

# A CHRISTMAS ANGEL

## *GOODBYE, DEAR FRIEND*

by

Jack Wilde

Maybe I was in a slight state of panic or perhaps I couldn't quite accept he was gone, or just a combination of both, but I did dial Henry's phone number one Friday night last December. Problem is, Henry had been dead almost a week. I even let the phone ring three times.

I'm still trying to cope. It's just starting to sink in that I've joined the ever increasing ranks of those who have also lost a close friend to AIDS. Remember Surgeon General, C. Everett Koop? Just a few years ago he was going around the country predicting that soon everyone in the U.S. would know at least one person who had died of AIDS. Well, many have done their share to help that prediction come true. I know lots of people who have died of AIDS, too. But, Henry was my good buddy and my closest friend to meet up with this dreaded killer disease.

When I met Henry about four years ago I was working in a stressful desk job for a large company with thousands of employees. In those days, for me at least, lunchtime was the only ray of sunshine in a daily schedule of frantic paper movement. It was during that hour that I went three times a week to an aerobics class in the gym across the street from where I worked. Half heartedly I joined that aerobics class shortly after getting hired, mainly to shake off a certain co-worker near my desk who kept up a pit

bull-like campaign to help me "get in shape." To her surprise, and even more to mine, I stayed in the class and actually came to enjoy all the jumping around.

A year later and humbled by a better appreciation of my lack of coordination, I was still in that class. Even though I could never seem to quite get the hang of all those rapid directions and changes in movement music, I had gotten pretty good at sweating through the hard working exercise routines with the best of them. I noticed Henry started coming to the classes just about then. I had never seen him before, but it was easy to spot him. His was one of those toned bodies just about every male wishes he had; a well-defined chest, powerful looking arms and no discernable measure of fat on his narrow waisted frame. He had a full head of black hair, was about average height, looked to be between 30 and 40 years of age and couldn't possibly have weighed more than 170 pounds. Fortunately, it was comforting to see that he, too, had to struggle just like the rest of us in the class to keep up with the teacher's seemingly unending high energy and shouted cruel workout orders.

When Henry and I had our first chance to introduce ourselves and swap small talk after one really tough and exhausting class, I learned he was also working in my building on the first floor. I remember what struck me most was his great sense of humor as we shared thoughts on our mutual job miseries. It was fun talking with Henry, yet early on I sensed the serious side of him that let me know that this was a caring and honest person . . . someone I could trust. Over the following months we slowly got to know each other. When I later left that job to move on to another position, Henry and I found it took little effort for us to remain friends. We continued to talk on the phone or see each other at least once a week.

Henry loved to laugh. His laugh sounded something like a cross between the roar of a Superbowl crowd at the sight of a touchdown and the final ovation to the greatest of Broadway productions; it was infectious. He could take a seat at a table of the most sober collection of folks and in just a few moments have everyone laughing and having a good time. Henry had a way of making people forget their egos and self-importance. He had lots of friends and he was always busy doing something for someone and giving his time to many charities.

Pinpointing just how Henry and I developed our friendship is no easy task. Then again, who among us can come up with the historical specifics of how we managed to find our current flock of friends, much less keep them? If pressed to find an answer, I suppose most of us would no doubt talk generalities about "common interests" or something like that. Really, maybe that's true, but the longer I think about it, the more I am convinced that most of our friendships are somehow formed to help us feel OK about ourselves. Perhaps that paints a bit of a greedy view, but at least that's how Henry fit into my life.

And to be sure, over the relatively short span of our friendship, Henry did help me row through some rough seas. The times when I lost confidence in myself and others, Henry gave me words of encouragement; not empty phrases or bromides, but thoughtful and caring expressions of encouragement. When I felt alone and the pains of abandonment, I knew I could phone Henry and he would make me feel better. On those too many occasions when I screwed up, I knew my non-judgmental friend, Henry, would still be there. No doubt about it, I took as much from him as possible. More importantly, however, he gave his friendship freely and with no strings attached.

Then something awful began to happen. In the early Spring of last year, Henry's health started to change. All kinds of frightful diseases and symptoms bombarded his once perfect body. He was diagnosed as being in the final stages of AIDS. Even though he was daily taking 23 different doctor-prescribed drugs, he was in great pain as his weight rapidly dropped. Surprisingly, he continued to go to his job everyday.

When Henry could work no longer, it was me who had the honor one late afternoon last September of bringing him to his employer's office to complete and sign the necessary resignation paperwork. That day will forever be etched in my memory. As we slowly walked together in small measured steps the short distance from my parked car to our destination less than two blocks away, I noticed that my now fragile friend's body held on tighter and tighter to my arm for support. When we entered his workplace, the outpouring of love and spontaneous burst of best wishes from Henry's co-workers was overwhelming. People, regardless of age, sex, race and color hugged Henry and bid him a highly emotional farewell. When we met privately with the gray haired, and very serious looking personnel officer she quietly informed a genuinely surprised Henry that his co-workers had gotten together and contributed their accumulated sick leave days to him so that he now had enough personal sick day leave time to last through the next three months. Henry tried to politely tell the personnel officer that he could not accept such an unexpected gift, but she very firmly let him know that the group had made its decision and that was that. "Henry, they want to do this. They need to do this. Please understand," she said in a whispered voice.

As Henry and I drove back to his apartment, neither of us said a word for a long time. I vividly recalled the faces of those co-workers. In my professional life I'd never had to face the painful task of saying goodbye to a fellow worker who was about to die. So many people were weeping. I'm sure Henry could tell I was shaken by the experience.

Still, I was determined not to let him see me "lose it" as I ineptly started to talk about something like the weather and global warming.

Henry, however, apparently would have none of the mindless mumblings of my well-learned avoidance behaviors. He stared at me and abruptly said, "Christmas is in three months. Do you think I'll be a Christmas angel?" At that, we both began laughing and crying. I had been given permission to let go of my feelings. It was then that I turned toward Henry and half-seriously and half-jokingly warned, "When you get to 'that place up above' and I talk to you, you better answer my prayers, you hear me?" Whether or not we believed it possible for us to continue our conversations after his death, we both managed to have a good parting laugh at the thought of it all as he feebly climbed out of my car in front of his apartment.

Driving home in a misting rush hour traffic that night I was aware I had just been with someone who knew he had a short time to live. Thoughts raced through my head. All I could think of was how I could at least make his last days more comfortable. I remembered when I was a skinny little kid growing up in the mid-west and got sick or had a painful run in with the family doctor, my mother usually tried to make me feel better about the ordeal by fixing me a milkshake. Sort of "milkshake therapy," I guess. Even these days, whenever I get sick I still picture a tall, sudsy and cold milkshake. Now my friend was gravely ill. Maybe a milkshake would make him feel better, I childishly reasoned. Most of all, I felt it was time to pay back for all I had taken. I knew I had a responsibility as a friend.

Hours after arriving at home I was still pacing the floor thinking about the new turn in my relationship with Henry and how I was going to deal with my feelings of helplessness. He was going away and I would never see him again. I'd never hear that

laugh again. Late that night I phoned Henry to ask if I could come to visit once a week. Maybe it was a bit presumptuous on my part to make such a request, but I thought that verbally committing to visiting him one day a week seemed like a good way to show I wanted to be there for him. I was relieved that he seemed happy about the whole idea and we agreed I would "stop by after work for a couple hours" every Wednesday. I think I nervously added something about a milkshake.

The next eleven Wednesdays gave me an opportunity to pay back my friend, as well as come to grips with death and dying. I clipped his fingernails, combed his hair, washed windows, vacuumed floors and collected dirty laundry. Sometimes we just sat and watched TV without saying a word and other times we had intensely serious talks about life and death. I saw his health quickly deteriorate as I watched someone four years younger than me waste away. Each time I came to visit he weighed less. He could not eat and no matter how much I tried to talk him into eating, he had no interest in food. Finally, when Henry could take care of himself no more, he had to move to a Hospice.

The Hospice was a surprisingly cheerful two-story house run by Buddhist monks and located in the middle of a quiet residential neighborhood. There were ten beds and each was filled. Henry had his own room with a large bay window overlooking a lush and green garden. The sense of relief that came over him after he moved there was quite evident. All the anger, confusion, sadness and fight was gone. He had come to the Hospice to go about the task of dying.

Henry died sometime early Sunday morning, last December 8, just a few short weeks before Christmas. His 97 pound body was cremated and his sister quietly and unceremoniously took the ashes away to a family resting place in China. The

Wednesday before he died, I think he hugged me a little bit longer when it was time for us to say goodbye.

He knew that was our last goodbye.

All of Henry's friends are happy that his long, painful journey is finally over. And still, the selfish part of me misses him. I won't be dialing his phone number anymore. I'll learn to get used to that eventually. I do know, though, my good friend is now in a better place. He left just in time to be a Christmas Angel.

END

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