

FIRST DAY OF A NEW SEASON

by

Pam Garlick

I awoke one morning to see the first robin of the season. Outside I knew there would be crocus and daffodils I had hardly noticed as I'd gone to work each morning and returned again each night. All symbols of Spring that had drawn little of my attention that year, and none the year before, as I'd been too busy adapting to other changes that had nothing to do with the season.

It had been over a year ago my husband died. Though it hadn't been entirely unexpected, it still had left us in a numbed state of shock, I hadn't expected. I mean, I expected the emptiness. I even expected a strange sense of relief. But shock?

Perhaps it was more the shock of facing changes I hadn't anticipated would bother me. And finding that the things I thought would be difficult adjustments, weren't adjustments at all.

Like lying awake the first night after he died, listening to the silence. There was no raspy breathing coming from the room where my husband had spent his last months. No groans of pain whenever he moved, and eventually even when he didn't move.

I had not anticipated the silence would bother me. By dawn I'd given up on sleep and got up to start cleaning my house. I knew we'd have plenty of visitors in the next few days, people calling to pay their respects, to offer their sympathy.

On the other hand, the adjustment of becoming the sole breadwinner, the head of our household, wasn't nearly as daunting as I'd once thought it would be. Maybe because I'd gotten plenty of experience during Jim's illness. Time where I learned not only how to juggle the finances just enough to keep the wolves from our door. Time where I was forced to make decisions I'd have

previously deferred to my husband, but no longer wanted to bother him, as it seemed every ounce of energy was needed just for him to remain alive.

After he died I'd return each day to a house that was eerily quiet, and that didn't change after my son got home from school. No, eight year old, Jamie had grown too used to being as quiet as he could so he wouldn't bother his father as he rested, in what had once been our dining room. He'd just go to his bedroom and do his homework then look at magazines until dinner. Then afterwards he'd visit briefly with his father, though those visits grew more and more brief as Jim's illness progressed and he seemed to have little strength or patience for his son.

I'd been concerned the effect Jim's illness was having on Jamie, knowing it couldn't be good for a child to be exposed to so much pain and suffering. It had to be taking its toll on him; after all, no one knew better than me how stressful it was watching someone you love slowly die.

I tried to talk Jamie into spending more time outside with his friends, but he hadn't seemed interested. I got so desperate to provide my son some reprieve I even moved the television into his room, thinking he might like to watching some of his favorite shows. Yet, it was hard to believe, the boy who I'd once had to threaten to get him away from the TV set, hardly ever turned it on.

No, Jamie seemed content just leafing through the many outdoor magazines his father had collected through the years.

And it was this pattern he continued even after his father died. Even into the next year, with no sign of changing.

Then that morning when I saw that robin I knew it was time for us to make some changes. Our home had become a mausoleum. It wasn't me I was worried about, it was my son. I knew a nine year old boy should do more with his spare time than leaf through magazines.

I decided it was time to move some of those magazines out of his room. I went in and was shocked to realize just how many there were. I mean, I must have been blind for months when I cleaned in there. There were not only hunting, fishing and camping magazines on his book case, but also in his night stand, several boxes full in his closet, under his bed, and not only under his pillows, but between his blankets.

As I moved another huge stack off his desk I spotted a calendar at the bottom of the pile, open to April. Then I saw it was a calendar from the year before. April was the month Jim had died. It was almost symbolic, like everything had stopped for our son on the day his father died. I even saw a red circle around a date. However, when I looked more closely I saw it wasn't the date Jim had died.

I tried to remember just what it was that happened on that day. Or, was supposed to happen, I thought, reminded that Jamie had done little of anything other than school and look at the dated magazines since his father died.

I drug the heavy boxes of magazines from my son's room to take downstairs, returning to see if there were any I'd missed. Suddenly I spotted what seemed to be a picture from one of those magazines tacked to his bulletin board. Tears filled my eyes as I looked at the man and little boy standing by the water with fishing rods in their hands. I was reminded how often Jamie had asked if he could go fishing with his father.

Jim loved fishing. He'd spend every free weekend he could at the lake where he even had a camp spot. He'd been renting the spot for years. In fact, he'd been going there since he was a boy and went there with his father.

I now knew what the date was that had been circled. I remembered Jim often telling Jamie he would start taking him along to the lake when the first fishing season opened after he was eight years old. Jamie had been eight when his father died.

I hurried to the phone to make a call. I wanted to make it before Jamie came home from school.

Jim's father and mother now lived in Arizona, but I knew my father-in-law would know when fishing season opened.

"Second Saturday in April," he replied. "Why you want to know?"

"You know how Jim always promised to take Jamie fishing," I explained. "Jamie hasn't forgotten."

"Oh Jiminy Crickets, if I were closer I'd be happy to fill in for his father and take him," the older man said in a voice I could tell was choked with emotion.

"I know you would, Pop," I said. "But don't you worry. I'll get him there."

"You aren't thinking of taking him yourself, are you?" he asked. "I mean, Jen, you never went fishing with Jim before."

"I never went fishing with anyone, Pop," I replied, not admitting I'd never wanted to, until that very day. "But I've had to learn to do a lot of things I never thought I'd have to do. God has been good to me so far."

"Yeah, well, I'll pray He sends you a guardian angel, how's that?"

"One that knows everything there is about fishing, okay?"

"That goes without question, Jen. Just you be careful of them hooks."

"I'll bet they hurt when you get them in your finger."

"There too." He laughed, then proceeded to tell me the story about the first time he'd taken Jim fishing and how when he'd tried to cast his line he'd somehow managed to hook his father by the seat of his pants.

I was still laughing when Jamie came home from school, and he looked at me in surprise.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

I wondered whether I should share the story about his father. I decided on an edited version, afraid talking about his father would upset him. As it was he hardly ever smiled.

"I was just thinking we should take a vacation and called your pop pop to see if he had any suggestions where we could go," I explained. "Maybe you'd like to go see him and Mom Mom. Or, we could go to the beach. Except the water is still pretty cold. We might turn blue."

He gave me a slight smile. "See, you think that's funny too." I paused a second before going headlong with my other suggestion. "Then again, Pop Pop reminded me the rent is paid up on the camp site at the lake." Actually it wasn't a lie, I'd forgotten Jim had taken advantage of the discount he'd gotten when he pre-paid the rent for five years.

Jamie's brown eyes grew wider when I mentioned the lake. "Going to see Mom Mom and Pop Pop would be great, but we just saw them when they came here for Easter. And I always spend a couple of weeks with them in the summer."

"So, you'd like to go to the beach," I teased.

He shook his head, smiling. "I don't want to turn blue. I'd rather go to the lake. Do you think we can fish while we're there?"

"I suppose we can," I replied. "Since it seems to be the main reason people go there, I guess we should."

His smile grew more, and I knew I'd made the right decision.

However I wasn't quite as certain of that when we made the trip. I'd managed to hook the pop-up trailer to the back of our truck with little trouble. Even driving it to the lake hadn't been difficult since the route wasn't that hard to follow. The problem was when I realized I would have to back the camper into our camp sight. There was no way to pull it into the spot as I'd hoped.

As I struggled to get the camper lined up to the spot, I wished I'd listened more closely when Jim had tried to explain to me the finer points of backing up a trailer. But it had always been so difficult to understand when he explained things. He spent so much time telling me what I shouldn't do, and other bits of information he thought was helpful, I always got confused with the things I was supposed to remember.

So there I was, trying to remember if I turned the wheel the same way or the opposite from the way I wanted the camper to go. Neither seemed to work. I'd basically jackknifed the camper.

"Mom I think you were supposed to turn the wheel the other way," Jamie said. I knew he was only trying to be helpful, so I bit back any unpleasant reply I might have made.

"Yes, sweetie, I think I did."

"So whatcha gonna do?"

I turned around and took a breath and counted to ten, before turning off the key to the car. "I'm going to put the camper in place manually."

He looked puzzled.

"It's not that heavy. I had to lift it to put it on the hitch."

He shrugged, glancing around the outside of the car nervously. I remembered when we first arrived at the main lodge to check in I'd suggested he use the bathroom like I had. But he'd insisted he didn't have to go.

I sighed. It was getting dark and I didn't like the idea of him going by himself to the public rest rooms we'd passed as we came in the long drive. Since there was enough room for someone to get around my truck if they needed to, I decided to leave it for the few minutes it would take for him to relieve himself.

I opened my car door. "I think I'd like to make a trip to the rest rooms before I set up the camper. How about you?"

He nodded quickly. "Are you sure it's okay to leave it like this?"

I shrugged. "By the time anyone else shows up we'll be back," I said. "Besides, there's room for someone to get by."

Jamie looked at the narrow space in front of my car and frowned, but he didn't argue. He had other things on his mind.

The walk to the rest rooms was further than I'd thought, but at least it was fairly well lit, which was good because I'd forgotten our flashlight. Then I noticed that some of the light was from the headlights of a truck heading toward the camp site. One of those big trucks with wide double wheels, towing an equally wide camper.

I hurried my son as much as I could, but obviously not fast enough for the driver of the big truck and camper. When we got back to my car, I saw it had been moved. In my hurry to get Jamie to the rest room I'd left my keys in the car.

"Wow Mom!" Jamie seemed so astonished, like he thought the car got there by itself. "Look, the camper is right where you wanted it."

I glanced to the camp site just past ours, to where a tall man was just getting out of the big truck that had passed us after parking his own camper. He must have moved our car out of the way and parked the pop-up in the process.

"Thank you for parking my camper," I called to him when he looked over at us.

He replied with a simple nod of his head and a look of disgust. At least that was what it looked like in the dim light.

Anyway, I didn't let his attitude bother me as I focused my attention to the job at hand. Setting up the camper. Thankfully I'd practiced setting it up at home before we left, so I wouldn't have problems when we got to the camp grounds. And it really wasn't that difficult.

Certainly not as difficult as setting up the little gas stove. I knew Jamie would much have preferred a camp fire, but I figured if I wasn't able to get the grill going, I certainly wasn't going to be able to start a camp fire.

"What's the problem, Mom?" he asked.

"The matches must have gotten wet," I replied as I struck another and didn't even get a spark.

"I thought they were in a plastic bag."

I sighed, pushing my hair from my eyes as I hovered over the task. "I know. But either the bag leaked or got condensation in it or something."

"Condensation?" He thought a moment. "Isn't that where sun on plastic makes moisture under the plastic? We did an experiment like that in school."

"It also happens when there's a change in temperature. Like when something hot goes into something cold."

"Like when your sunglasses steam up when you get into the car."

"Yes, like that." I tried to strike another match. "So it looks like we need to go someplace and buy some matches if we're going to have breakfast tomorrow. Unless you can settle for cereal."

I supposed I could forgo my morning coffee for one day. Especially since it had looked like the

closest store we'd passed on the way there had been several miles down the highway. And I had no idea how late it would be open.

"What about supper?" Jamie asked, looking suddenly famished. I supposed the cookies I'd given him after school to curb his appetite so we could get on the road probably were no longer doing the job.

"We'll just have to have peanut and butter and jelly sandwiches," I replied. *Or Spam*, I thought, knowing it could be eaten cold.

"Then I guess I won't be able to roast marshmallows tonight," Jamie said, trying not to sound disheartened.

I really did enjoy my morning coffee. It was the one thing that seemed to keep me going after many long sleepless nights during the past year.

"Tell you what," I started. "I'll bet I can use more than matches now that I think about it. I mean, bacon and eggs might be even better than hot cakes for breakfast."

"Dad always talked about eating his fresh catch."

I'd have made a face about eating Trout for breakfast, if I actually expected we'd catch anything. Since I wasn't so certain we would I resorted to another excuse.

"Yes, but we have to start our first day with something until we catch something," I said. "Fish will be just as good for lunch." So would peanut butter and jelly or Spam sandwiches, which seemed like gourmet to me compared to the alternative.

I never had liked fish, even tuna. My aversion to it was never more greatly established as it had been the first spring Jim had gone on one of his fishing trips and returned with several large Trout he'd expected me to cook for his dinner. I may not have liked to eat fish, but I'd never had a problem cooking it. -- Until then.

There was something so repulsive about putting something in the frying pan that seemed to be staring up at you. And as though that hadn't been bad enough, the smell was my undoing. I'd hardly made it to the bathroom on time. Then to Jim's dismay I'd burned the fish because I'd forgotten to turn off the heat while I'd made my escape. He'd ended up not only having to cook his own dinner, but cleaning up both messes while I remained hunched over our toilet.

Of course, I hadn't known at the time I was pregnant. And extremely sensitive to certain smells. In particular fish. I hadn't even been able to clean our gold fish bowl without feeling queasy.

I guess that was one of the reasons Jim never asked me to go along on his fishing trips. And it really hadn't mattered to me after that, I was content to stay home with our son. I wasn't even certain I'd have gone along after Jamie was old enough to join his father.

Yet, ironically, there I was. With matches that wouldn't light.

By the time we got to the store it was closed. Across the street was a dark, log structure with brightly lit florescent signs in the window bearing names like *Coors*, *Miller* and *Budweiser*. Judging by the number of cars and trucks parked there, I knew the bar was open. I dreaded the thought of going in there, but I figured if they had cigarettes, they'd have matches. It wasn't that I had anything against bars; really. It's just that I'd never been in one.

My father had been a minister; and though he took his ministry nearly anyplace, and where he took his ministry he usually took me; a bar hadn't been one of those places. Since my mother had died while I was still a toddler, he was pretty much stuck taking me along. He never had a regular church, so by the time I went to school I'd grown familiar with hospitals, nursing homes, homeless shelters, community centers, and even correction facilities. But bars were an unknown entity.

I wondered just how much I really wanted to light our gas stove. It would probably do me good to have a little less caffeine. Then I looked down at my son's hopeful expression and my decision was made.

I wasn't about to leave Jamie alone in the car, but the alternative wasn't all to pleasing either. I didn't know what I was going to find when I went through the doors of the alien place. There could be men in leather pants and vests, donning pony tails, all with cue sticks in their hands they could use to shoot pool or hit each other over the head, which ever they fancied doing at the moment. There could be women in scanty outfits sitting on the laps of some of those men, or dancing in a way that probably could be considered making love if it weren't for those scanty outfits and leather pants between them.

As I slowly opened the door, I pushed my son safely behind me, whispering that he should keep hold of my shirt and not let go.

"Be prepared to run for the door if I tell you," I warned as we stepped inside.

"Well how you doing there, Missy. Welcome to the Angler," a gray haired woman in blue jeans and a plaid western shirt said as I walked through the door. Her smile grew as she glanced around me and noticed my son. "And who's this rascal?"

"I'm Jamie, and I'm not a rascal," he replied boldly.

"Oh, sorry about that," she said, her wink in my direction showed she had taken no offense by his rudeness. "Would you like a table or a booth?"

I glanced around the room seeing more denim and plaid, some tee shirts with various pictures and sayings to do with fishing. It was almost difficult to tell the males from the females, except to say I'd assumed those possessing a day's growth of beard were most likely the men. Though I saw there was a pool table, I saw there also was a barrel with a wooden top holding a giant checkerboard,

another identical one holding a delicately carved chess game, and a card table where a man of obvious advanced years was putting together a large puzzle.

"Got the best ribs and steaks you'll find anywhere in the state," the woman continued when I hadn't answered. "That is if you're here to eat."

Jamie looked up at me hopefully, just as a waitress came out of the kitchen toting a sizzling T-bone steak. As she passed the scent triggered a reaction that finalized my decision. My stomach growled loudly.

"Guess that's a yes," I said with a smile. "We'd like a booth."

It turned out The Angler did have the most delicious steak I'd ever eaten, and if the red mess on my son's face and hands was any evidence, so were their ribs.

I sent him to the men's room to wash up as I paid our bill. I had almost forgotten about the matches until Jamie returned with a pack in his hand.

"Where did you get those?"

"You know the man at the camp ground who parked our camper. He was in the men's room and I was telling him how we had trouble lighting the grill and couldn't start a campfire either because our matches was wet."

I refrained from correcting my son's grammar this time, more concerned for how long a story he had told the poor man he had encountered in the men's room. Though the man had helped us by parking our camper, I suspected it was just so he could drive past. He hadn't seemed that friendly when I thanked him.

"Then I told him we decided to go to the store to buy matches and a bunch of other stuff, but the store was closed, so we came here," Jamie continued. "And how we decided to have our dinner

here, instead of cooking it, or having peanut butter and jelly, or Spam sandwiches. And how good our dinner was. But that I still wanted to roast marshmallows if we could get matches. . ."

"Jamie," I finally interrupted. "Our neighbor at the campground gave you the matches, am I correct?" I knew I was. The poor man had probably only given them to Jamie to get him to end his tale of woe.

I glanced around the room as we started for the door, hoping to catch a glimpse of our neighbor at the camp ground. I wanted to thank him again. When I saw him he was seated at a table alone. I went up to him and thanked him for the matches, for which I received a simple nod.

I waited a moment, before realizing that was the only response I was going to get. Besides the gray-haired waitress had just placed a big plate of ribs in front of him.

I forced a smile then left, wondering if it was just me or if the man was always so unfriendly.

The following morning I rose early to cook breakfast for my son. He'd decided on hot cakes. By the time we made our way to the lake we realized what had seemed early to us, was late to most everyone else. It seemed like there was a wide circle of people elbow to elbow around the lake.

"Let's walk a little further over this way," I suggested to Jamie. "Maybe we can find room somewhere else."

We walked a short distance before it became apparent I'd made my first, or was it second, or third major mistake of the trip. Not being able to park the camper was a minor inconvenience. Having wet matches turned out to be a mixed blessing when we ended up having such a delicious meal. But to not be able to find room to do what we came there to do, was pretty much unforgivable.

I could see by Jamie's expression he was disappointed. He had waited a year beyond the promised eight year mark when he'd be able to make this trip. And now I had ruined it by not getting up in time to find us a place to cast our rods.

Jamie looked crestfallen as he walked back to our camp site carrying our fishing rods and net. I was just plain exhausted after carrying tackle box, stools to sit on, and a cooler.

After catching my breath I realized it was time for me to take another walk. To the rest rooms. When I returned I saw my son anxiously waiting. He looked about ready to jump up and down with excitement.

"Let's go, Mom," he instructed as soon as I drew close enough to hear.

"Where are we going?"

"To the lake," he replied. "He came and got our stuff."

"He, who?"

"Our neighbor. Right after you left he came and got our stuff and took it to the lake."

"Without even asking?"

"He doesn't talk much, Mom. He's a man of action."

I rolled my eyes, not nearly as impressed with this man of action. But it certainly made no sense for me to complain. Especially after it was obvious the man had done us another favor.

At the lake I saw the man had more or less dumped our things on the bank of the lake between his own spot and the person next to him.

"Didn't know Will had friends here, or I'd have left room right away," the elderly man beside us said as I set up our stools so we'd have something to sit on.

"Oh . . . well, thank you," I replied, not knowing what else to say. It seemed I'd been saying those words a lot since coming there.

"You aren't intending to sit on those are you," the man continued, glancing at our neighbor, who I assumed was the man he'd called Will. He shrugged, then returned to his own fishing.

"Is there a reason we shouldn't sit on these?" I had to know. I didn't want to make a bigger fool of myself than I already had. "I thought that was what they were for. They were with all our fishing stuff. And I thought they'd be more compact than lawn chairs."

"It's really not for me to say," the man continued, glancing again at Will. "I guess if Will thinks it's okay, it's okay."

"Excuse me, but I don't have to answer to Will about what I do," I said. "He's just our neighbor here at the camp grounds."

"I see," the older man replied. "Good luck then."

I looked down at the small stools again, knowing it was wasting time trying to figure out what the man was talking about. Besides, now that I was looking at them more closely they didn't seem very steady. Everyone else seemed to be standing.

"When in Rome," I said to my son.

"What?"

"Never mind, Jamie. Let's fish."

"Sure, Mom, let's fish." He picked up his rod and looked at me. "Don't we gotta put worms on the hook or something?"

"Ah, worms," I repeated, thinking if I hated fish, I certainly hated worms more. "I think we have some plastic ones in our tackle box."

I went into the box and pulled out a juicy looking pink one and tied it onto his hook. Then took another and did the same to my own hook. By the time I finished I glanced up to see Jamie trying to cast his line into the water.

He was having a lot of trouble, though he stopped to watch several other people cast there's and tried to do it the same way. I went over to try to help him, but I had no more luck.

Finally with a sigh, our neighbor came over and pointed to a little button on our rods. He then took Jamie's pushed the button, then showed him how to cast. Afterward he reeled in the line and handed it to my son to try.

I followed suit with my own rod, intent on doing it exactly as the man had shown my son. Unfortunately something went wrong as I felt my line jerk, but when I looked I saw the bright yellow worm I'd chosen, flying through the air. Then I realized that yellow worm was no longer attached to my hook. I squinted trying to figure out exactly where my hook had gone, but the line was so thin so I couldn't be sure, except that since no one had screamed I felt pretty certain it had not landed in the seat of anyone's pants as Jim's first cast had.

I tried to reel my line back in, frowning when it seemed to be stuck in place. I tried reeling the other way and only turned it once and it was stuck again. It seemed there was no going forward or backward.

I glanced to my side, relieved when I saw that my son had successfully cast his own line. He looked over as if to make certain I had seen, and I smiled back at him proudly. I looked back at my own rod and reel and stuck out my tongue.

I finally laid my rod on the ground and started pulling in the line by hand, feeling certain that was the only resolution for the predicament I was in.

I was slowly rolling the line around my fingers when a huge hand grasped my arm and pulled me back to my feet. I looked up into the face of my neighbor and noted his disapproval.

"What did I do wrong now?" I asked.

He shook his head and reached for my hand just as I felt the line growing taut as something tugged on the other end. Certainly a fish wouldn't have taken the hook without any bait, I thought,

watching in horror as my neighbor quickly grabbed a knife and cut my line, before putting his knife away again and slowly unraveling the line from my fingers.

I could see the marks where the line had tightened on my fingers, and knew without a doubt the man had once again come to our rescue.

"We've got to stop meeting like this," I said, embarrassed to have made another fishing etiquette faux pas.

The man's stern look suddenly turned into a grin as he picked up my rod. He motioned over to his own rod with his thumb and I assumed he wanted me to keep an eye on it, though I wasn't certain he should be so confident of my ability to do that without mishap.

I tried to watch his rod, though I wasn't exactly certain what I was watching it for. At the same time I had one eye on the man who was doing something with the line on the reel. After a few moments he opened my tackle box and took out another hook, tying it to the end of my line.

He looked up and saw me watching him, then waved me over again. He put the rod back in my hand, but instead of walking away, he patiently showed me how to correctly put a worm on my hook. Then he showed me what he had previously shown my son. Exactly how to cast the rod.

This time I did it without any mishap, cheering when I had successfully completed the task. Will made a face then put his finger to his lips to signal silence. I guessed that was why he had been so silent. Judging by the looks I was getting from some of the people, I supposed they wanted me to be silent too.

I watched Jamie's face later when he caught his first fish. He looked so happy, I couldn't help but smile myself; in spite of the fact I wouldn't have been disappointed if we hadn't caught anything that day.

I had one close call myself, but fortunately the fish got away with my bait. But this time when I put a worm on my hook I did it the right way. And judging by the thumbs up I got from Will when I cast my line, I supposed I did that okay too.

All in all, Jamie caught two fish that day and I learned a trick or two myself of how to evade catching one. Of course, that still left his two fish to content with when we got back to our camp site.

"Oh boy, I can't wait to taste my fish." Jamie practically danced as we headed back.

Will glanced over at me and I forced a smile, but I don't think I fooled him one bit. He looked at me more closely than as though coming to a conclusion he nodded, then hurried to my son's side. When we got back to the camp site he took Jamie with him to his trailer while I set about trying to clean up so I could prepare dinner.

A little while later I smelled the unmistakable scent of cooking fish. I watched as my son hovered beside our neighbor who was busy frying fish in a giant cast iron pan. Though the scent was not in the least bit pleasing to me, the sight of my son's huge smile was.

Tears filled my eyes as I thought about the fishing trip that should have happened a year earlier. A trip that my son should have taken with his father. I would never tell our son that before his death his father had been planning another fishing trip; one he was going to be taking with several of his friends. One I knew Jamie would not have been taken on.

It was far better for my son to remember what might have been. And, perhaps, to have the memory of this day, of something that was so very good.

As my eyes cleared I realized our neighbor was looking at me very closely, his expression unreadable. Finally he smiled and motioned to me to join them. Actually I think he was inviting me to share some of the fish, but I had another idea.

"I'll be over in a second," I replied, hurrying to gather a few extra supplies.

Will's eyebrows raised in question when I arrived juggling a plastic bowl filled with salad and a tin of cookies. "My contribution to the meal," I replied to his unspoken question.

I watched as his smile grew in approval. Then he stood and helped me carry the items to the tiny folding table he had set up between two chairs. He then motioned to Jamie who immediately went to get one of our own chairs.

By that time I'd begun to realize my first impression about this man had been wrong. He wasn't in the least bit unfriendly. In fact, he was quite kind. I also suspected his lack of conversation had more to do with being unable, than unwilling.

However as we enjoyed our meal of fish and salad, salad only for me -- I realized we were communicating quite well. In fact, this man probably said more without words than my husband had with words. But that was another thing I was never going to say to Jamie. It was far better he remember the more positive things about his father.

That night as the stars slowly came out in the sky my son sat roasting marshmallows, while I sat listening to the sounds all around me. I realized there was probably a great deal we missed hearing sometimes because of all our talking.

It wasn't long and I realized my son had roasted his last marshmallow. The one on the end of his stick was burning in the camp fire, the tip of his stick about to catch fire as Jamie's arms slowly relaxed, his chin on his chest, his eyes closed.

"It was quite a day for him," I said with a smile as I stood and gently took the stick from his hand, carefully putting out the fire on the end of it. Then I looked up at the man who had also risen. "Thank you for making his dream come true."

Will cocked his head to the side in thought a moment, before looking down at Jamie with a grin. He put his right hand to his heart and brought it forward again palm up. Somehow I knew he was thanking me.

I didn't argue when Will lifted Jamie from the ground. It had seemed right.

After he put him in his bed in our camper he returned outside and motioned toward the chairs that were still circling the dying embers of the campfire at his site.

"I think I would like to sit out here a while longer," I agreed. "This has been a very nice day. Not at all what I'd have expected."

I looked at my companion, seeing his grin in the dimming light. I suddenly laughed, more relaxed that I had been in a long time.

"I suppose I don't have to tell you I've never done this before." I laughed harder when I saw his look change to one of mock surprise.

Then I grew more serious as I looked into his face. I never asked the question, he instinctively knew what it was. He opened his shirt at the neck and showed me the fairly fresh looking scar.

"Cancer?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Will you ever speak?" I asked, without a note of sympathy, because I had none. I knew this man was lucky to be alive. And judging by his shrug, I suspected, he knew that too.

"Do you mind my asking you these questions?"

He shook his head, giving me a slight grin. Then he pressed his fingers to his lips and shook his head.

"Actually, I do mind if you don't reply," I said honestly. "I spent too many years being ignored when I spoke, it's still a sore point." I was aghast when I realized what I'd just said.

Will saw that and looked intently into my face before his eyes went toward my camper and back to mine again.

"No, not Jamie," I replied to his unspoken question. "His father." Before I knew it I was telling Will about my husband, his illness, and our marriage. All the while he looked at me with compassionate understanding.

What surprised me the most was when he went into his camper and returned carrying a book. I saw when he sat down again it was a Bible. He opened it to a verse, then pointed to it as he handed the book to me. I hated to admit it, but it had been a long time since I'd looked at a Bible. Yet, as I started reading what he had marked I knew the words were familiar. They were the Beatitudes, Matthew 5, Verses 3 through 11, spoken by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount.

After reading the words I slowly closed the Bible, but before I did I noticed the inscription on the inside cover. *To Reverend William Bennett.*

"Is this you?" I asked, seeing him nod in reply. I realized how much more losing his voice must have impacted on his life. The words, 'I'm sorry,' came to my lips, but I did not speak them. Looking at this man, I realized there was nothing to feel sorry for. He had accepted his life as it was. He was going to make the most of it no matter what happened, because he knew the those verses I'd read were promises spoken from Jesus's own lips.

"I imagine being unable to preach a sermon has made it more difficult for you."

He nodded, pressing his hand to his heart as his eyes locked with mine. I knew he was telling me it had been a painful adjustment.

"They have devices that help you communicate."

He rolled his eyes and I couldn't help but smile. "Not for you, I guess."

He tipped his hand from side to side in a manner that said he was undecided.

"Maybe you can't speak; but it seems the only problem that creates is giving a sermon."

He looked doubtful.

"Come on, look at the way you relate to Jamie," I persisted. "He's had no problem communicating with you."

He cocked his head to the side in a way I now knew showed he was thinking. Finally he nodded.

"I bet you'd make a good youth pastor," I said. "You have a lot to offer."

He glanced at his fishing rod.

"You have a lot more than that," I continued. "Besides, what's wrong with fishing. Jesus was a fisherman."

Suddenly Will threw back his head and laughed. When he looked at me again he shook his head. He moved his hand front and back like he was sawing, then up and down like he was hammering.

"Okay, Jesus was a carpenter. I stand corrected. But he liked fishermen. He had quite a few for disciples."

Will nodded his eyes bright as he seemed to absorb my enthusiasm.

"Not only that, are you a good writer. You must be," I answered my own question. "You had to write your sermons."

His forehead wrinkled as though he couldn't figure out my reasoning.

"You could always have a written ministry," I said. "I work for a company that does newsletters for other companies. I can teach you everything you need to know about doing newsletters. We also do web sites. A lot of them are no more than newsletters on the web."

He leaned back in his chair as though exhausted. Then he smiled and motioned for me to continue.

"Okay, I've been accused of getting on a roll with something," I confessed. "But some people think I have good ideas."

He pressed his finger to his chest and winked. I smiled, suspecting this was the beginning of a new adventure.

And it has been that. Will and I have met many weekends at the lake, and when we're not there we've stayed in touch through the Internet. Though we've started out small, I've been helping him write a newsletter targeting youth. It's not meant to be preachy, rather to relate to the things kids are facing today. We hope to eventually set him up with his own web site.

I have several other ideas too, though I haven't sprung them on him yet. One is a fishing clinic for kids, or even a Christian summer camp program where he'd be director. Of course, that will require us to work a lot more closely together. Not that either of us is complaining. And I think Jamie will be the happiest of all if we do, because he's been so much more outgoing and not at all depressed since Will's become our friend.

I don't know what the future holds for us. But I do know whether we simply remain good friends, or eventually become something more, we have something very special.

I guess Pop got an answer to his prayer, God did send us a guardian angel that fishing trip. And that angel has been watching over us ever since.