

New Friends

by Phillip W. Weiss

Once upon a time, or maybe now, there was an old guy. His name was Al. Al was feeling sorry for himself, He had lived a good and responsible life, full of challenges, all of which he met head on. He had outlived many of the people who had been close to him. He thought about the past, recalled moments of intimacy with ladies who were no longer living and of places he had visited, things he had done, moments of joy he had felt, times when he thought of the future, of all the things he wanted to do, and did. He recalled the time when he lived life with gusto, went to parties, traveled the world, sharing moments of laughter, never cognizant of the passing of time that transformed the new into old. Well, time had passed taking with it his youth, leaving him only memories to keep him company as he entered the sunset years of his life, feeling a pervasive sadness that produced fits of tears that rolled down his cheeks, causing him to look sad and forlorn. One day he went to the library located at nearby university which was Al's alma mater. Sitting in the library caused him to recollect the time so many decades ago when he was a young student with lots of friends, looking forward to graduating and accomplishing great things for himself and humanity. He remembered when he graduated from ROTC. That was a special moment as was the day when he received his commission as a second lieutenant in the

U.S. Army. He remembered the day when he saved a boy from drowning in the ocean at Rockaway Beach. He was called a hero. Al brushed off the accolades. It was so long ago and now just a memory. Al thought to himself, "Everything was different. I was different." Soon he was weeping, his tears transforming his face into a beacon of light as the light from the ceiling fixtures reflected off the streams of tears that covered his face, yet nobody seemed to take notice of him. To those passing by he was just an old man. of no account. Al felt unwanted, abandoned and unloved. He asked himself whether he still wanted to live. But then something remarkable occurred.

Seated nearby, two students, Noel and Jessica, noticed Al. What they saw was an old man sitting by himself crying.

Noel said to Jessica, "I wonder what's wrong with that guy. He's sitting there by himself crying. Maybe we should inform someone."

Jessica replied, "Leave him be. He probably wants to be left alone."

Noel said, "I don't know. I don't feel good about some old guy sitting by himself crying. What about if he does something crazy."

Jessica said, "If it makes you happy, let's go over and ask him if he's all right."

Noel and Jessica left their belongings at their desks and went over to Al who was still weeping.

Standing next to Al, Jessica asked, "Excuse me, sir, my friend and I couldn't help but notice that you are crying. Is everything all right?"

Wiping away the tears, Al looked at Jessica and Noel and said, "Things are awful. I'm old, all alone, and have no friends. It sucks."

Noel said, "You're wrong, sir, you do have friends. We're your friends. I'm Noel and this is Jessica." Noel shook Al's hand while Jessica nodded.

"It's a pleasure meeting you, young man," Al said as he regained his composure. "Would you care to join me at this table?"

Noel said, "Jessica and I were going to get a bite to eat and if you want you can join us."

Jessica, sensing the spirit of the occasion, said, "It's on us."

"That's right," Noel said, "You'll be our honored guest."

Jessica and Noel returned to their table, gathered their belongings and all three left the library. As they were walking across the campus, Al recalled what the school was like when he was an undergrad and how much everything had changed. They left the campus, crossed the street and entered a coffee shop. It was crowded with students. They found an empty table and ordered light snacks. Noel offered to pay. Then Jessica called out, "Ronnie! Sammie!" A young man and young woman turned and waived. Noel said, "Come and join us!" Ronnie and Sammie joined them at the table. Jessica introduced Ronnie and Sammie to Al, and soon all five were engaged in a lively discussion. They seemed to talk about everything, the free-flowing conversation often interrupted by good-natured laughter. Two hours later, the get-together broke up. As they were preparing to leave, all four told Al how glad they were to have met him and hoped that they

would see him again soon and as they were about to leave each gave him a big hug and exchanged email addresses and other contact information. Al was so moved that he started crying again, but this time they were not tears of sadness but tears of joy as he thought to himself how life can be so unpredictable. Here he was, an old man, feeling forgotten and alone, and now he had four new friends, proving that he's not a total washout and that somebody out there in the world cares.