

IT'S LATE

By Bob Heller

In the hospital, as Jason's twin sister, Joyce, was getting her latest chemo transfusion treatment he sat next to her wondering, "*We entered the world together, should we leave together?*"

While Jason contemplated this question, for some uncanny reason he was thunderstruck by a vision of their once vivacious eleven year old classmate, Carolee, singing in the auditorium at their P.S. 157 Elementary School Talent Show:

"Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think

Enjoy yourself, while you're still in the pink

The years go by, as quickly as a wink"

The next year Carolee was exuberantly singing at the Junior High Talent show. Tommy, Jason's classmate nudged him, giggled and whispered, "Look at her two volcanic eruptions." Jason's eyes focused on Carolee's tight pink sweater as she belted out the same hit song. This time she accompanied the verses with a complicated tap dance routine while her pleated polka dotted skirt freely swung as she traversed the whole stage:

"You work and work for years and years, you're always on the go

You never take a minute off, too busy making' dough

Someday, you say, you'll have your fun when you're a millionaire

Imagine all the fun you'll have in your old rockin' chair"

Did Carolee's lyrics influence Jason and Joyce's life decisions?

Jason's sister asked, "Do you think that you being 7 minutes older affected our relationship?"

"No idea!"

Joyce said, "What if I were an inch taller? Or my name was Tiffany instead of Joyce?" As she talked Jason became more aware of his twin. How her frumpy flowered hospital gown, her exhausted face and unkempt hair made her seem 20 years older. Joyce continued, "Or if we were born two minutes apart? Or played the piano? Or spoke Mandarin? Or I was a vegan? Do you think my life would've been different?" Jason was feeling cranky and tired. "I find the "what ifs" both silly and destructive," said Jason. "But if you insist, ask Siri. Google is your best friend. Or, even better, ask yourself. You probably know the answer."

"Why are you being mean?"

"Sorry," said Jason. He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "I have a serious question. Our parents, all our aunts and uncles have died. We are the oldest of all our cousins. I'm seven minutes older than you. Does that make me the head of the family? If so, what are my responsibilities?"

"To be nice."

Jason excused himself, "I'm going out for a little fresh air. Is there something I can bring back?"

"Yes, a lot of healthy fresh air," Joyce said as she projected a positive image and attitude displaying an open happy emoji smile that erased those 20 years.

“Back soon.” Jason left and walked to a park and sat down on a bench behind a woman selling sunglasses. The warm glare from the afternoon sun was a great comfort to Jason and he closed his eyes. He thought of years spent running after dreams of glory. He thought of his adult children and when they were born his focus slightly shifted from himself. The responsibility of parenthood diffused his stress. He now worried about them as well as himself.

Jason was startled out of his reverie when the thin middle aged street vendor, without makeup, dressed in an untucked short-sleeve yellow checked shirt over tight fitting black denim jeans, and wearing a narrow brimmed straw hat over loosely hung hair graciously demanded with her husky voice, “Try these!” She handed a casually dressed middle-aged man, in a sloganed t-shirt and green shorts, a pair of sunglasses and held up a mirror. The potential buyer put them on and looked into the mirror. He turned to the left, and then to the right. He pursed his lips. His erratic movements did not indicate happiness. He took them off and casually glanced at the hundreds of possible selections. After 30 seconds he picked up another pair with smaller green round lens, and again she held up the mirror, “Very nice.” He looked at her and returned the glasses to the table. Another minute or so passed, he picked up another pair of glasses and preened back and forth, left and right, studying himself in the mirror. He shook his head, replaced the glasses and walked away.

The young woman, in a brassy waitress voice yelled after him, “Mister, who are you looking for in the mirror? Brando? Harrison Ford? Brad Pitt? Better yet, imagine Jim Carey.” As she turned back her eyes briefly met Jasons’. He was surprised to hear from her lovely lips such sharp insightful words.

Instantly Jason was taken with her attitude. He fantasized joyously rolling with her on a tropical beach, laughing and touching on the hot sand. After a few minutes he left without a word or a smile.

“Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think”

When Jason entered the hospital room his sister was on her cell phone, "I keep working and giving you and you keep spending." Short pause. "No more." A long pause. "Yes. Yes. Ok. Love you and big hugs to my grandchildren."

She put the cell down and made a face at Jason, "You're no different from me!"

"I am. I stopped working years ago and you insist on working to support your adult kids. Want my advice?"

Joyce said, "No. I've heard it many times and I know you're right."

Jason looked out the window and heard the aria, "Toreador" from Carmen and watched his mother, with her most beautiful smile, dancing in circles through the fluffy clouds, waving her arm at him in rhythm with the music. Jason turned to Joyce, "Do you remember mom used henna, she bought in Egypt, on her grey hair and it turned a bright orange?"

"Vaguely"

Surprisingly, Dad was now dancing with mom. Jason smiled, then asked Joyce, "Do you know why our parents divorced?"

"Vaguely. Not really."

"I miss them," Jason said. "Do you remember dad taught us to ride our new bikes? We were probably 6 or so."

"Jason, please. Enough!"

Jason couldn't control himself, "It was in the playground, the open space in front of our apartment building. Dad was very patient with us. You remember, all the kids on the block played there. Neil, Margaret, Nicky, Kenny. Punch Ball. Jumping rope. Even spin the bottle."

Joyce sharply turned to Jason, "Please stop it. It's always, 'Do you remember this? Do you remember that? Do you remember grandma sewed us matching snowsuits? Do you remember when we asked to be in different classrooms in the second grade? Do

you remember when dad spanked us for whatever? Do you remember when Mommy and daddy screamed at each other at the Chinese restaurant? Do you remember when dad won't let us have a Xmas tree?' I don't remember. I just don't remember and it's not important to me."

Jason was hurt, "But that's who we are. Shared memories. We're twins."

"Yes, we're twins," answered Joyce, "but as you always remind me, 'Joyce, I'm the oldest twin, by seven minutes.' Yes Jason, you are older. Seven more minutes of you being with mommy and daddy. Seven more minutes of you breathing in new experiences and observing your surroundings. I missed those seven minutes and all the reasons for what you remember. I love you but sometimes I feel we're strangers." she said with tears running down her cheeks.

"I love you," whispered Jason as he hugged Joyce and touched her hair.

"Next year for sure, you'll see the world, you'll really get around

But how far can you travel when you're six feet underground?

Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think..."

Jason left the hospital and drove two hours to his home in the country. He enjoyed the quiet and solitude that surrounded his cottage as he relaxed on his porch overlooking his large pond.

Early the next morning he walked under a Japanese arch into his flower garden. Jason centered himself in a sitting lotus position among the spring blooms and patches of wildflowers. The air was still. As time passed, he heard the most beautiful song with notes as sweet as a Brahms cello sonata. The bewitching tones came from a most gorgeous small yellow hopping bird. Jason couldn't move as he was mesmerized by the melodious sounds. The little bird sang love songs and hopped around Jason all that

day, through the sunset and past the dawn. He was charmed by the singing and hopping dance. But Jason didn't feel the yellow bird's love. He remained aloof, serene and distant from the yellow bird's love. And like all flowers, Jason slowly wilted into a sad heap.

The little yellow bird, heart-broken, stopped hopping and singing of love.
Instead, it sang of disappointment

and sadness

Sang of emptiness

and loss

Sang of pain

and death