

ANDREW JOBES

A TALE OF TWO TEDDIES

TEDDY SMILED, EYES CLOSED, as the rich song of the day's first robin floated into his head and pulled him gently into wakefulness. *No rain this morning*, he thought. He got up and crossed the space between his cot and the musky canvas flap that when lifted would unveil the subtleties of the morning. He smiled again. *Mild and sunny*. He grabbed his towel from its weathered rope line and made his way through the bushes to the fountain behind the park's gazebo. He tossed a nickel as an offering to the less fortunate, undressed and bathed, the chlorinated water offering cleanliness in the absence of soap. Refreshed, he pulled on his pants, retraced his steps through the underbrush, and put on the freshest of his three shirts.

Once dressed, he filled his enamel teapot with water, primed his stove, and lit it with a match, wincing at the smoky sulphur smell that filled the air after he blew it out. He swept the night's stray twigs and leaves from the dirt patch out front while he waited for the water to boil, then sat outside on a large, inverted pail and greeted the dawn by sipping hot tea from his chipped and stained mug. Cardinals joined the robins as blacks faded into greys, wrens accompanied the rise of the greens, and orioles ushered in the reds, yellows, and oranges. By six o'clock, the sky was blue and the air was filled with the symphonies of duelling birds. He finished his tea then went back inside to rinse and hang his mug.

He went to the old wooden crate next to his cot and knelt. A five-by-seven photograph rested atop the legs of a seated teddy bear, held upright between the bear's charred arms. A woman wearing a beige sweater smiled at him from the picture, her warmth reassuring him that life could never be anything but all right. Teddy thanked her silently and rose, prepared for the challenges that would be the new day.

Teddy walked along the stone path that meandered through magnificent oak sentries. He slowed to enjoy the lilac scent that filled the cool shade then returned to the heat of the sun at the house end of the path.

“Afternoon, Mrs Wilkinson.”

Mrs Wilkinson's broom stopped mid-arc. She wiped the sweat off her brow with the back of her hand and smiled. "Well hello, Teddy. How are you today?"

"All's well ma'am. What's the news today?"

Mrs Wilkinson leaned against her broom. "Well, I got a letter from my sister this morning. I haven't heard from her in seventeen years."

Teddy grinned. "Well that's nice. Not that you haven't heard from her in so long, I mean—that you have, I mean."

Her smile faded. "I thought so too until I read it. She's terribly ill and she wants me to visit." Mrs Wilkinson looked at her hands and said, as if to herself, "my little sister's going to die."

Teddy was moved by Mrs Wilkinson's openness. His customers had been distrustful of him when he started his route two years earlier. He understood this—how many forty-three-year-old men made their living delivering newspapers, after all—and despite his best efforts to look decent while living in a canvas hut in the woods, it was obvious that he was not of their class. Understanding someone's feelings didn't make them any less hurtful, though, and he enjoyed the trust he had gained with his customers over time.

He picked up Mrs Wilkinson's fallen smile. "Well, it's nice that she wants to see you again before she does, isn't it?"

"I don't know if I can. We didn't part on very good terms, and seeing her knowing that it will be the last time seems like more than I can handle right now."

"I bet you're tougher than you think, Mrs Wilkinson. Look how strong you were when ol' Abe died, and I'd bet you were closer to him than to your sister. Besides, I'm sure it would mean a lot to her if you went to say goodbye."

"Closer to my dog than to my own sister ..." She looked up at Teddy. "There's something very wrong with that, isn't there? If you'll excuse me, I'm going to go inside and call her right now."

"Sure thing. Besides, I've got to keep the papers coming." He handed Mrs Wilkinson her paper. "Say hi to your sister for me and tell her that I hope she gets better." He started walking down the path towards the street. He paused at the first oak sentry and looked back. "Oh, and Mrs Wilkinson? Don't be afraid for your sister—there are a lot of things in life that are worse than dying."

Sweat coated Teddy's forehead and formed dark circles under his arms as he walked through the park. Young parents stood chatting, one eye

on their children who scrambled over jungle gyms and shot down slides. The enamoured strolled hand-in-hand or lay in the shaded cathedrals of riverside willows. Shirtless teens tested their skateboarding talents against the rim of the fountain. No birds sang at this time of day. Only the mechanical drones of lawnmowers and cicadas accompanied the general reverie.

He made sure no one was watching him before he ducked into the bushes. He'd occasionally been harassed by the local kids, but they were generally afraid of the "crazy hermit in Thompson Park." Still, he preferred when others didn't see his comings and goings.

He opened a brown paper bag in front of his hut and scattered crumbs on the ground for the squirrels and chickadees, who scolded him for being late. He ducked inside to fetch a knife, a plate, a small cookie tin, and the photo of Jessie, and returned to the pail out front. He pulled a Montreal-style bagel out of a second paper bag and some cheese from the tin and spoke to his wife as he prepared his supper.

"I saw the darndest thing this afternoon," he began. "I was sitting on the rocks by the river and the lady mallard I feed every day came over as usual. Only today she had nine of the tiniest yellow ducklings tailing her, and she was just as proud a mom as could be. Sometimes they followed her, sometimes she had to work to keep them together, but you could just tell she was happy to be out showing off her new family." Teddy smiled. "There's not much cuter than a baby duck, I tell you." He took a bite of his sandwich and continued. "So I'm feeding her, and breaking off smaller bits of bread than usual for the little ones when all of a sudden there was this great splash and one of the little guys disappeared into the mouth of some big fish. I couldn't believe my eyes."

"Well, mom just freaked out—calling frantically—and all her kids beelined it for the grasses along shore. Once they were all safe from the fish, she went to where it had been, and swam in circles over the spot where her little one had disappeared, quacking. It broke my heart watching her swimming in circles like that, calling over and over, like she expected the little one to just pop back up like a cork. But he didn't."

Teddy sniffed, wiped his eye with the back of his hand. A robin flew past, its mouth overflowing with bugs.

"I guess life's just like that. One minute you've got something, and you're the happiest, proudest duck, and then the next it's gone—wham!—just like that. No warning. No preparation. Just gone. And you're left swimming in circles, wondering what the hell just happened."

He stood, entered his hut, and returned the photograph to the bear's embrace. "There's more. I tried to console her by tossing her some more bread. She ignored it at first, but after a few minutes she took a piece. Then another. And before you know it, she's back and all her kids are there, and they're all feeding away as if nothing had happened at all."

Alternating red and white lights flash like synchronized cameras in the periphery and a wailing siren gets louder, more insistent, until it passes him in a rush of red that shakes the car he is driving. He rides in the wake of the screaming fire truck until he turns a corner and sees a house, his but not his, ablaze. Orange and yellow flames scramble to escape from every window and door, reaching for the black sky like flyaway hair. Billowing smoke reflects the sunset colours of the blaze and rises into the darkness. Dozens of men in dirty yellow slickers scramble around like so many busy ants, their yells drowned out by the gunshot cracks of burning wood and the gale of the backdraft. A side window explodes and sends a thousand orange sparkles into the yard. The smell of smoke fills his nostrils. *Oh my god*, he cries, *Jessie! Nick!* A gloved hand, large, strong, dirty, pushes on his chest, stops him. Frantic shrieks tear through the chaos and everyone stops, looks up. A woman wearing a gown of fire stands in the space that had been the bedroom window, screaming *Catch him! Please ... somebody catch him!* The bundle she throws is trailed by an arc of smoke as it falls to the ground in slow motion. Several of the men in dirty yellow slickers lunge to catch it, but there are no heroes this night. The bundle bounces as it hits the driveway and stops at his feet. A little blue bear rolls out of the bundle and rests against his toe, smoking. *Nick! Oh my god ... Nicholas! No!* His head lurches forward and he vomits an acrid wet plume that doesn't end until his legs collapse beneath him.

It is suddenly lighter. Grey, not black. The smells of burnt wood, burnt plastic, burnt hair, compete for his attention as he walks across the remains of his-not-his house. Thin wisps of smoke snake upwards from the smouldering mess that surrounds him. The heat of the rubble warms the soles of his feet. He passes a charred kitchen sink, dozens of exploded tins, and the arm of his-not-his favourite reading chair. He stops to look at himself in a smoky shard of their-not-their dresser mirror and sees nothing. Nothing. He is alone with himself. He notices a picture frame. It burns his hand as he pulls it out of the ashes, and he drops it. The glass in the frame shatters. He bends over to retrieve the photograph from which his wife smiles at him. *Jessie ...*

Jessie and the bear watched silently in the darkness as Teddy shuddered and sweat rolled from his brow and across his twitching eyelids. A tear rolled down his cheek onto his sweat-soaked pillow. They wished he wouldn't remember the dream when he woke up, but he would. He always did.

Teddy leaned against the wrought-iron railing as he rested on the second of seven steps to the polished oak entrance of 974 Benton Road. Jake Hartsford burst from the door as Teddy raised his right foot to tackle the third step.

"Good morning, Teddy. You're early today." Jake bounded down the steps, brown leather briefcase in one hand, blue gym bag in the other.

"Good morning, Mr Hartsford," he said as he reached into his bag for a paper. "It's been taking me a bit longer to do my route lately, so I've had to start earlier to finish on time."

Jake tilted his handsome tanned head. "Picked up some new customers?"

"Nope. I'm fighting something and I can't carry two delivery bags anymore, especially with all the back-to-school flyers that come at this time of the year."

Jake frowned. "Couldn't the paper find someone to cover you for a couple of days so you can take some time off and get some rest?"

Teddy shook his head. "They probably could, but I can't afford the time off. Besides, sometimes you just have to keep on keeping on."

Jake nodded. "Well, I'd take a couple of days off if I were you. Life's too short to spend it fighting." He glanced at his watch. "I'd better keep going or I'll miss my squash match." Jake held out his hand. "I'll take that, Teddy—save you the climb."

"Thanks a lot, Mr Hartsford."

"No problem at all, Teddy," Jake said as he threw his bags into the trunk of his silver Audi, "and please, call me Jake."

Teddy shuffled across the field towards the woods at the edge of the park, hands in pockets, shoulders hunched. A noisy gang of dry maple leaves accosted him in a gust of wind. The cold was hard on his lungs, and he wheezed as he walked. He coughed, a wet, phlegmy rattle from deep in his chest, and spat. *Blood looks so black in the moonlight*, he thought. When he reached the shrubs at the edge of the field, he wove his way through them without watching where he was going. He reached the small canvas hut he called

home, grey in the November night, and entered its cold darkness. He lit a candle to tame the chill and ward off the demons of loneliness. He warmed his hands over the tiny amber flame for a few moments, hating that it was fire that was his protection against the cold.

He turned his attention to the photograph of his wife next to his cot and removed it from the bear's embrace. As always, Jessie smiled openly at him from the photo. He forced a smile, despite another body-wracking cough and its accompanying blood.

"I really need you right now, Jessie," he said, looking his wife in the eye. "I'm dying here, so alone, and I need you now more than ever." He returned Jessie to the protection of the bear's lap and turned his attention to the bear itself. "And you," he said, "you're all that's left of our little Nick." Teddy tried to recall his son's face, his smell, his laugh, but couldn't. "Why did you have to leave me as well, Nick?" He clutched the bear to his chest and cried, not noticing the photograph fall to the ground by his feet. The bear's silence was drowned out by the slaps of wet snow on the tarp overhead. He hurled the bear, knocking over the lone candle and returning the hut to utter, abysmal darkness, then slumped to the floor and sobbed alone in the dark. Jessie lay unnoticed beneath his convulsing form, her face moist with his tears.

The last door of Teddy's day opened as he reached for its handle and he was greeted by the beaming face of Wendy Dunston.

"Merry Christmas, Teddy," she said. "How are you today?"

His words were visible in the cloud that left his mouth. "Fine thanks, Mrs Dunston, and a Merry Christmas to you and Mr Dunston." He handed her their paper and turned to leave.

"Just a moment, Teddy. Randall and I would like you to join us for a mug of hot chocolate. It's awfully cold out there this morning."

"It sure is, Mrs Dunston. A hot chocolate would be wonderful right now, but I don't want to impose."

"Nonsense, we wouldn't have it any other way." She stepped back and opened the door fully. A wall of warmth came out to greet him. "Please, come in."

Randall Dunston met Teddy and Wendy in the garland-laden foyer. "Merry Christmas, Teddy. Thanks for joining us. Let me take your coat."

He handed over his jacket. "Thanks Mr Dunston. Merry Christmas." He removed his worn sneakers and placed them next to Mrs Dunston's new

burgundy leather boots. Wendy led him to the kitchen, where she fixed him a steaming mug of cocoa, then back down the hallway towards the living room.

He turned the corner into the living room and was greeted by a collage of familiar faces. “Merry Christmas, Teddy!” they shouted in unison as he walked in, mugs held aloft.

Teddy fumbled as he scanned the crowd. At least half of his seventy-two customers were there. Mrs Wilkinson stood next to Jake and Silvie Hartsford. There were the Thompsons, Dr Lee, Bill and Linda MacPhearson. And over there were the Singhs, the Efstons, and Tom and Emily Foxworthy. “Merry Christmas, everyone,” he finally said.

Wendy touched his left elbow. “We have something for you, Teddy.”

Randall guided him to the chair beside the fireplace, turned to face the assembly. “Teddy,” he began in his lawyer’s voice. “You’ve touched each one of us in this room with your good cheer, your honesty, your integrity. I hope you know that everyone on your route considers you a member of our community.”

Teddy sat looking at his feet.

“We’ve all noticed how ill you’ve become, and we want to help you.” Randall looked him in the eye. “You’re struggling with your papers, and we know you can’t go on like this, so we’ve decided to, for lack of a better word, ‘adopt’ you into our community. Every last one of your customers, even those who couldn’t be here today, has agreed to contribute to a monthly fund to pay for an apartment and food so that you can take a break from your route and get well again.”

Teddy objected. “That’s really nice of all of you, but I can’t accept something like that.”

“Nonsense. It’s the least we can do. You wouldn’t accept anything more than a thank you when you rescued Sarah from that Doberman two summers ago. You have no idea how much it means to us that you saved our little girl.”

An image of the blue bear’s charred arms flashed through Teddy’s mind.

“There’s no point in arguing—everything has already been arranged. We’ve found an apartment a few blocks away that you can move into on the second. So, if you can just hang in there for another few days, we’ll have you all set up.”

Wendy handed him two parcels. “These are for you from all of us in the meantime, Teddy.” He opened the larger parcel first, to reveal a thick, hand-knit sweater. The second parcel contained a new pair of winter boots.

Teddy's eyes welled. "Thank you so much everyone. I don't know what to say."

"How about that you'll stay for lunch?"

Everyone moved to the dining room, where Teddy enjoyed the biggest, most delicious meal he'd had in over two years.

Teddy smiled, eyes still closed, as the cheerful gurgles and chatters of the resident chickadee family escorted him from slumber. He'd slept in—he chickadees didn't visit until after twilight had arrived. *A mild and sunny winter morning*, he thought as he sat up and coughed. He reflected on the previous evening's party at the Dunstons' as he looked at Jessie and the bear and smiled again.

He lifted the crate next to his cot and retrieved the jar of coins hidden beneath it. He fetched his towel, went to the fountain, and opened the jar. *Those loonies and toonies add up pretty quickly*, he thought as he dumped the jar's contents, over \$400, into the fountain.

It was too cold for a full bath, so Teddy wet his facecloth in the fountain and scrubbed his face, pits, crotch, and feet. He dressed quickly and returned to his hut. He boiled water, made some tea, and brought it and an old coffee tin outside with him. He sat on his inverted pail, removed the thin plastic lid from the tin, and greeted the day by feeding the chickadees from his hand while sipping his tea. A pair of small black-and-white woodpeckers and a nuthatch joined the chickadees in keeping him company.

"Thank you," Teddy said when he had no more seeds to give. "It's time to go home." He stood slowly, went into his hut, and sealed the door.

He brought the remaining tea to his cot and sat down. He looked at the photograph of Jessie, smiled as he pulled a small plastic container from his jacket pocket. He removed the lid from the container, poured 48 little pills into his cupped palm, and swallowed them with the last of his tea.

He removed his jacket and boots, climbed into his sleeping bag, held the bear against his chest with his right hand and the photo of Jessie over his heart with his left, and fell asleep with the calm smile of an innocent child on his face.