

Seasoned Love

The kids busted out of school and flew down the stairs. Some had their coats on already, others flinging them on as they ran. The frosty air bit at any exposed skin. The mass of scurrying feet dwindled as it moved, some kids had chores and some had sports practice. But none of them wanted to leave. The mass of middle schoolers rounded the bend toward Main Street. No one wanted to miss an afternoon at the store, even on Friday. The elementary schoolers had gotten out of school earlier, so they would be clearing out as the older kids entered the beloved establishment. They were so close to the hot chocolate they could practically taste it. Stephen reached the door first. He grabbed the handle and heard the familiar jingle.

The old wooden door was the type to creak. It had been there for over sixty years, its hinges practically crying out for rust, for decay, for death. But the heavy oak didn't make a sound, minus the loose bell that hung from the inside handle, lightheartedly jingling to welcome each visitor. When a hand gently pushed the brass knob inward, the door glided like a catamaran

on the Bahamian waves. Lester McPherson, “Les” for short, made sure of that. As owner of the hardware shop, Les knew how to fix things. If it moves and it ain’t supposed to, use duct tape. If it doesn’t move and it’s supposed to, use WD-40. He’d learned that lesson from his father, and his father’s father, and his father before him.

McPherson Hardware was nestled in a small town, which was nestled on the outskirts of Ithaca, New York, which was nestled in a valley, which was nestled on the outskirts of the Appalachian Mountains. Occasionally, the small town saw a few new faces, mainly from those who had strayed too far off the highway to get gas. In the summertime, when people drove from New York City to visit Niagara Falls, the travelers passed Ithaca. Then, the valley was proud of its lone McDonald’s and BP. Otherwise, during the other nine months out of the year, the locals prided themselves on their seclusion, their old ways of life, and the bitter, bitter cold that made upstate New York the type of area one merely drives *through*, not *to*.

Les was the grandfather of the town. And his wife had been the grandmother until her passing several years ago. Les fit the grandfather role as well as his old Carhartt coat fit around his broad shoulders. His wrinkles allowed him to look the role, but it was his love for the children that really enabled him to embody the role. Since he’d never had any kids of his own, Les sort of adopted all the children in the town. It didn’t matter if they were three or thirteen, Les loved them. The old storeowner took games to kids who were sick, and he would sit there and play them, too. He went to ballgames. He went to ballet recitals. He went to science fairs. But most of all, he made hot chocolate.

“Hi, Les!” Stephen shouted before his back foot even made it through the door. About fifteen other middle schoolers piled in behind him. Hardware stores aren’t designed as gathering places, but Les had made adjustments. The front of the store featured a long counter with

barstools. At one end, the cash register. At the other end, a large industrial-looking coffee dispenser filled with hot chocolate instead.

“What are you kids doing here?” The old man asked with a wink, as if he didn’t see them every day, as if he hadn’t just made some more cocoa, as if, with a void in his widower heart, he didn’t need them to come. The youths all laughed in reply, busily filling cups full of steaming deliciousness. The crisp air wisped its way into the shop and battled the old heating system for power. Les ran about busily, or, rather, as busily as a grandfather can run. Most of the town knew not to stop by the store right after school got out. McPherson’s at 3:30 came to be known as Grand Central Station. However, sometimes a desperate husband would come in search of a toilet plunger or the like, and Les would have to work double duty, serving his customers and serving hot chocolate.

“Hey, Les!” Stephen shouted over the kids’ chatter. “Do we have any more marshmallows?”

Les made his way over to where the voice came from. “What’s that?”

“I was just wondering if you have any more marshmallows. We’ve kinda plowed through them today.” Stephen chuckled.

“Oh, heavens. I must be losing my mind. I meant to get some earlier today.” Les reached for his coat. “I’ll go get some right now. Goodness gracious. That’s what we call a senior moment, Stevie.”

“No worries! Hey, can I come with you? There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“Of course! Just hurry along now. Who knows what these hooligans might do to the place while I’m gone.” Les smiled as he opened the door for Stephen. The two stepped out onto the sidewalk as the door closed with a faint jingle behind them. Les was glad Stephen asked to come

along. He was happy for the company, even though the walk was only about two blocks, but, more than that, he was happy to spend time with Stephen. The two had formed a special bond over the years since Stephen's father died in a car accident.

No one spoke for a minute. The only sound was heavy breathing and crunching ice beneath heavy boots.

"What is it you wanted to talk about?" Les glanced at the 8th grader through foggy glasses. Stephen was visibly nervous; he kept breathing out as hard as he could and then intentionally walking into his frozen breath.

"Well, um, you know, Les, you've always been like a dad to me," Stephen tripped over his words.

"I'm mighty proud to be." Les put a fatherly hand on Stephen's shoulder.

"Well, um, I have a question about... something. I need some advice."

"Go on, spit it out."

"I, I need advice about a girl."

Les' eyes wrinkled cheerfully, and anyone who saw him would say he looked just like Santa Claus, minus the big white beard. Just then, the automatic glass doors to the grocery peeled open to let them in. Les grabbed a basket, already knowing they needed more marshmallows than four hands could carry.

"Ahhh, girl troubles. I see, I see," Les puzzled thoughtfully. "What kind of advice are we talking about here?" His feet briskly started walking to the aisle with marshmallows, as if on autopilot.

"Well, here's the deal." Stephen scurried along to keep up. "There's this girl I like, see? But she's new here and she's in the grade below me, and I've talked to her a couple times but I

just never see her, and I want to be her friend at least but I don't know where to start." Stephen spilled his guts as Les filled the basket full of 'mallows.

"And where do I come into all of this?" Les asked. "If you never see her, there's not much I can do, sonny."

"Um, I kind of have a plan."

Les raised his eyebrows. "Oh you do, do you? Care to let me in on it?"

Stephen laughed. "I'm getting there, okay! Here's the deal, Les. She just moved into the house two doors down from you."

"Oh, it's all beginning to make sense now. You want *me* to date her!"

Stephen punched Les in the arm. "Don't be ridiculous! I just want you to get me in, you know? Like, use your grandfatherly finesse."

Les gave him a look.

"Your, excuse me, *fatherly* finesse. I don't know, see if they need someone to do chores or something! I'm pretty sure she's an only child."

"Oh brother." Les rolled his eyes, but they still gleamed with love for Stephen. "I'll see what I can do, lover boy."

Les flipped the OPEN sign around and locked the door on his way out at six. Darkness was beginning to roll across the landscape as the old man walked home with nothing but an empty lunchbox and his thoughts. He kept pondering Stephen's request. On the one hand, Les figured he had no business meddling in young people's affairs, and what if this girl didn't even like Stephen? On the other hand, Les couldn't resist an adventure. In his mind, the latter won out. He was delighted that Stephen would even confide in him.

Casually, Les decided to walk by the target's house to scout it out. Stephen had instructed him that it was the little white one with the purple mailbox. On his way, Les figured he might as well knock on the door. The people had just moved in and welcoming them was the neighborly thing to do. A ramshackle little fence enclosed the front yard. Les opened the latch and pushed the gate in – *creak*. Some WD-40 was definitely needed. The grass looked as though it hadn't seen a weed trimmer or a lawn mower in quite some time. An idea began to sprout in Les' mind as he stepped onto the porch. *Knock knock knock*.

“Coming!” A woman's voice sounded from deep within the walls. Then, clattering. “Goodness, my sauce is burning, just let yourself in! I'm in the kitchen!”

“It's your neighbor, Les McPherson,” he shouted through the cracked door. “I can come back at a better time!”

“No, get yourself in here! I'm good!” The woman popped around the corner. “Come on in!”

Les followed her into the kitchen. The aroma of smoke and tomato sauce wafted around the room.

“They just don't make stoves like they used to, I'll tell you that right now!” The woman laughed. She was old and looked like she'd seen her share of stoves over the years. “I'm Mary Watson, but everyone calls me Gigi. What'd you say your name was again?” She stuck her hand out to shake his.

“Oh, Les. Les McPherson. I live two doors down. It's nice to meet you!”

“Nice to meet you, too, Les. I was just telling my granddaughter the other night that I want to meet the neighbors. That's why we came to a small town, you know. Nobody cares about meeting anybody in the city.” Her voice was warm. Les was about to ask about her

granddaughter when Gigi added, “Want to stay for dinner? I don’t know when Emily will be home from exploring with her friends, and I’ve got this whole pot of spaghetti!”

Les said he would love to. It became apparent that only Emily and Gigi lived in the house.

Three hours and three decaf coffees later, Les spilled the beans on why he’d actually knocked on the door that night. He hadn’t meant to. Gigi just seemed like the type of person one should never keep a secret from. The two had migrated to the living room by that point, and Les was surprised when she sat down on the same couch as him when there were other suitable chairs in the room as well. He made sure not to reveal Stephen’s name, but he indicated that a young friend of his was interested in Emily. Gigi was elated. If Les had walked into her house as Sherlock, he certainly found his Holmes. Gigi hatched a plan to get Stephen over to the house – she would hire him to trim the weeds.

“You just tell that boy to come over here tomorrow morning around ten, since it’s Saturday and he won’t be in school,” Gigi instructed. “Do you want to come early so you can greet him when he gets here?”

“That’s a fine idea!” Les set his glass down on the table as he stood up. “And thank you, Gigi, for a wonderful evening.”

Later that night, Les emailed Stephen his instructions (that was the only way the two could communicate outside of the shop). What Les knew about hot chocolate, Stephen matched in technological savvy. The old shopkeeper knew he could count on his young friend to get the message by morning.

Knock knock knock.

“Come on in, Les! I’m in the kitchen!” Gigi’s voice carried down the hall to the front door and ushered Les inside. He slipped through the door as the bitter air whipped in behind him. He was greeted with the smell of pancakes and maple syrup.

“I brought coffee!” Les greeted Gigi with a gentle side hug. His hands were still dirty from oiling the creaky gate on his way in. “Boy, it smells mighty fine in here! Where’s Emily?”

“You know, that girl dashed off this morning to run some errands,” Gigi replied. Les furrowed his brow.

“But don’t you worry,” Gigi added. “I told her to be back here by ten for breakfast! And I didn’t say a word about our little, shall we say, romantic set-up?”

Les winked. He and Gigi took turns dropping chocolate chips in the pancake mix. Ten o’clock rolled around, and Stephen rolled up with a weed trimmer. There was no sign of Emily, though. Les gave Stephen a sympathetic shrug from the porch while the blonde-haired boy finagled the trimmer around patches of snow and slush in the yard. Les could practically read the disappointment on his friend’s face. Gigi and Les agreed to try to get the kids together the next day.

Sunday, however, proved an even greater failure – Les had sent another email and Gigi told Emily to be back at ten, but neither teenager showed up.

“I’m surprised Stephen isn’t here,” Les pondered aloud. “He tends to be a pretty prompt young man.”

“Yeah, I’m disappointed in Emily. I don’t know what’s gotten into that girl lately.”

“Are you sure you told her ten o’clock?”

“Hey now, are you calling me forgetful?” Gigi joked. “Watch yourself, old man!”

“Whoa, you better watch who you’re calling old!” Les tossed a pancake at Gigi and she screamed. She ran to the fridge and retaliated by spraying whipped cream on his face. They laughed and laughed until Les nearly forgot why he’d even gone to the little white house with the purple mailbox in the first place. He just knew he didn’t want to leave.

On Monday afternoon, as Les was preparing for the swarm of children as he always did, the faint jingle made him turn. Gigi was walking through the door, weighed down by at least ten cans of whipped cream. Les couldn’t help but chuckle. He’d told her about serving afternoon hot chocolate, and she had been taken aghast that he only served marshmallows. “Any decent cup of cocoa is topped with cream, sir,” she announced on her way in. Les couldn’t argue with that. They spent the afternoon setting up, and Les showed her around the shop, pointing out his favorite displays and asking her which Sherwin-Williams swatch was her favorite. As it turned out, they both really liked sunburnt olive.

The young children arrived first, and Gigi greeted each one with open arms and a kiss on their heads. Les watched proudly as she topped each cupful with ample whipped cream, *since one cannot trust an elementary schooler with a squeeze bottle of any sort*, she whispered over her shoulder. Around 3:30, the middle schoolers piled in. Les was busy helping a customer pick out the perfect hummingbird feeder in the window when he glimpsed Stephen outside... walking past with a girl. Les dashed out the door, the bell jingling furiously.

“Hey, Stephen,” Les hollered after them. “Get back here!”

“Les,” Stephen croaked as he slowly turned around, his face whiter than if he’d seen a ghost. He took the girl’s hand and led her back to where Les stood. “It’s time that you met my... girlfriend, Emily. Emily, this is Les.”

Puzzled, Les shook the hand of the girl beside Stephen. She was petite and quite lovely, Les thought.

“I’m Gigi’s granddaughter,” Emily said, grinning cheerily.

“Nice to meet you, Emily.” Les paused. “I’m just, well, I didn’t know you two were... I mean, I thought...” Les stumbled over the words, but the truth was beginning to dawn on him.

“My grandmother has told me all about you!” Emily gave Les a hug. In a hushed tone, she added, “I think she’s quite fond of you.”

Then, it was Stephen’s turn for a hug. As he embraced his father figure, he didn’t let go for a long time. He whispered in Les’ ear: *You do so much for all of us, Les. It’s time you do something for yourself. I’m sorry I lied to you.*

A tear slipped from Les’ eye and got caught on his cheek. It hung there, trapped in a wrinkle, above a smile that bloomed from love, true love.