

WHAT HE ASKED FOR

The Knave

Gil had just finished showing Birch the new hardwood floors, hundreds of individual pieces put together like a puzzle, when the doorbell chimed. Gil looked down without moving toward the door. Birch saw him tense up, as if he had never heard that chime before or never opened the door with pleasant anticipation. Gil was thinking, Why now, with Birch here? Maybe they will go away. In fact, Gil would not have answered at all except that his guest was looking at him, waiting, as the chime sounded again, and then several times in a row with musical exclamation.

He turned and took 5 slow steps toward the door, squeezed the doorknob and paused, giving the visitor plenty of time to give up, then pulled the door open carefully.

Before him, framed in the doorway, stood a young man staring directly into Gil's eyes, expectantly Birch thought. At first glance he seemed well into adulthood, tall and very lean, cocky stance, scruffy thin beard, maybe 28 or 30, but upon closer scrutiny he was actually much younger. Beneath dark circles his eyes showed no signs of aging. Beneath the sparse wiry beard was skin smooth and very brown from ethnic roots and much sun exposure. To Gil he seemed loosely relaxed in posture, though not so in the face, like an athlete taking a short break, ready to move quickly if needed. His striped shirt was fashionable but a bit tight for him, and his jeans were torn and dirty.

Gil was aware of Birch standing behind him, no doubt considering this young intruder. He made no introduction but said, "Oh, yes," but not as a question.

"Hey", the young man spoke, and with no further introduction asked, "Can I have a sandwich?"

For Birch the circumstances were clear now. He had ignored beggars at the off

What He Asked For

ramps but never seen one come to the front door. He made a gruff sound in his throat as he moved protectively closer to Gil.

Gil made the slightest motion of his head in the affirmative, thinking what was the quickest way out, and said, “We have *something* in the fridge.” To Birch’s astonishment, Gil closed the door without locking it and walked slowly toward the kitchen, thinking about what was in the fridge.

Birch was most puzzled that Gil would ask no question. What kind of sandwich was at least required. In a few moments he followed his friend to the kitchen, where Gil had pulled out some wheat bread and was applying mayonnaise. He had some ham ready to go and was pushing aside some white cheese in favor of cheddar.

Birch rather slumped onto a bar stool and asked incredulously, “Do you get many beggars here in Oakleigh?”

“From time to time,” Gil answered grimly.

Birch turned his mouth down at the finished product. In spite of himself he said, “Some people don’t like mayo on ham.”

“I’m one of them,” Gil admitted. He placed a single piece of lettuce on top of the cheese, then cut the sandwich diagonally in half. With no further information he put the sandwich on a paper towel and carried it to the front door.

The young man arose from the steps where he had been seated and came to the door. A rank odor was evident as he came close to accept the sandwich from Gil’s hand.

To Birch it seemed that, for a moment, as the young man held the sandwich carefully, he looked past Gil into the foyer, and beyond that into a bedroom with a foot locker, a bed, and a shelf of books. Outside this bedroom door was old-fashioned

What He Asked For

coat rack with an athletic jacket hanging there, the white numbers visible on the dark green sleeve. Gil could feel the chill of the night coming on though it was barely sunset.

As Gil started to speak the young man smiled a frail, ironic smile, said “thanks” and turned, bolting down the steps and across the yard. From behind, with that distinctive jaunty walk he seemed even younger, like a 14-year old heading out to meet friends for a game of basketball before returning home to rest in his warm bed. He held the sandwich like a prize that would bring fulfillment of his need of the moment, all his vision could entertain.

“Have you seen that boy before?” Birch asked roughly.

Gil nodded. “I saw him sleeping at the library last week. He smelled even worse. I’m surprised they let him stay.” He watched the visitor take a first bite of the sandwich as he disappeared round the house at the corner of the block. “And I once saw him build a fire without matches. He’s my son.”

“Your adopted son?”

“My son, Tanner” Gil said, closing the door. “I raised him.”

“Well,” said Birch, nodding with complete understanding now. “You never know what you’ll get, do you.”

Gil headed back toward the kitchen. He mustn’t let the mayo stay out too long. “Neither do they,” he told Birch. He had a sudden thought and froze. “I could have given him a granola bar and a drink too,” Gil thought aloud. “As always, I only gave him what he asked for.”

What He Asked For

The Knob

“Poppy, when did we first come to the Knob?”

The old man looked at his hands in the glow of the fire. How could these gnarled and heavily veined hands be mine? He didn’t feel old but people reminded him that he was by calling him Mr. Gil and “Sir”. “Must be 20 years I guess,” he said.

“Got to be 25 cause I’m 40 this year,” the younger man with the scruffy beard corrected. “I think I was 15 when we first came. We got out our bikes and rode the lake trail before we even set up our tent”. He shook his head. “Never thought I’d live to be 40.”

Gil nodded quietly, looking out over Lake Thurmond from the tree-studded banks. They had camped out often at the Knob when Tanner was growing up. Every time they spent a weekend there riding, playing tennis, and building fires Gil’s main thought was, “I’m being a good dad. These experiences will give him a good childhood and make him a man. He will not be a troubled, neglected child.”

Somewhere on the campground a dog barked. Tanner had slept under the stars often as a teenager. When he did not follow the rules and came home past curfew he slept on the porch, even in winter. Tanner’s mom said he went wild when the moon was full. He moved easily about the campground in the dark, checking the tent, tending the fire. He had lived on the street off and on for 7 years, so he should know how to get around. He once had a makeshift tent in the woods near the family home.

“Let’s get up early and ride the Loop, Poppy. Then go into town and have breakfast at the café.” He smiled. “You can do it.”

Gil shook his head. “Not me. The short Lodge Trail is the only one for me these

What He Asked For

days. Plenty of roots to jump there anyway. But you go on and do the Loop then we'll go to the café for coffee and pancakes.”

Tanner shook his head. “No, no, I'll do the Lodge with you.” After all, this trip was for Poppy and his 70th birthday.

A park ranger stopped his pick-up on the road and waved at them. “Hi ya doin, Mr. Gil?” he called.

Gil smiled to himself. “I'm making it. You guys really keep a beautiful park,” he complimented the ranger.

“You fellows leaving tomorrow?”

“Guess so. Need to get home.”

The ranger said, “What's your hurry, you're retired aren't you?” That was everyone's assumption these days.

Gil nodded and smiled. “Yeh, from most things.” The young ranger laughed as if he knew what Gil meant, and moved on.

“I hate leaving the campsite,” Tanner told him. “Nothing sadder than a campsite when the tent and cooking stuff is all packed up, and the fire is out. But...it's nice to have a home to go to.”

Gil nodded. “This is my home, if home is where the best memories live. I could be buried here.”

The Knell

It seemed like it might go on that way forever. The dreaded doorbells, requests for “food money” from a bleary-eyed kid, the frustrated provision of food or a few dollars

What He Asked For

that led to a very temporary peace, with no end in sight.

Then one day as Gil drove home after a beat down day at work, looking forward to collapsing on his couch just 3 sweet blocks away, he saw the thin but athletic form, the puzzling swagger in spite of all the wants, leaning in the shade of a service station, and a hand waved at him in the heat that was still 80 degrees at 6:00 pm.

His first impulse was to pretend he didn't see the wave and drive on, but in 10 minutes there would be the doorbell, so he sighed and pulled over.

The young man was sweating heavily as he strolled over to the car like he was offering valet parking. "Have *you* got \$5.00?" he asked impatiently, as if he had made the same request to many that day.

"And good afternoon to you," Gil played with him.

"I'm good, you got 5? These people are hungry." He played on Gil's well-known humanitarian spirit. Behind him was a young man about the same age, holding a long board. He waved a hand at Gil but let it fall limp at his side, as if he did not expect the greeting to be returned. Gil nodded at him. There was also a girl who had to be at least 16, very thin, dressed for the hot weather but no visible tattoos, moving her feet up and down like she couldn't be still.

Gil shrugged dramatically. "Five dollars doesn't buy much food for 3 people". It might buy some prestige from people who could come up with nothing. "No, I don't have \$5 today."

"Well, do you have \$3.00?" The young man was very irritated.

"That's okay, Tanner" the guy with the board called. "Don't worry about it." He seemed concerned there might be a scene.

What He Asked For

“Tell you what,” Gil said, reaching into his lunch cooler. “You are in luck today. We had a special thing at work. I’ve got some chips, 2 muffins, a ham sandwich I haven’t touched, and two cold sodas. Not bad, huh?”

The note of hope in Gil’s voice always seemed to irritate the young man. He ignored the offer and started tapping on the sides of the car, glancing back at his friends. “You got to have *some* money.”

Gil had given Tanner some money two days earlier. He was not giving in now. “Nope.” He put the items from the cooler in a plastic bag and handed them out the window. Tanner held them in his hand like they were trash.

Gil started to drive slowly away. “See you.” Tanner returned cursing to his friends. “That’s bogus, he’s wrong,” he said, and mightier oaths. In his side mirror Gil saw the scarecrow girl say something, then the 3 of them moved in Gil’s direction as he waited to pull into the street. He wouldn’t go home right now. He would drive around for awhile. More cars were coming down the street than Gil had ever seen in this quiet neighborhood. Suddenly there was an opening, just as the 3 reached the rear of his car. Gil hit the gas and pulled out.

He didn’t look in his mirror because he did not want to see the thin figures following dejectedly in the hot sun. In his desperation Gil had underestimated the speed of the car coming up behind him now. If he had looked, he would have seen the tall thin youth with arms outstretched like airplane wings, stepping into the street near the speeding car. Tanner realized that his dad was at risk of being rear-ended, so he had forced the speeding Mustang to slow down. But he had stepped out too far, and though the driver tried to brake and swerve the young man was sent sailing through the air about

What He Asked For

20 feet. Later, when the police arrived, the girl said that Tanner had a strange look on his face. She thought at first it was a smirk of defiance, but later she said it was probably a smile of inevitability. It seemed a strange word for someone like her to use.