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LEONARD

MY FIFTY-YEAR FRIENDSHIP
WITH A REMARKABLE MAN

WILLIAM
SHATNER

WITH DAVID FISHER

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THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS

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I am dedicating this book to a human being who lived his life for over eighty-three years, whose journey was filled with joy and anger, cynicism and idealism, the endless array of emotions that constantly change and evolve. We humans go through life barnacled with the detritus of life—it's a drag, causing change, what once was passion changes to indifference—joy becomes sorrow and love has many hues. All the interweaving elements of human existence. Thus, I am that, you are that, and he was that. I dedicate this book to my dear friend Leonard Nimoy and his loving family.

ONE

Death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship.

—PLAYWRIGHT ROBERT ANDERSON

At the conclusion of the second Star Trek movie, *The Wrath of Khan*, the *Enterprise* is facing destruction. The starship had less than four minutes to escape the activation of the Genesis Device, which will reorganize all matter. But it can't get away fast enough because the warp drive has been damaged. It can be repaired—but it's a suicide mission. Enough radiation has leaked into the reactor room to kill anyone going in there to make those repairs. As Dr. McCoy tells Spock, "No human can tolerate the radiation that's in there."

To which Spock responds, ever logically, "But as you are so fond of observing, Doctor, I am not human." After incapacitating McCoy with a Vulcan nerve pinch, Spock goes into the reactor room and saves the ship and its crew. But the cost is his own life.

When Kirk realizes what has happened, he runs down to the engine room. Spock is still barely alive. The two men, who have fought together throughout the universe, are separated by a clear plate glass wall. In his last

moments, Spock tells Kirk, “Don’t grieve, Admiral ... it is logical. The needs of the many ... outweigh...”

“—the needs of the few,” Kirk finishes.

“Or the one,” Spock adds, then places the palm of his hand, open with Vulcan salute, on the glass. On the other side, Kirk lays his hand on the wall, their hands seemingly touching. A final good-bye. With his dying breath, Spock tells Kirk, “I have been ... and always shall be ... your friend. Live long ... and prosper.”

At the conclusion of the 2001 documentary *Mind Meld: Secrets Behind the Voyage of a Lifetime*, which is simply a long conversation between Leonard Nimoy and me about our lifelong journey to places no man had gone before, we are together in his den. Earlier in this film, we were looking at a framed photograph of us in our *Star Trek* costumes on the cover of *TV Guide*. “This is us,” he’d mused. “Siamese twins.”

I agreed, “Yes, you and I. Joined at the hip.” A few seconds later, I added, “You and I have spent more than half our lives together. I think of you as one of my dearest friends, my dearest. And I truly love, I love you.”

Leonard wasn’t a man given to public displays of emotion. Much like the character Spock, he was very reserved. “The same,” was the best response he could muster at that moment. But at the very end of the documentary, as we stood next to each other looking into the camera, he suddenly and quite unexpectedly threw his arm around my shoulders and blurted, “You’re my best friend.”

In life, as well as through the characters we created on *Star Trek*, Mr. Spock and Captain James T. Kirk, Leonard Nimoy was my best friend. And like the millions of people who loved him, I will miss him forever.

Leonard and I were born four days apart. While I was born first, and was therefore the wiser, more mature, and more experienced one, he simply enjoyed pointing out, “You’re a lot older than I am.” Although neither one of us remembered it, we met briefly for the first time in 1964 when we both

appeared in an episode of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* I played a supposedly drunken bon vivant; he was the Russian bad guy. In our first scene together, I slung my arm over Leonard's shoulder, raised my martini glass, and muttered, "Calvin Coolidge! How are you, Cal baby? Want a taste of this?" But our friendship, our friendship that was to last fifty years, actually began in July 1965, when we filmed our first *Star Trek* episode together.

Obviously, neither one of us could have imagined that eventually we would become best friends. Nor did we have the slightest hint that we were creating two of the most iconic characters in American cultural history. We were two working actors showing up to do the job. Honestly, until Leonard and I developed our relationship—with the exception of my wives—I never had a real friend; I didn't even know what a friend was. I had never had anyone in my life to whom I could completely emotionally unburden myself. There certainly have been some wonderful people I have been close to, people I know I could rely on, but as far as speaking openly and revealing that which is most troublesome and most secretive, secure in the knowledge it will remain as buried in their breasts as it is in mine, there was only Leonard. We worked together for three seasons. During production, actors will spend more time with each other than with their families. When actors work together for a lengthy period of time, comfortable friendships often develop. We've worked together under great stress and forged a common bond. We've faced ridicule and shared feelings of inadequacy. We've pushed each other past exhaustion to try to do better work. We've fought the front office and the business staff, and we've made something good. Through it all, many of us come to love and depend on each other.

Before doing *Star Trek*, for example, I did a series called *For the People* with Howard Da Silva, Lonny Chapman, and Jessica Walter. It was a wonderful show, and they were all my best friends. When it ended, we hugged and told each other how much we loved each other and pledged eternal friendship and never saw each other again. Long after *Star Trek*, I

did *Boston Legal* with James Spader. My God, I love James Spader. We cared for each other, we respected each other, and I learned from James Spader the value of facing a problem rather than burying it and hoping it goes away. The characters we played were so close I suggested we marry, so as my senility took control, he would have legal authority to take care of me. Off the set, we weren't quite that close, but certainly I consider him a very good friend. If I called him and asked the wildest favor, I have no doubt he would respond. When the series ended, we knew we would be friends forever. And with very few exceptions, we have never spoken since.

Actors' friendships are like that. They tend to be deep and temporary. During the closing party, we hold each other firmly, intimately; man, woman, and child, we've been through the wars together. I love you. I'll never forget you. You're my friend forever. But within a few days, if you're lucky, you've got another job, and your life is filled with all new and equally wonderful people, and you never see each other again. Every series, every movie or play I've done, they were all my good friends, and I never saw them again.

But with Leonard, it was different. What should have happened was that after three years of making a mildly successful series and gaining a great deal of respect and good feeling toward each other, after our last day on the set, we each should have gone in whatever direction our careers took us. But this was a unique situation; there never has been anything comparable. Rather than being forgotten in television history, after going into syndication, *Star Trek* grew to become one of the most popular programs in history. It became part of the American dialogue. Leonard and I made five movies together; he directed two of them, and I directed one. We attended several conventions a year and otherwise made appearances and even commercials. While circumstances should have taken us to different places, the unprecedented success of *Star Trek* continually brought us together.

Our friendship took root in the many common bonds we shared. We had similar childhoods; both of us were raised in lower-middle-class Orthodox Jewish immigrant families, we grew up in religiously mixed neighborhoods in great cities, and both of us found the magic of acting when we were very young and filled our emotional needs with it. We both defied our fathers to pursue our dreams. We had our families, our children, our homes and marriages; we both had a strong work ethic, a need for approval, and a great respect for the craft we'd chosen. We went through marriages and painful divorces together, we fought the studio together, we even got tinnitus together. Mostly, though, we shared an extraordinary experience that very few people have ever known. We were carried and buffeted by the same winds, and there truly was no one else who could understand what that meant. But beyond all that, beyond the success and the recognition and the applause, I really liked being with the guy. Leonard was smart and funny and nice; he had learned from all the challenges in his life and gotten through them and taken from them a great deal of wisdom that he was kind enough to share with me.

My respect for him was profound. I was in awe of his creative talents. There are people who rush through life pursuing various passions; Leonard's life unfolded slowly, revealing passions I wouldn't have guessed were there. As an actor, he created an archetype character that has become part of our culture. He was a very successful director, a wonderful fine-arts photographer; he wrote and starred in plays and published books of his poetry. Leonard Nimoy was the only man I have ever known who could perform Shakespeare in Yiddish; he could make you appreciate the beauty even if you didn't understand a word beyond, "*Oy gevalt, Hamlet.*"

He was my friend. But according to the Global Family Reunion project, we also were distantly related; supposedly I am Leonard's wife Susan's fifth cousin twice removed's wife's aunt's husband's uncle's wife's second grandnephew. Admittedly, that was not something we ever discussed, but in

fact, on some level, we were related; we came from the same tribe. Leonard and I were both products of the same history. Our lives were shaped by the same historical hatreds and the courage and desire of our families—Jews who fled eastern Europe to escape persecution. Leonard’s mother and father came from the village of Iziaslav in Ukraine. His mother and grandmother were smuggled out of the brand-new Soviet Union hidden under bales of hay in the back of a wagon and made it to America; his father snuck across the border on foot, sailing first to Buenos Aires and then on to New York. When his father found out that a cousin in Boston was opening a barbershop, he settled there, met Leonard’s mother, and married her. Like Leonard, my family also came here from eastern Europe; my grandparents were from Ukraine, Lithuania, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Leonard and I were both born in March 1931.

Both of us grew up in the west end: my family lived in the west end of Montreal; his family lived in the Boston neighborhood known as the West End. My father was in the *schmatta* business, manufacturing inexpensive suits for the workingman who owned only that one suit. Leonard’s father had the local barbershop. I grew up in a mostly Catholic neighborhood, while Boston’s West End was the American melting pot, Italians and Jews and Poles and Irish, everybody who came from Europe, and even as Leonard described it, “A sprinkling of blacks.” In most immigrant communities, there was a great sense of equality; we all had nothing together. I can remember the pushcarts and the beggars, the ice man delivering hunks of ice to keep the small icebox cold, the singsong and the bells of the merchants as they drove slowly down the street. Leonard could recite the merchant’s singsongs, singing out in Yiddish, “We have threads, we have needles, we have cloth, we have ribbons. What do you need? It’s all here on my cart.”

While neither one of us actually came from poverty, growing up in the Depression, we both saw too much of it. Leonard always remembered the

families who had been evicted from their apartment, sitting on the sidewalk with all their belongings, waiting for someone to come with a wagon and take them somewhere else, never to be heard from in the old neighborhood again.

I'm not sure why, but in retrospect, I actually knew quite a bit more about Leonard's childhood than he knew about mine. Leonard was a wonderful storyteller, and he would weave these vivid word portraits of the people and places of his childhood. His father's barbershop—haircuts twenty-five cents, shaves a dime—had three chairs, quite extravagant for that neighborhood, but a lot of life took place in the back room. Apparently, that was the local hangout. There was always a pinochle game going on, maybe some other gambling that nobody talked much about, and if someone was hard up and needed to borrow a few bucks, that was the place to go. Leonard's father was the treasurer of the Iziaslav Letter Society Credit Union, an organization the immigrants all chipped into to offer assistance when it was needed. Leonard remembers people coming into the Modern Barbershop, as it was named, once a week to give his father as much as a dollar.

Leonard and his older brother grew up in an apartment with their parents and grandparents. Like mine, it was a kosher home; maybe we didn't have any luxuries, but we always had three sets of dishes. A lot of Jewish immigrants in the West End, including his grandparents, spoke mostly Yiddish, so Leonard actually became quite fluent in Yiddish. Leonard loved the sound of that language; he used to repeat some of the wonderful expressions his grandmother used: "You should grow up like an onion, with your head in the ground and your feet in the air." "Go bang your head against the wall when you say you're bored and got nothing to do." By the time we became friends, he was concerned he was losing his facility for the language, so he actually found a Yiddish-speaking psychiatrist in Los

Angeles and paid her hourly fee once a week just to sit and speak with him in Yiddish.

He was always proud to be a West Ender. He named his house in Lake Tahoe West End, and that also was the name painted on the back of his boat. People like us, who grew up in that kind of environment, carried the values we learned there with us wherever we went for the rest of our lives. For Leonard, that meant being a responsible citizen; respect other people, give back to the community by helping those people who needed help, work hard, and take responsibility for your actions.

Leonard described his parents as hardworking, extremely ethical, and constantly concerned about what might happen next. “Everything my parents did was colored by fear,” he said. ““What could happen if you did this or did that? So, be safe, just be safe.”” In his family it was his grandfather Sam Spinner who was the real character. When his parents were telling him, “No, don’t do it, it’s not safe,” his grandfather was slipping him a dollar and telling him, “Here, go do something.”

It was his grandfather who continually pushed Leonard to go ahead, try it, do it. He was the adventurer in the family, the one who came to America first and then started bringing over the rest of his family one by one. It was my father, Joseph Shatner, who did the same thing for my family: he came here alone at fourteen and slowly and over many years helped bring each of his ten brothers and sisters to America.

My father cut fabric and made suits; Sam Spinner was a leather cutter. I remember Leonard telling me that when he went home after his first few years in Hollywood, his grandfather would reach down and feel the leather on his shoes to determine how well he was doing. If Leonard needed heels, his grandfather knew he wasn’t doing well.

And, quite naturally at that time, both of us were exposed to anti-Semitism. I actually had to plan my strategy for getting to my Hebrew school; I’d walk past it on the far side of the street—then race across the

street and inside. But I still got in my share of fights with the Catholic kids. I was a tough kid; that was my nickname—"Toughie." Leonard's family called him *liebe*, which was the German word for love. The moment that had the most lasting impression on him took place one day during World War II when his father suddenly laid down his newspaper and said softly, "They're killing Jews." Killing Jews meant the Jews of Europe, in many cases our distant family members. There was a real feeling among all the Jews: that could have been me. For kids the age of Leonard and me, that had a strong impact. There also were a lot of whispered conversations in Jewish homes about whether or not Franklin Roosevelt was good for the Jews. He received a lot of criticism in the Jewish community for not bombing the rail lines to the concentration camps; although some people explained that if he did that, there would be complaints that he was more worried about Jews than the war effort. But what it came down to was that Jews were on their own, they were different, and I suspect Leonard felt that at least as much as I did. It was part of our shared heritage.

And both Leonard and I got called all the nasty anti-Semitic names. Experiences like that create a sort of subtext, and as we got to know each other, those common experiences helped bind us together. It's almost an emotional shorthand.

We also learned the value of a dollar and inherited a work ethic. Later in life, Leonard would do a very funny impression of me in which he made fun of the fact that I can't stop working. "It's quarter of four," he'd say in his best Shatner. "What's scheduled for four ten? If I'm done here by four thirty-two, can we book something at four forty?" But the reality was that for most of his life, Leonard really never slowed down too much either. It just was in our blood to be anxious about the next job, the next paycheck. In some fashion, we both worked all our lives.

Growing up, I worked as a suit packer in my father's factory; I take great pride in my ability to fold. I've often said if the acting thing hadn't worked

out, I would have had a fine career in professional folding.

As a kid, Leonard took any job he could find. He sold newspapers, he worked in his cousin's card shop, he shined shoes, he set up chairs for the Boston Pops. Whatever somebody was paying to be done, he would do it. He even sold vacuums for the Ace Vacuum Company. The money made a big difference in the family finances. Leonard's biggest memory about the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, for example, was the fact that he sold all his copies of *The Boston Record* and couldn't get any more of them.

Neither one of us were especially good students. With so much out in the real world to learn, school just didn't hold our attention. But there was one skill at which both of us excelled: we could talk. My mother was an elocution teacher and never hesitated to correct my speech; Leonard once won a declamation contest at the neighborhood settlement house, the Elizabeth Peabody House, by memorizing and reciting the entire text of Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*. If I close my eyes, I can hear his deep and somber voice, playing with Longfellow's words as he says with utter conviction:

*By the shore of Gitche Gumee,
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,
At the doorway of his wigwam
In the pleasant Summer morning ...*

And when I do that, it's almost impossible not to smile.

It is, however, a little more difficult but considerably more fun to imagine the taciturn Mr. Spock reading that poem with both curiosity and a complete lack of emotion.