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## The Short and Happy Life of Spaghetti Johnson

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Very few twelve-year olds are fortunate enough to have a friend like Spaghetti Johnson. Ronald knew that. Ronald, that's what Spaghetti Johnson called him. His parents and his sister called him Ron or Ronnie. His mother called him Ronald Stewart Sibley when she was mad at him, or when she'd called him several times and he hadn't answered. His older sister, Stacy, called him Ronald when she was being smart-alecky, or when she was acting high-toned. But Spaghetti Johnson called him Ronald, just as a matter of course, because it was his name.

Ronald called Spaghetti Johnson Spaghetti Johnson. He never called him Spaghetti or Mr. Johnson. Though they were close friends, they maintained a level of almost formal dignity; each of them held the other's persona in the highest respect. Spaghetti Johnson told him about persona when they pioneered a new route up the face of Cottonwood Butte. Spaghetti Johnson wedged his fist into a crevice, pulled himself up onto a narrow ledge, and lay there looking down at Ronald.

Ronald sweat in the sunshine. Pulling, pushing, grasping, clawing up the steep rock face took all his strength and all his ability. The part of the rock they climbed rose straight up. Fear nearly paralyzed Ronald. He'd never felt fear like this on their other climbs. He clung tightly to the rock. He realized part of his fear was fear that Spaghetti Johnson would know he was afraid.

Spaghetti Johnson wriggled and writhed and pulled himself to a standing position on his ledge. He drove a piton, secured the rope, and then looked down at Ronald again. He said, "Check your gear."

Ronald checked his belt, the rope, and his tie-in. "I'm secure."

"Now Ronald, don't think you shouldn't be afraid, or that you will outgrow being afraid sometimes. Fear can serve a very important purpose. It can alert us to danger and help us escape harm. A finely-tuned sense of fear is very valuable. You're more than half-frozen with fear, and that's just how you should be.

"The section of rock you're on is not stable. I felt it shift just as I pushed off from it. It's going to give along the fracture line just above you and slip away from the rest of the cliff. From that fracture up, I think it's stable. I want you to relax and wait while I take the rope to the top and secure it. If you come up the rock under your own power, you might dislodge it the rest of the way. So I'm going to pull you past that ledge and up to that first bush."

Ronald waited, mostly at ease. He didn't think the rock would move if he didn't disturb it further. He couldn't see him because of the rock jutting out from the bluff, but he knew Spaghetti Johnson would get to the top.

Spaghetti Johnson pulled him past the unstable fracture. Ronald climbed to the top. They rested above the cliff and watched the sun set.

Spaghetti Johnson told Ronald about persona. He said, "Persona is the way we come across to other people. It's all our actions and mannerisms-- how we communicate, how we carry ourselves-- all the external manifestations of what we believe and feel inside.

“I think there’s a general difference in the persona of, say, a twelve-year-old like you and a forty-six-year-old like me. But this difference in persona isn’t a difference in quality or quantity of self. A child or an adolescent doesn’t have a lesser self than an adult, or than a very old person, for that matter.

“But this culture believes that a younger self is a lesser self. The assumption is that spiritual weight and content come only with maturity. Knowledge and wisdom usually do come with maturity, but the spiritual weight and the complete self are there from the beginning. And the beginning goes back much further than anyone yet imagines.”

It didn’t seem like Spaghetti Johnson was going to say anything more, so Ronald asked, “Then what causes the difference?”

“Expectations. To some degree, we do what people around us expect us to do. But if we have a strongly-held code of conduct, it limits how much we change to fulfill these expectations. On the other hand, too rigid a code can cripple as much as no code.”

Ronald knew he would eventually understand what Spaghetti Johnson told him. A lot of what Spaghetti Johnson said seemed like riddles. He knew the answers, but he couldn’t quite recall them. He knew understanding was coming to him, like the answer to a riddle which has broken its anchor line in the unconscious and floats up toward consciousness, becoming gradually more illuminated by the light of consciousness. He also knew understanding these small conversations would illuminate larger conversations they hadn’t even had yet.

When he got home, supper was already on the table, and everybody was eating. His mother looked at him. “Those trousers

are almost new, and you've already taken one knee out. And your arm is all scratched. Whatever have you been doing?"

"Climbing."

"Where?"

"Cottonwood Butte." He washed at the back sink, then he pulled his chair out, sat down, and started dishing up food.

His dad asked, "Were you climbing alone?"

"No, with Spaghetti Johnson."

He looked up at his mother's and father's faces. They stared at him, open-mouthed. He clearly remembered a conversation he'd had with Spaghetti Johnson one sunny, hot afternoon out by the airport. They had flown up the river and back, and they walked over, sat on bales of hay where the hayfield came to the edge of the runway, and talked for a while.

Spaghetti Johnson talked about his dad. "He believed in cutting a green willow to sting our hides. He put down some hard rules. He said never tell him a lie. Sometimes, if a lie could get me out of the willow switch, it got mighty tempting. But a lie that was found out brought on the switch double."

Ronald said, "I never lie to my parents." Then he felt uncomfortable about what he'd said. Maybe he should have said, "I usually don't," or "I almost never do." So he said, "Anyway, I never will again."

Spaghetti Johnson said, "Not lying doesn't mean telling everything either. Needs of a particular situation can change the persona somewhat without changing the person."

It was one of those things Spaghetti Johnson said that Ronald later realized he should have listened to more carefully.

He knew Spaghetti Johnson was talking about the plane ride, but that evening, when his dad asked him where he'd ridden his bicycle that day of the plane ride, he just let the truth fall out of his mouth. He should have stuck his dirty tennis shoe in there and choked on it instead.

He said, "I rode out to the airport, and Spaghetti Johnson took me for a plane ride."

"What kind of a plane does Spaghetti Johnson have, Ron?"

"The one we went in today is a Tri-Pacer. He also has a P-51."

"Have you ever ridden in the P-51?"

"Yes. Taking off in that one can almost knock you out."

"Do you know how old a P-51 would be? That's a World War Two fighter plane."

"Yeah, I know. Have you ever heard of restoring and preserving airplanes?"

"Has he ever let you fly the planes?"

"He lets me fly the Tri-Pacer sometimes, when we're already up, but he doesn't want me to touch the controls on the fighter. It's too fast. You could put enough Gs on it to knock yourself out."

"It's an irresponsible pilot who takes a child flying without the parents' permission."

Ronald wondered how in the world he'd gotten himself into this mess. Everyone had stopped eating. All eyes focused on him. Then his mother turned to his sister and asked, "What did you do today, Stacy?"

"Well, today I met a friend of mine named Macaroni Jones, and he took me for a trip in his spaceship. He let me fly it part of the time, and we visited some friends on Mars."

“Ron,” said his father, “I thought you gave up that Spaghetti Jones fantasy.”

A hot flush spread from Ronald’s heart. He thought his father had given up trying to make him say Spaghetti Johnson wasn’t real. Now he realized he had stopped talking about his visits with his friend until this evening’s blunder, and that’s why his father had stopped pushing at him to say Spaghetti Johnson wasn’t real.

“But Dad, it isn’t a fantasy.”

“Well then, I’ll have a word with him for taking children up without their parents’ permission. I might put the law onto him about it. Come on, everyone. We’re going to the airport.”

Ronald knew he was too young to be a real friend. He felt stupid, frustrated, and humiliated.

He started easing up a little when he saw where his dad was driving. He realized there might be hope, and he started trying to put some strategy to work, trying to figure out how it would go and what he could do. It was like chess. If you could see several moves ahead, you could lay out a more sensible plan.

They stopped, and his dad said, “Come on.” They walked together into the airport office. His dad asked about P-51s, Tri-Pacers, and Spaghetti Johnson. Ronald’s parents and his sister made fun of him in front of the people who ran the airport-- who, of course, knew nothing about Spaghetti Johnson. One of the men said, “There’s P-51s around, but we don’t usually get them here.” He looked at Ronald and grinned, and when he kept on grinning, it occurred to Ronald that the man wasn’t making fun of him, but rather, he shared a joke with him that no one else understood. Ronald looked up and looked directly into his eyes; the man winked at him, and Ronald winked back and grinned until he thought his face might break.

He could tell his family. He could relieve their stupid sense of superiority just by saying, "This is the wrong airport. He uses the crop-duster strip north of town, and you could see his planes there, because that's where he keeps them, and the P-51 even has his name painted above the step-plate on the wing."

But he thought of his father saying he might go to the law, so he kept his mouth shut.

Two years ago, when they drove out to the airport, his family tried to talk him out of what they called a delusion. He should have brought Spaghetti Johnson home to meet them, but he didn't think of that possibility, and after feelings got bad and they started saying Spaghetti Johnson wasn't real, it was too late; he wouldn't even consider bringing him home.

He didn't know if he ever could have brought Spaghetti Johnson home anyway. He was the kind of man, well, you just saw him when you saw him. Ronald rode his bike out around that part of the country, and sometimes he ran into Spaghetti Johnson exercising his horses or training dogs, always in need of a helper. So Ronald helped.

Rarely did the two plan to meet and do something. Usually, Spaghetti Johnson was already doing something, and Ronald joined him. When they finished, Spaghetti Johnson always had something else to do, and it wouldn't work to say, "Well, why don't you come over to my place? I got television. I got video games, and a train set. You could meet my parents." A man who can fly a P-51 anytime doesn't need to play fighter planes on video.

The drive home from the airport seemed to take forever. All the hay was cut from the fields. Some of the bales hadn't been picked up yet. Ronald wished his dad would turn on the air-conditioning in the car, but he didn't say anything.

He said nothing at all for hours after they got home. Once in a while, his father asked him a question, and Ronald just shrugged. His dad kept asking him questions, and Ronald wondered if he could say something to unload some of the disapproval.

His dad came out from the kitchen and tried again. "What about this Macaroni Johnson now? What do you say about him now? Are you ever going to talk again?"

"There is no such person."

"You mean you're giving up the fantasy?"

"I don't need fantasies. I have my friends and my family." He could disavow fantasies all day long. That was all they were after. They didn't care what reality was. They just wanted him to be without fantasy, and that was easy.

It was like the chess game. They were so intent on taking his bishop that they didn't see he would castle, next move, to protect his king, and to open a powerful line of attack for his queen.

Spaghetti Johnson had told Ronald, when he was teaching him how to play chess, "Once you start learning this game, it can help you think more effectively. Life is not a game, but the analytic processes you learn from chess can be applied to living."

The only real change Ronald made was that he kept larger parts of his life to himself. When Spaghetti Johnson was around, he saw him often. They hunted, fished, hiked, and climbed together. Neither of them mentioned flying again.

Everything was just fine until that day when he came back from climbing Cottonwood Butte and spoke before he thought. When he said he'd been climbing with Spaghetti Johnson, his mother said, "I've read a great deal about children with imaginary playmates. To some degree, it's normal and shouldn't be discouraged. But beyond a certain point, it becomes an aberration. You're too old

now to have imaginary companions, and you've carried the fantasy too far. I'm taking you to a psychiatrist."

The psychiatrist had played many more games of chess than Ronald had. Ronald said, "Spaghetti Johnson could beat you in a game of chess and read a book at the same time."

"I'll bet you on it. Invite him to come in for a game of chess. You can be here and watch, if you like."

Ronald tried being completely honest with the psychiatrist. He told him everything that happened and how his family reacted to it. He said, "Don't you think they're really the ones who should be in here trying to get their heads fixed?"

"Why can't your parents or I meet this man?"

"You can. But I can't arrange it for you. It isn't up to me to prove I'm sane. It's up to you to prove anything else."

Ronald lost hope that the psychiatrist would see reality, reassure his parents, and remove some of the pressure on him. The psychiatrist had no better vision than Ronald's parents. They all conferred together and agreed they were dealing with a full-blown delusion.

Ronald told Spaghetti Johnson about some of it. He didn't want to, but the gloomy feeling he brought with him from the psychiatrist's office revisited him during some of their times together. He tried to explain what dampened his mood, and then he felt it more deeply than ever, coupled with sickening premonitions of some terrible disaster already moving toward them.

He took all the joy, all the companionship he could get from their times together. In all his life, he would never forget the time they rode two soft-footed horses up Blind Canyon, going slowly along the brilliantly clean, wild stream of water, watching the wildlife of late summer. A tremendously loud, very strange call echoed

from the canyon walls. Spaghetti Johnson stopped his horse, and Ronald rode up beside him. Spaghetti Johnson asked, "Do you know who that voice belongs to?"

"No."

"Sandhill cranes. Two of them nest at that high seep up the canyon, where all the willows are. Relax and don't try too hard to be quiet. They already know we're coming. Once you see them, drift downslope from them. If we circle clear down to the lower trail, we won't disturb them."

They rode far below the crane's area. Ronald saw the tall, long-legged birds, grey against grey rock. They called again, a staccato, echoing sound that filled the canyon, but they stayed where they were, undisturbed by the passage of horses and riders.

That same day, they saw a puma, at a distance, and not for long, but they got a clear look. Spaghetti Johnson said, "Not very many people ever see mountain lions anymore."

They swam in the hole in the rock below the upper spring. The water ran ice-cold, but the sun shone hot. Ronald climbed out of the water onto rocks that had soaked up sunshine's heat. He felt clean and more alive than he had ever felt. He looked at Spaghetti Johnson floating in the water with just his face above the surface. Ronald wanted to remember this place and this day and everything he saw here for the rest of his life.

The next time he saw Spaghetti Johnson, they worked the two youngest dogs a while, and then they galloped out two four-year-old geldings. The P-51 sat at the strip behind the house. Ronald had never seen it there before, but he didn't say anything.

When Ronald was ready to go home, Spaghetti Johnson reached out, uncharacteristically, to shake his hand, and Ronald thought he saw sorrow and regret in his eyes-- something he'd

never seen before-- and his dark foreboding doubled and tripled. He wanted to say something, but he choked up and couldn't get any words out.

Spaghetti Johnson climbed into the P-51 and roared down the runway and rose into the air, into a tight turn and then northeast. He was nearly out of sight when it happened, but Ronald knew what he saw, and he knew just seconds before that it was going to happen. He called out, "No! Oh, my God, no." But it still happened. The P-51 failed to make enough altitude to clear the mountain and crashed into the cliffs just below the peak, in a brief but brilliant ball of flame.

Ronald cried uncontrollably all afternoon, but he wouldn't speak. When they took him to the psychiatrist the next day, Ronald hated him for the victory in his eyes after he said, "Spaghetti Johnson is dead."

He knew that same light of victory would shine in his parents' eyes when they heard the news.