, the reason I'm calling is that Art and I would like to invite you and Allen to attend a little gathering at our house on Saturday afternoon. Nothing formal, we just want some of our friends to meet you."

I raise an eyebrow in momentary surprise, thankful Sally can't see my reaction.

"Well, sure, Sally, but..."

Sally interrupts.

"No baby sitter required, Ann. Bring Genevieve with you, of course!"

I can only wonder if Sally is a mindreader as she continues.

"Frankly, she'll be the life of the party, Ann!"

"To be honest, Sally, we don't have many friends. In fact, we don't have any. Except you and Art, that is. I may have to convince Allen, though. As comfortable as he is on stage performing, he's as shy around people he doesn't know."

"Hmmm. Here's an idea," Sally schemes. "Just tell him Art is expecting his first music lesson Saturday. That oughta convince him!"

"Sounds good to me, Sally," I chuckle. "Do you want me to bring anything?"

"Just bring yourself, Allen, and Genevieve. Oh! Before I forget! Make sure Allen brings his trumpet along! Can you manage that?"

"Uh-oh, sounds like you have something up your sleeve!" I tease playfully. "Tell you what, I'll make sure his trumpet makes it into the bus before we leave, one way or another."

"Now that's what I like. A sneaky little wife! What he doesn't know won't hurt him, honey. Does two o'clock work for you?"

"Sure, two is fine."

"Wonderful. Got a paper and pencil handy?"

I grab paper and pencil from a kitchen drawer.

"I do now."

"Okay, here are driving directions to our house. We're only about five minutes from the apartment."

Allen

Ann and Genevieve are sitting on the couch when I get home around 5:30. Ann is reading Dr. Seuss to her. Hearing me open the door and walk in, Genevieve frog-kicks her legs in excitement. But Ann knows better, looking at me with a worried look on her face.

“Something happened today, didn’t it?” she asks hesitantly. “I can see it in your eyes, Allen.”

I have to look away for a moment to gather my thoughts.

“Something remarkable, Ann . . . I’m still at a loss for words.”

She pats the couch cushion twice.

“Come. Sit with us, Allen. Tell us both all about it.”

I slowly lower myself onto the couch. I reach out my hands and Genevieve jumps into my arms. I kiss her on the forehead. Then I lean into Ann, laying my head on her shoulder.

“I auditioned three kids today, Ann. Remember I told you about Nate?”

Ann nods and puts her arm around my shoulder.

“Well, first Nate showed up carrying a big upright bass, of all things. He brought a drummer along to audition, too. Samantha. Sam, for short. Then Will, a kid from my homeroom, showed up with an acoustic guitar, no less. Then they played, Ann, like ... well...”

Ann waits patiently for me to finish my unspoken thought before finally asking me.

“Like what, Allen? Tell us.”

I raise my head and look into her the eyes, a tear already rolling down my cheek.

“Like . . . angels. I’ve never heard anything like it, Ann. These kids are way beyond their years. They’re spiritual. And deep. I wish you could have heard them, seen them, felt their magic. The room soon filled with kids who’d been listening out in the hall. They all sat on the floor. Bowed their heads. And listened. Really listened.”

Ann reaches over and gently wipes the tear from my cheek. She nods. The three of us hug, baby in the middle. But Ann knows me too well.

“There’s something else, isn’t there, Allen?”

“There is,” I whisper slowly. “I should have told you this yesterday, but I didn’t. Frankly, in the excitement of Day One I didn’t even think about it.”

“Then tell us now, Allen.”

“It’s about Ben Alexander. I found out yesterday that the day after he hired me two weeks ago, he disappeared.”

“What do you mean, disappeared?”

“Well, it seems he just dropped off the face of the earth, Ann. Poof, gone without a trace. No answer at his apartment. No forwarding address. No message from him about where he is, or why he left. With all that’s been happening, it never occurred to me that something could be wrong. But now, I’m worried about him. There’s something going on that doesn’t make any sense. And my heart tells me that it has something to do with me, Ann. I don’t why I believe that, but I do. I know I have to do something. Anything. But I just don’t know where to start.”

“Allen? What do we really know about Ben? Other than he called us two weeks before the start of a new school year and invited you to interview for the job he’s held for 62 years. Obviously, he trusts you, Allen.”

“But why me, Ann? There must be something more than music that binds us. I just have to find out what that is.”

“Okay, Allen. Let’s assume you’re right. If you are, we have to believe he *will* contact *you*, of all people, as soon as he finds what he’s looking for. In the meantime, we can start asking questions around town. Find out who Ben was close to, if he was close to anyone. But in the end, when he’s ready, I have no doubt he’ll make the first move. He will contact you, Allen. Don’t ask me how I know this. I just do.”

Ann

It was bound to happen. The letdown. After our conversation last night, I knew Allen was struggling. Overwhelmed by the long drive to and from school. By the daily routine. By the newness of it all. By the incredible talent of young students whom Allen must think don't seem to need him. By the lunchroom fiasco and its looming threat of violence against him. And now, by Ben's mysterious disappearance. I should have known to expect this. It's 6:45 in the morning and Allen hasn't gotten out of bed. Genevieve is sleeping late, too. She knows. She understands. And me? I feel it, too. But I know I will not, must not, give into it. So, like any other day, I'm sitting at the dining room table, drinking but not really enjoying my morning cup of tea. As much as I'd like to let Allen sleep in for the whole day, I know that would be a mistake. So I force myself to go into the bedroom and wake him up. When I do, I see that he's already awake. Staring at the ceiling. Mentally preparing himself to do what he knows he must do.

"Allen?" I whisper.

"I know. I'm okay, Ann. Really, I am. I know. Time to get up." he whispers back.

From his alarm-radio, we hear yet another Chicago song.

'Does anybody really know what time it is? Does anybody really care?'

Allen

No breakfast for me this gloomy morning. No time. No desire. It's a dismal, cloudy day, threatening rain. A perfect reflection of my mood. While I showered, Ann called the school to tell them I would be a few minutes late. One of the office secretaries said she would monitor my home room. When I arrive and walk in, ten minutes late, she tells me the kids were great. I thank her. She leaves quietly. I sit at my desk, looking down. The kids look at me without saying a word. They know. I feel their love washing over me. I raise my head and offer a weak, forced smile.

“Does anybody really know what time it is?” I ponder aloud.

Silence.

“Does anybody really care?” Will asks aloud.

The bell rings, startling me in mid-thought. The kids get up to leave, each one patting my back gently as they depart.

Ann

I will not allow myself to fall into the trap. But I'm worried about Allen. Afraid for him. Genevieve lets me know she's awake, so I softly walk into her room. She looks up at me, as if to ask, *'where's daddy?'*

“It's all right, honey. Daddy's at school. We all just slept a little late today.”

She knows I'm feeling low, my spirit lagging. She knows what to do. She smiles at me. Opens up her raised arms, signaling me to pick her up. Which I do. The tears roll down my cheeks. Genevieve wraps her little arms around my neck and snuggles in my hair. For several minutes. And I'm reminded of who we are. The three of us.

Allen

I head down the main corridor. When I turn onto the long hallway which ends at my rehearsal room, there are dozens of kids lined up. Clutching their musical instruments to their chests. Silently waiting their turn to audition. Solemnly watching me glide through their love as I absorb their anticipation. When I arrive at my office door, the school principal is waiting for me. She opens the door for me and gestures for all the aspiring musicians to take their seats. She puts an arm on my shoulder.

“Mr. Jeffries, there’s an important message for you in the office. I’ll sit with the students for you while you attend to it.”

My first thought is that something is wrong with Jeff or Ann.

“No, no, it’s nothing about your family, Mr. Jeffries. It’s something else. Please. I’ll wait here for you.”

I walk quickly to the main office. Almost run, in fact. I arrive out of breath, virtually running into the office. The secretary who watched over my home room students looks at me ominously. She hands me a large, official looking manilla envelope. Confused, I take it from her hand. I look at the return address. The American Embassy in Zurich, Switzerland. I look at the secretary, then back at the envelope. It’s addressed to me. My legs feel suddenly weak, so I sit down before I fall down. At least a dozen teachers stand around me. Watching. Waiting. Wondering. I open the envelope. I start reading to myself, not sure of the contents of the letter. Not ready to share what even I don’t know is written and by whom.

Ben

'Dear Allen,

By the time you receive this letter, I will no longer be in Switzerland. There is so much I want to tell you. But for now, the most important thing I want to say to you is that I'm sorry I wasn't there to welcome you to school on your first day. You see, I left town the day after you accepted your teaching position. Indeed, your signed contract was my proverbial get-out-of-jail-free card. It was my opportunity to fulfill my last mission in life. Finding my daughter. Yes, I have a daughter whom I haven't seen in 40 years. In fact, we haven't communicated in any way all that time. She's 62 years old, now.

I began my search years too late in the very town where you now teach. Little did I know my daughter had left the states many years ago. The trail I now follow eventually led me to Switzerland, which explains this letter. From here, I'm on my way to Germany, where I have reason to believe I may find another fork in the trail worth following. I promise to keep you up to date, Allen.

Just so you know, you were my second-last mission in life. I knew the moment I received your resume that you were destined to teach in my place. The moment I spoke with your lovely wife Ann on the telephone that morning, and heard your darling daughter Genevieve in the background, I knew that they are the most important parts of your destiny. And I knew after speaking with you, then meeting you in person, that your acceptance of my offer was the final link in that destiny. I have confidence in you, Allen. Confidence that you will share yourself unselfishly with the students I entrust to you. They need you. They deserve you. There is no question that I have chosen wisely in hiring you.

I promise to write to you as often as possible, as soon as I am able to follow up on the clues and leads I'm able to uncover. I don't have a great deal of time remaining, Allen. But I am driven by the knowledge that I won't stop until I achieve my goal. Take care of yourself, Allen. And always love your beautiful family. Finally, please offer my best wishes and love to the teachers undoubtedly surrounding you as you read this correspondence!

All my love,

Ben'

Allen

I can only sit, thinking about the letter I've just read. Of course, Ann was right when she insisted Ben would contact me. Now, oblivious to the teachers surrounding me, their eyes desperate for explanation, I'm suddenly taken back to my interview with Ben. What he said. And how he said it.

'Look, Allen. I won't beat around the bush. These kids are talented. They need someone close to their own age, someone with a solid background in their own music. Someone to look up to. Someone other than this old, worn-out music teacher. Someone like . . . you, Allen.'