



THE HUG

I knew I was in trouble when my advertising firm acquired the most sought-after client in the Pacific Northwest and I felt empty, like I had just eaten a dime-store candy. What had formerly gathered my energies into a frothy fury of success now seemed to leave me cold and depressed. The previous fall, in Hawaii, I disappeared before a client's closing conference banquet where I was set to give a rallying motivational talk to their sales force. I simply could not rise to the occasion. Returning home, I began to write spontaneous, emotional poetry—verses that tightened a chronic knot in my belly. One night I made my wife nervous by apparently bolting upright from a dead sleep and screaming, "This dog's out!"

A few nights after we were awarded the new contract, my wife and I hosted a dinner party to celebrate the firm's victory. Mid-way through the evening, I tired of telling corporate war stories and slipped out of the house unnoticed. I walked along the beach feeling a flicker of panic as the ocean's brooding womb washed over my boots, my thoughts turning to the poetry I had been writing and the contrast between what some of the words were pointing to and the chatter of the advertising world. I began to think about how poets live—often on the outer edges of society, with an appetite for the unknown. The unknown, for me, had recently invited an inward turn toward healing repressed pain from past experiences and a focus on the shining peaks of faith I sensed growing inside myself. A line sprang into my mind as I shivered in a spray of soft rain: "Forgiveness begins in the green fields of love."

I wandered for hours, finally stopping at a twenty-four-hour bagel joint, where I ordered a sesame bagel with cream cheese and a cup of steaming latte from a sassy young woman with streaked purple hair. While carrying the food upstairs to a small dining area, I noticed on every table a thin white candle, the kind you hold between your fingertips during midnight mass. The ambiance seemed peaceful, with only one other person there. So I took a seat at an empty table, planning to sort through my feelings of alienation.

Immediately the other diner stomped toward me on what appeared to be a wooden leg, or foot or something. Under his right arm he held a crumpled-up plastic bag from Denny's. The guy sat at my table, unrolled a sloppy old burger that stuck stubbornly to its wrapper, and, chomping on it, barked, "Hey, you want a bite?"

"No," I answered abruptly, glaring at him with resentment for intruding on my late-night latte.

Seemingly unfazed, he reached into his coat pocket and, one by one, began pulling out soggy french fries layered with dried ketchup.

It was hard to determine his age, as is true of most street people; the guy appeared to be between thirty-five and sixty. He was ugly, smelled bad and had his gaze fixed on me with an eerie Charlie Manson glare. Insisting on conversation although it was 3:00 a.m., he bent his head toward me and blurted out, "My name is John—from the Montreal area."

Like this mattered to me. This guy probably wandered west to escape Montreal's brutally cold winter and screw-up my late-night latte.

I decided to ignore him, hoping he would wander off.

"Did you know that *dog* spelled backwards is *God*?" he asked.

Again I did not respond.

"Did you know *dog* spelled backwards is *God*?" he challenged, more loudly.

I picked up my steaming-hot coffee, thinking that if he leaned in any closer I could throw it in his face. But he just kept staring, like some night-owl skitzo.

"Did you know that..." he began once more.

"Yes, yes, John. I know, I know," I finally replied, hoping to ward off further dialogue.

"Then if *dog* spelled backwards is *God*, he must be man's best friend. Right?"

"Right," I answered, managing a weak smile. I asked him if he had a dog and where he lived.

Bowing his head, he growled, "Ain't got no home. Ain't got no dog. Ain't got nothing."

For some elusive reason—perhaps wanting to help a stranger because I had not been able to help my best friend Bo—I wrote down my phone number, saying, "John, why don't you give me a call sometime, and we'll go down to the pound and get you a little god."

The guy's face, toughened most likely from too many dumpster dives, softened for a moment. Then he smiled as big as a kid hearing the ice cream truck.

While the candlelight flickered on our faces, I felt a tear well up in the corner of my right eye. Rarely one for tears, I flashed on the two times I could remember crying: while singing with Harvey at the karaoke bar and as I sat with Bo at the coffee joint. John must have sensed my unfelt pain, for he suddenly whispered, "We are on the same tree, you and me, just different branches."

Touched by his tenderness and terrified a deep and sad river might come crashing through both of my eyes, I got up to head for the men's room. But John lunged forward, banged his chest awkwardly against mine, and wrapped himself around me like a boa constrictor, burying my face in his chest. With his heart beating like a wild drum, the man was hugging me, holding me up, and refusing to let go. Heat raced up my spine and swirled through my neck, my throat opening like a tunnel. I wailed like a lost boy, arms limp at my sides.

After a few minutes, John folded me into a chair. Nothing was said. I stared into the flickering candle flame then disappeared to the men's room to gather myself. When I returned, John was gone.

I sipped the rest of my latte in a state of awe, mystified that a guy as socially awkward and physically repulsive as John could be such an athlete of the heart. I was astonished that he could stay whole before my waves of grief and see the necessity of unraveling my pain in his embrace. Awakening, perhaps for the first time, to healing fires of intimacy, I smiled as the words of a spiritual teacher rippled through my mind: "Go ahead, light your candles and burn your incense and ring your bells and call out to God, but watch out because God will come and he will put you on his anvil and fire up his forge and beat you and beat you until he burns brass into pure gold."

Thankful that John had hugged me back into my heart, I vowed never to forget that just beyond loneliness and terror there is beauty.

THE HUG is an excerpted chapter from the book "*Hug an Angry Man and You Will See He is Crying.*" (Red Spiral Books 2003). You can order the book directly from the author at sean@seanleclaire.com. For members of the "Be the Change" community there is currently a two-for-one special. HUG makes a wonderful gift.