

## IMAGINARY FRIEND

By

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George Reyes first saw the tatterdemalion while walking along the sidewalk that encircled Rocky Peak Park. It was a cool, breezy Sunday, and George was getting some well-needed exercise. He had been sick with the flu for nearly a week, and had been unable to do anything but stay home, watch television, and force himself to eat soup and drink hot tea. Being retired, he didn't have to worry about missing work, which made the discomfort of the illness a bit easier to bear.

On a different level, in reference to the word *missing*, sometimes George missed his longtime job at the DMV. Not the job, per se, but rather the friends he had made there. Now, however, every one of them either had died, or moved away. Hence, there were no regrets regarding his retirement. It was the relative isolation that troubled him.

Nor were there any regrets about the lack of communication between himself, and the relatives of his late wife, Ramona. They were not, and had never been, a part of George's life.

When George came upon the ragamuffin, he was rummaging through a trash can. "Good morning," he said, half expecting the hobo to withdraw from him. Instead, the homeless man turned and smiled.

"And a good morning it surely is," replied the unkempt man, whose age was hard to determine because of his unshaven face, and the long, stringy gray hair that fell around it. "Slim pickings, though," he added, holding up an empty juice carton and some candy wrappers. "One must be satisfied with what one gets. There are people much worse off than I."

George was surprised by how well the hobo spoke, and by his positive attitude. He reached into his pocket and took out the five-dollar bill he always carried with him on his walks (in case of an unexpected emergency). He handed it to the man.

"Kind you are, sir, but I cannot take it," he said, and smiled. "We must all make our own way in this world." The hobo continued his search for usable throwaways. "Life isn't always easy."

George pocketed the money. "Good luck, then," he said, and, having finished his stroll, got in his car and left.

Later that day, George thought about the hobo's words: "Life isn't always easy." Being a lonely, eighty-year-old widower, living on Social Security, George Reyes knew exactly what he meant. Death had taken those close to him; he had been spared. He wasn't sure whether or not that was a blessing or a curse.

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When he went for a walk three days later, the same ragamuffin was there. This time, he was tossing peanuts to a couple of squirrels scampering about at the base of a tree.

"Got enough money from the bottles I found to buy my bantam buddies some munchies," he said, throwing a handful to the awaiting squirrels. "Give 'em a break from having to scrounge for food - at least for a while."

George exchanged pleasantries with him for a bit, and commenced his walk. On his concluding lap, when he passed the spot where the hobo had been, he was gone. The squirrels were still there, however, busy filling their stomachs with peanuts.

Tears filled George's eyes, for there was heartbreaking irony in the reality of a hobo feeding small, vulnerable

animals, while he himself was homeless and hungry. "You have a friend, little ones," he said softly, a lump in his throat. "I wish I could say the same."

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George Reyes had a health scare a few days later. Dizziness, shortness of breath, and chest pains, prompted a visit to the local hospital. While the tests found no major abnormalities, they did show that his blood pressure was too high. They recommended a change in diet, and he left with a prescription for blood-pressure medicine in his hand.

That same day he drove to the park, hoping to see the tatterdemalion. To his delight, the undernourished vagabond was there, moving a metal detector along the ground.

George exited his car and walked straight to him. "It's good to see you," he said, happily.

"And you, as well," the vagabond replied. He tapped the shaft of the detector. "I bought this metal detector at a thrift store, for only ten dollars. It was all the money I had in the world. I figured it might pay for itself in the long run, though." He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "The thing is I don't cotton to the idea of finding other people's

money, then spending it like it was my own. It's a conflict of conscience that I'm still dealing with."

George smiled, and reached out a hand. "I'm George Reyes."

"It's about time we had a formal introduction," the man replied, shaking George's hand. "You're looking at Mr. Anthony London, nice to make your acquaintance."

"You speak very well, Anthony," he said to the hobo. "Were you ever a teacher?"

Anthony chuckled. "No, but I'm honored by the comparison." He looked intently into George's blue eyes, as though he was asking, *Are you not repulsed by my appearance? Don't my raggedy clothes and unshaven face bother you?*

It would have been an understandable reaction to an individual of Anthony's social status. However, beneath the tattered clothes and scruffy demeanor, this man was a flesh-and-blood human being, and a well-spoken one at that.

"I better get moving before I take root," George said. "Take care of yourself."

"You, too, my friend."

By the conclusion of George's first lap, the hobo had disappeared.

*My friend.* These two words stayed with George. Although they had left behind many good memories, every member of his nuclear family, and those he had communicated with in his extended family, had passed away. His friends had succumbed to mortality, as well. And, he needed a friend - oh, how he needed a friend! But, a hobo? He resolved that social status shouldn't play a role in determining whether two people should form a friendship.

Although he went to bed late, George awoke in the middle of the night, the pangs of loneliness nipping at his spirit. He got up, made some warm milk, and sat alone in the living room. Eventually, the dark cloud passed, and he went back to bed.

"*My friend,*" he whispered to himself, and drifted off to sleep.

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The young couple who rented the other side of the duplex where George lived were arguing again. It seemed they started the day off by fighting, and finished it the same way. What bothered George the most was that the morning squabbles were getting earlier and earlier, and the evening spats later and later.

It was still dark outside, which gave the argument an even more unsettling aspect. "This is getting old," he mumbled to himself, and got out of bed.

He ate an early breakfast. Although this wasn't his scheduled walk day, George drove to Rocky Peak Park. He pulled into the parking lot, and saw the hobo standing at a drinking fountain.

He parked his car, and joined Anthony at the fountain. "How are you, Anthony?" he asked, a bit unsteady from the effects of a troubled sleep.

"You know, George, since I turned seventy," the hobo said, pointing to his head, "my mind doesn't work as well as it used to. I forgot that Tuesdays are the day they water the grass." He shook his head. "It was a wet wake-up call, as I made my bed next to a sprinkler."

"Sorry to hear that," George answered. "I was rudely awakened by a couple who rents the other unit in my duplex. They fight so often, I can't figure out why they ever got married."

Anthony grinned. "Therein lies one of the reasons I never got married. I guess, when all is said and done, I am a very selfish person. Are you married, George?"

"I was," he replied. "She passed away - two years ago, next week."

The ragamuffin took a deep breath. "I'm very sorry. How long were you married?"

"Over fifty years. She was my soulmate." George wiped his eyes with the back of a hand. "Life has been very lonely without her."

"Come with me. I want to show you something."

George followed Anthony to a little alcove at the side of the recreation center. The hobo pointed to three stacks of letters sitting atop a sleeping bag. "Every one of those was written by Louisa - all ninety-eight of them!"

"Is she someone special?"

"You could say that." Anthony took the letters and shuffled them like playing cards. "She has given me one letter a month for over eight years."

"Do you know why?"

Anthony smirked. "One only has to read them to know why."

"If you don't mind me asking, what do they say?"

"Well, let me first say that we've eaten lunch together, gone on walks, and talked about life - even spent time in a

crowded coffee house over on Shadyoak." He looked around him.

"Basically, she has requested - in written form - that I give up the freedom I currently enjoy - to be with her. I think she's asking for too much. What do you think, George?"

"Is she talking about marriage?" George asked.

Anthony nodded. "That is exactly what she is talking about!"

George glanced at the letters. "I think marriage requires love. Otherwise, you could end up like my neighbors."

The hobo chuckled. "I don't want to begin my day with an argument, George. That's not for me."

It looked as though George was remembering something. "It doesn't have to be like that, Anthony. A man and a woman can work through their problems, and have a great marriage." He smiled. "Ask her if she loves you, and take it from there."

"So, love is the key?"

"If there's love," George said, indicating their surroundings with a sweep of his hand, "it's worth giving up all of this." He shrugged. "That's my opinion, anyway."

The hobo appeared amused. "What if I don't love her?"

"You *have* kept her letters, Anthony. And you know *exactly* how many of them there are." He patted Anthony on the back. "I'm starting to feel lazy. I better get moving."

Anthony hugged him. "I'll think about what you said. Thanks for your counsel, George."

"Sure. I'll see you in a couple of days."

By the time he had finished his laps, Anthony was gone.

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As usual, George spent his days tending to his plants, looking at his stamp collection for the millionth time, and watching television shows that served mostly as background noise. He needed to get a new hobby, something to take his mind off Ramona, and to ease the loneliness that seemed to be growing inside of him.

A promising thing had happened, however. While many people might consider it trivial, to a person living alone in a cramped little cubbyhole, without a meaningful relationship and with no friends or family, it was a major development: George had met Anthony, and he was beginning to regard him as a friend.

It didn't matter that Anthony was a hobo. Friends came in all shapes and sizes. The tatterdemalion was a source of delight, not of shame.

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On his next trip to the park, George brought along a sizable supply of various types of nuts for the squirrels. One of them actually came right up to within inches of him - multiple times - and received a bountiful reward of edible goodies. "Better to have a furry friend, than no friend at all," George mumbled, flinging his last handful of nuts to a group of awaiting squirrels.

He didn't see the ragamuffin that day, which was a disappointment. His brief interaction with the squirrels did bring him a measure of satisfaction, and, since the tatterdemalion had been nowhere in sight, it would have to do.

Something transpired a week later that made George rethink the appearance of Anthony in his life. While talking to his new pal, he accidentally dropped his car keys on the ground. He picked them up, and, although only a few seconds had elapsed, the hobo was gone!

He would have chalked it up to some undefinable fluke, had it not occurred again that same week. He was talking to Anthony about how much he missed his wife, and his feelings of alienation and isolation, when, for a brief moment, he watched a sports car burn rubber as it left the parking area. When he returned his gaze to Anthony, the ragamuffin had vanished!

George had searched the park, up one side and down the other: no Anthony. He was faced with two possible explanations: either he was losing it (possibly age-related), or something extraordinary had taken place.

That same night, while watching a late-night movie, a third explanation presented itself: perhaps Anthony was a figment of his imagination, a fabricated antidote to his loneliness and isolation. George was in need of a friend, someone he could confide in. Had he *imagined* the articulate hobo? Had the ragamuffin spoken so well because George had imbued his imaginary friend with a keen intellect?

He tried to make Anthony appear at that very moment, in his front room. Nothing happened. He tried again. Same result. If the tatterdemalion was an image he had created, why was he unable to make him materialize now?

He tried intermittently throughout the night to make Anthony materialize, but failed. Exhausted, he finally fell asleep just before sunrise.

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As usual, he was awakened by his squabbling neighbors. This time George didn't mind, because the answer to his quandary concerning his newfound friend came to him the moment he opened

his eyes: the next time he spoke to Anthony, he would bring someone else into the conversation. If they were able to see Anthony, then he was real.

He got to the park before the morning mist had cleared, and saw Anthony standing near the entrance to the recreation center. It was the perfect location from which to implement his plan.

"How are you, Anthony?" he asked, greeting him with a hug. "Something was bothering me last night. I'd like to address it."

"What's on your mind?" the hobo asked, amicably.

Before George could get the attention of two young women entering the recreation building, one of them offered Anthony a dollar bill. "Thank you," the tatterdemalion said, but declined to accept it.

"So much for that," George declared.

"I don't understand," Anthony said.

"This will sound crazy," George said, making sure no one was close enough to hear. "But I was beginning to think that you were a human mirage - a product of my imagination."

Anthony shook his head in comprehension. "So you were going to test it by getting someone to converse with me. It makes perfect sense."

The hobo's casual reaction caught him off guard. "Doesn't that seem kind of *weird* to you? I mean, I was questioning your *existence*."

Anthony sloughed it off. "I'm okay with being an imaginary friend." With uncharacteristic solemnity, he added, "How about you?"

George snickered. "Me? I could live with it."

The tatterdemalion looked him straight in the eye. "Could you, George? Could you, *really*?"

"Sure," George declared. "Of course, since I have a history, I interact with people, have memories and all that - it proves that I am a certified, three-dimensional person."

Anthony seemed sad. "Are you sure you're okay with it, George - truly sure?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" he replied. He was beginning to get a bit uneasy. "I'm one of the real folks, so it doesn't matter."

At that moment, a young boy, dressed in a basketball outfit, was about to go inside the center, when Anthony nodded toward the boy, and said to George, "Ask him what position he plays."

George complied. "Hey, kiddo - what position do you play?"

The boy ignored George, *as though he wasn't there*, and entered the building without acknowledging him.

"What a rude kid. Here comes the coach." A muscular adult with COACH written on the front of his jersey approached them.

"Thank you for caring about the kids," George said to the young man. In a gesture of gratitude, he reached out his hand. The man took no notice of him, *as though George didn't exist!*

He looked at Anthony, beseeching him for an explanation. The hobo remained expressionless. "These old bones need a walk - I'll see you later!" George suddenly declared, and moved quickly to the sidewalk. "This can't be happening," he murmured to himself, his anxiety growing with each wavering step. "What is *going on?*"

Flummoxed and flushed, George kept staring at different parts of himself, in an effort to try to verify his own existence. His body was real; he had the same thoughts and feelings any human being might have. Maybe folks were merely ignoring him, for whatever reason. Yes, that must be it. People could be impolite. There was nothing peculiar or mystical about discourteousness.

At the end of George's first lap, Anthony met him, and took him aside. "I wasn't going to tell you, George, not for a long, long time," he began, compassion in his eyes. "But,

being as intelligent and intuitive as you are, you came upon the truth without my assistance - only you kind of had it backwards."

"You m- mean *I* am th-the imaginary friend?" he stammered, unsteady on his feet. Anthony helped him regain his balance.

"Yes, George," Anthony answered, with all the empathy he could muster. "*You are my imaginary friend.*"

George's expression covered the gamut of emotions. "How about my history, my experiences, and things like that?" he asked, grappling with this incomprehensible revelation.

"Everything was *imaginary* - even my illnesses?"

"Yes," Anthony replied, and put an arm around his imaginary friend's shoulder. "And, just for the record, you were never really in danger of being taken out by some health hazard. It might be said that you are *immortal*, impervious to the vulnerabilities that threaten us mere mortals." He squared George's shoulders, and smiled. "George, my good friend, you may be *invincible!*"

George perked up noticeably. "Are you saying that I can't die?"

Anthony's smile grew wider. "That may prove to be true, George. I'll be long gone - and you'll probably still be around."

"When you put it like that, Anthony, it doesn't sound so bad," George declared. "In fact, it sounds downright *inspiring!*"

"That's the spirit, George!" the hobo proclaimed. "Here's how it works: I'm sure you've heard of the characters in a story taking on a life of their own, right? Well, all the more so with *imaginary* characters, like yourself, who manifest themselves physically." Anthony could barely contain his enthusiasm. "My visualization of you is so powerful, so single-minded and specific, that you have somehow acquired a substantial claim on reality; but at the same time, you are not vulnerable to the susceptibilities and hazards that we flesh-and-blood humans are exposed to every day. You have carved out a niche in this world that might very well extend far beyond my lifetime. In short, you've come into your own, George. You've outgrown this world - and, in a sense, you've outgrown me."

His imaginary friend thought about Anthony's words. "On the face of it, that sounds good. What I don't understand are my interactions with others. I've talked to people, done business with them, argued with them, laughed and cried with them - and there's Ramona, my wife. I spent many years with her. How can all this be *fake?*"

"It was real to you. For you, George, those things really did happen!"

George thought for a moment. Then, "If I have a claim on reality, how come those people that just passed by didn't see me?"

Anthony put both his hands on George's shoulders. "You might say I exercised a smidgen of creative license, and made sure that you remained invisible. I wanted you to see the *whole* picture, George. The exception was the animals. Remember the squirrels? They saw you because you were beginning to outgrow your position as imaginary friend. Still, I made sure people were unable to see you, which was quite insensitive. I must apologize for that."

George seemed placated. "It's Okay," he said, and smiled, albeit weakly. "Where do we go from here?"

"I guess we'll continue our friendship," Anthony said, greatly relieved. "If it will help soften the impact of what I had to tell you, I'm happy to address any issues you might have."

"Just two: Why did you imagine me? And, what is the proof that I've come into my own?"

Anthony carefully fashioned his answers, and said, "I imagined you because I really needed a friend. Being a homeless hobo isn't the greatest lot in life, and it takes some getting used to. I was very lonely, even to the point of depression.

Then you came along." He smiled. "And, lo and behold, you were lonely, too - in need of a friend." He gave George a hearty slap on the back. "Also, giving life to someone brought me a great sense of satisfaction. So, both our lives have been made happier by our association ... haven't they?"

George couldn't deny it. "Yes, they have."

"Is it fair to say we've become friends?"

"Sure - you could say that."

The hobo shrugged. "Then is there any reason to change things?"

"No."

"Shall we continue our friendship - and let the future take care of itself?" Anthony asked.

"I wouldn't have it any other way!" George responded, decisively. He reached out a hand. "Friends forever?"

Taking his hand, Anthony replied, "Friends ... *forever!*"

At that very moment, a young girl, being playfully chased by her female companion, accidentally bumped into George. "I'm sorry, sir," she said to him, and continued running. "Have a nice day."

Anthony was beaming. "There's the proof you've come into your own, my friend. You're a genuine, three-dimensional personality!"

Suddenly, through some brief, uncanny stitch in the fabric of time, the tatterdemalion and George Reyes exchanged identities, which allowed each of them to realize they truly had a wonderful, enduring friendship - and that they should never take it for granted.

The End