

# SIWIEEIT!

Sixteen Stories

to Brighten Your Day

and Lift Your Spirits

**BY T. JENSEN LACEY**

With Foreword by Amy Newmark,  
Publisher, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*

**S-W-E-E-T !**

**Sixteen Short Stories to Brighten Your  
Day and Lift Your Spirits**

**FREE CHAPTER**

**T. Jensen Lacey**

With Foreword by Amy Newmark

Publisher, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*

Copyright 2015 by T. Jensen Lacey

ISBN: 978-1503262669

Cover design and artwork by

*Tatiana Vila*

All rights reserved

This book, or parts thereof, may not be reproduced in any form without permission. The scanning, uploading, and distribution of the book via the Internet or via any other means, including storage in any form of informational or retrieval system without the express written consent of the publisher, except for newspaper, magazine or other reviewers who wish to quote brief passages in connection with a review, is illegal and punishable by law.

Version F8FC

Your support of authors' rights is encouraged and appreciated.

Published by:

Moon Howler Press

Fairhope, Alabama

## FOREWORD

T. Jensen Lacey continues to make a positive difference in our world, through her stories published in our *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books and her other works. We were delighted to have most of these stories appear in our *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books, and hope you enjoy reading them as much as we did.

*Amy Newmark,*

Publisher, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*

## LIST OF STORIES (and where they first appeared)

1. Love and Belonging (originally published in *Chicken Soup for the Romantic Soul*)
2. Lost Love (originally published in *Chicken Soup for the Teen Soul II*)
3. A Joy Forever (originally published in *Chicken Soup for the Romantic Soul*)
4. Coco the Cat (or, Sometimes the Best Revenge is Living) (published as a blog)
5. A Dog's Tale: Puppy Love, Lost and Found (published as a blog)
6. My Sisters, Myself and the Seasons of Life (originally published in *Chicken Soup for the Sister's Soul*)
7. The Power of Touch (originally published in *Good Housekeeping*, also as a blog)
8. Sweet, Soft Memories (originally published in *Chicken Soup for the Cook's Soul*)
9. True Beauty (first submitted as a story for *Chicken Soup for the Woman's Soul*)
10. Basketball and Life (first submitted for *Chicken Soup for the Athlete's Soul*)

11. My Dad the Critic (first submitted for *Chicken Soup for the Daughter's Soul*)
12. Realizing Faith (first submitted for *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul*)
13. Angel in the Butcher-Shop (originally published in *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Angels in Our Midst*)
14. To Build a Raft: A Lesson on Timeliness (first published for siblings only)
15. Charity at the Keyboard (first published in *Writer's Connection* magazine)
16. Rocky and You (first published as a blog, for those who doubt their abilities)

## INTRODUCTION

When the first *Chicken Soup for the Soul* book came out, I just had to pick up my own copy. I was intrigued with the title and loved the brief stories that always seemed to make me feel less blue (if I felt depressed) or inspired (if I needed that). The collections always held 101 stories, and as time passed, I thought, “I can write like this.” I studied the collections, read each story, and finally got an idea of the particular voice the publisher was seeking.

My first story ever to appear in the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* collection was “Love and Belonging,” and is the first one in this anthology. Each story here has a bit of an introduction, so you can see what gave me the idea for that particular piece (authors are always asked, “Where do you get your ideas?” to which I most often reply, “Where do I not? Ideas are everywhere!”).

As the reader of my little tales, you should find just the story you need to brighten your day. For those pressed for time (and who isn’t these days), I’ve kept them short, so you can read an entire story in one sitting or while on commute. Brevity is one of my closest allies, and I value your time.

Thank you in advance for purchasing your copy of *S-W-E-E-T!* A portion of proceeds from sales is earmarked for the **Wounded Warrior Project**, so you’re already helping our heroes who protect our freedom.

Thanks to country music singer Trace Adkins for his inspiration.

*TJL*

## **Story #1: Theme: A Sense of Belonging**

This story first appeared as a fictitious piece in a national collegiate magazine called *Orientation*. The editor there wanted me to write a story written from a male point of view, especially to appeal to their young men. After interviewing countless college freshmen and sophomore guys who had lived through divorce in their own families, I felt I finally had a tale to tell. When one of the editors of *Chicken Soup for the Soul* read the story, they contacted me, asking to reprint it in their *Chicken Soup for the Teen Soul II*. It appears here in its unabridged state. TJJ

### **LOVE AND BELONGING**

The classroom is silent, except for the breathing of my classmates and the occasional stifled “Oh, no!” from a student who just realized he should have studied harder for the Psychology 101 exam. I can understand the feeling, although no sound escapes my own lips. As I struggle with the question, “What is third in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs?” my mind is blank and my stomach is in knots—but not because of this exam.

Today, like every other day this fall, I feel a pervasive sense of impending doom. Impending because of the inevitable holidays, with their requisite cheer, are nearing; doom because my parents, recently divorced, both expect me to spend that time with them. Truth is, I can’t stand to think about seeing them during the holidays, now that they are apart and leading separate lives. And knowing that they will expect me to wear a cheerful smile and be filled with holiday spirit makes me feel even more depressed.

I finish the exam and turn it in, the Maslow question unanswered. I *knew* this material, I say to myself; but today everything seems so jumbled.



Walking down the steps of the Psych building, I spot my buddy Walter and his girlfriend, Anna. Walt and I have known each other almost all our lives. We grew up next door to each other, and fought and played our way through elementary school, adolescence, junior high and high school. Our parents had been best friends, and life even as recently as a year ago seemed so simple, so secure.

But now, while I'm struggling with my parents' divorce, Walter's world is intact—his parents are still together and living in the same house where he grew up. My mom is alone now in our house, while Dad is living the life of a newlywed with his new wife in an apartment across town. I feel my stomach churn as I think of that, and mild irritation as Walter puts his arm around Anna.

"Hey, Cliff," he says as he sees me; I notice a sudden, self-conscious grin wash over his face. "How was the exam?"

"Oh, okay, I guess." I wish Anna would disappear. Walter's obvious happiness irritates me, and I suddenly feel very tired. "What're you up to?" I don't care if I seem rude in ignoring Anna.

"Well," Walter begins, and his grip around Anna's shoulder tightens, "we're on our way to check out some CDs at that new sound shop down the street. Want to come along?"

"Nah. I think I'll take a nap before my next class."

Anna speaks up. "How are you doing these days, Cliff?" I can see the sympathy in her eyes, and I hate her.

"I'm fine—just great. Life couldn't be better."

"Well..." she struggles with what to say next. I find myself enjoying her obvious discomfort. "Sorry you can't go with us." But I hear relief in her voice even as she says this.

"See ya around, Cliff." Walter takes Anna's hand, and together they cross the street.

Why should they seem so happy and secure? They don't have a clue as to what's going on in the real world. Well, I could tell them a thing or two!

I turn and walk down the sidewalk and across the Commons area. Maybe it's true, as my coach had said when I talked with him this summer, that I have my antennae out these days. It seems as if every couple strolling across the lawn or sitting on the grass, heads close, pricks at my consciousness and reminds me of the failure in my own family.

Coach Carter had been great in his talks with me. I looked up to him. He'd coached Walt and me in soccer when we were younger, and he had known me just about all my life. Maybe he even knew me better than my parents did. I'd never considered our talks to be counseling sessions—he was my friend, too.

I remember some of the things he said about divorce, one afternoon, in particular. "How could this have happened to my family, Coach?" I had blurted out to him then. "Why didn't I realize what was happening? Maybe I could have done something!"

Coach Carter picked up a crystal paperweight from his desk and tossed it to me. I caught it purely from reflex.

"Why did you do that?" I asked him.

He leaned against his desk and put his hands in his pockets. Looking around the room, he said, "You knew you had to be careful with that paperweight, didn't you, Cliff?"

"Sure. It might break." I put it back on his desk.

"Well, people take care of things that seem obviously fragile." He walked to the leather chair next to mine and sat down. "Think about it. When you buy a house, you don't expect it to maintain itself. Or a car; you make sure you do things like change the oil every few thousand miles and buy tires when they're worn. When you get a job, there are six-month and yearly evaluations of your performance to see how you might improve.

"With so many things in life, Cliff, you expect to have to care for them, keep a close eye on them and nurture them. We're more careful with an insignificant paperweight than we are with our closest relationships."

“You’re telling me that my mom and dad were careless with their marriage?” I heard my voice rise unnaturally; my fingers clenched in my palms.

“Not necessarily careless, Cliff. Perhaps they just expected their marriage to flourish on its own. But marriage, like anything else, won’t flourish in an environment of neglect. No one should take a good relationship for granted.”

“But what do *I* do?” I asked him, and slumped back in my chair. “You’re telling me to accept all this—Mom and Dad splitting up; Dad marrying someone I don’t even know! And she can’t take Mom’s place! *No way!*”

Coach smiled. “I’m suggesting that you try to accept it,” he said gently, calmly putting on his glasses, “because for you, that’s all you *can* do. You can’t change your parents, and you can’t change what happened. You don’t have to love your step-mother as you do your mother, and probably no one expects you to. But to get beyond this and to be able to handle your parents’ new, more complex relationships—and your future relationships with women—then you do need to learn to accept what has happened.”

“Well, I just don’t see how you can ask me to do that, Coach. Mom and Dad feel the same way you do. But I can’t stand seeing them apart!” I croaked out those last words, my throat dry as I struggled to get control—but I felt as if there was a freight train running through my head.

Coach had said one more thing as I had stood up to leave his study. It really got to me, as if he knew my mind better than I did. “I know you’re feeling pretty alone right now,” he had told me then. “But, believe me, you’d be surprised at how many young people have sat in this office and asked me why divorce had to happen in their family. Maybe it will help if you remember that there are a lot of people who are hurting, just like you.” He paused, and for the first time I noticed how tired he looked. “One more thing—your parents’ divorce is not your fault. Don’t ever forget that.”

Now, as I walk down the street, I see a city bus slow down, then stop at the corner. On impulse, I step on. Maybe I'll wander around downtown for a while, I think. I'm not ready to go back to the dorm right now.

I pay the driver and begin to look for a seat. *That lady looks talkative; I won't sit next to her. That man looks like he'll want a handout; not there, either.*

An elderly man and woman are seated near the back of the bus. They'll talk to each other and won't bother me. I sit opposite them.

We ride in silence toward town. I glance over at the couple and notice they are holding hands. Such old, lined hands with the veins sticking out—probably caused by years of hard work, I imagine. The woman's wedding ring is a dull gold; as I watch, the old man rests his left hand on hers, and I see his ring matches hers. His ring, too, is scratched and worn with age.

As they sit in companionable silence, I notice how they look a bit alike. Both of them wear glasses, and both have pure white, wiry hair. They even wear the same style of shirt—simple, white cotton, short-sleeved. I wonder if all this comes from years of being together.

Occasionally the woman points at something as we pass by, and the man nods in agreement. I am mystified, yet I feel a sense of peace, sitting next to them.

Before long we reach their stop. A row of neat, white frame houses lines the quiet side street. The old man gets up slowly and pulls his walking stick from the seat next to him. He waits patiently for his wife to get up before he starts to walk to the front of the bus. The woman rises just as slowly as he and pulls a blue cardigan over her thin arms. He takes her hand, and as they turn to walk to the front of the bus I catch his eye. I can't let them leave without asking: "How long have you two been married?"

He looks inquisitively at her. She smiles and gently shrugs her shoulders. It doesn't matter. It hasn't mattered for some time.

Finally he says to me in a raspy voice, “I don’t know exactly—many years.” Then he adds, “Most of our lives.”

They walk down the aisle of the bus, she in front of him. Then they step off and are gone. Suddenly, the answer to the Maslow question flashes before my eyes. This in the hierarchy are *love and belonging*.

I lean back in my seat. It takes me a few minutes to realize that the cold, hard knot in my stomach doesn’t seem so tight now. And the face reflected back at me from the glass of the bus window looks a little less tense.

I watch the colors of the leaves on the trees slide by as the bus moves on, and my mind wanders back to the old couple. I think of Anna and Walt, so trusting and full of love. I begin to think of my parents, and suddenly it dawns on me that I’ve been looking for answers—when maybe I don’t *have* to know it all. I don’t have to hurt for my parents and for me, too. I don’t *have* to have all the answers about love and life and why things work out the way they do sometimes. Maybe no one has the answers.

“Hey, Buddy.” It’s the driver, and he’s talking to me. I look up and realize I’m alone on the bus; we’re downtown at the square. “This is the end of the line,” he says. “I’m turnin’ around. You can get off here or go back.” He adds, “But ya gotta pay if you do.”

I think for a minute. “Do you go by that new sound shop close to campus?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Well, drop me off there,” I say, and I feel myself smiling a little. “There’s someone there. A friend. And I need to talk to him.”

THE END

From New York Times bestselling author T. Jensen Lacey:

You should find just the story you need to brighten your day. For those pressed for time (and who isn't these days), I've kept them short, so you can read an entire story in one sitting or while on commute. Brevity is one of my closest allies, and I value your time.

"Lacey is a truly gifted storyteller." W.E.B. Griffin, New York Times Bestselling Author

"I found Lacey's storytelling to be fun, poignant and uplifting."  
John O'Melveny Woods, Award Winning Author.

**If you enjoyed this story, I would invite you to purchase the book by going to my web site:**

[www.SweetSixteenBook.com](http://www.SweetSixteenBook.com)

or to Amazon.