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PUMPKIN PIE

Life in my family was as barren as an Irishman's field in the potato famine. Finally, on Christmas morning, after a Spitfire fight with my father, amidst the scent of pumpkin pie and evergreen that my sister had sprayed heavily about the room and that smelled like cat pee, I quit on them. I'd wanted an Ipad—just an Ipad, like everyone else. Dad had lost his job last September in the recession, but Mom continued working, even after the company had cancelled her paid insurance. My sister took a part-time job in the take-out line of a fast-food palace, and I was flunking literature. What the hell did I need literature for, anyway? I could learn all I needed from Marvel Comics and the sports page. They had good writers, didn't they? I figured that the package they'd tucked up for me in some drab 99-Cent Store wrapping paper and put under our two-foot Douglas Fir was too heavy for an Ipad, but they always liked to joke around, and I thought they might have weighted it down with a brick. When I tore the Santa Clause paper off the Collegiate Dictionary, I went off like a cherry bomb in an old ladies' jazzercise class. I flung the book across the room and set off into a rant that threw Dad, who was no

dilettante when it came to rants, into stunned silence until he regrouped and came back at me with his usual fire. He reached deeply into his union vernacular, but I'd heard it all before. Within an hour, I'd stuffed whatever I could into my jacket and stomped out of the house.

I felt like the loneliest guy on earth and blamed them for it. Dad sat at home drinking beer, satisfied with his unemployment check; mom pandered to him and cried whenever she made out the bills; sis mostly kept to her room, sulking. I walked in the morning gloom of the snow clouds but strengthened my jaw and knew anything was better than life in that mausoleum. First order of business was to decide where to go. My buddies' parents would just suggest I go back home, and I didn't have the money to get a room for myself.

I spent the next month with a grizzled old pedophile in his five-room house about three miles from my home. He wore an ankle bracelet, reeked of garlic, and sprayed the sink hose on the plates before we ate. I'd met the old frump a few years before, when the guys played touch football in the Commons, and I'd been to his house once with a couple of my friends when he said he could teach us how to dance. After that, the guys twitted him mercilessly whenever he showed himself in the Commons, but I went knocking on his door, anyway. I'd no alternative. He seemed happy to have some company, but warned me to be careful—very careful—about coming and going, so that his neighbors wouldn't know. I'd stopped going to school but, since my folks didn't know where I was, and I never contacted any of my old friends, nobody seemed to notice. I doubt whether anyone cared.

Within a week, I'd gotten a job as a sweeper at a warehouse and, after my first two paychecks, found a room off the back of a house in the riverside area. The old lady who owned the house lived skimpily and did what she could to keep things neat. Part of the deal was to keep up the yard and do whatever repairs she needed. This entailed changing light bulbs, taking out the trash cans, and un-sticking her jammed back door, which I never got entirely right.

I told the old lady that I'd graduated and was on my own—just one of the new fools trying to make his way through a tough economy. Life on my own was tougher than the tough economy, but she came to my room two or three time each week and invited me to have dinner with her. She never cooked anything elaborate—sometimes a stew that we ate a couple of days in a row, or sandwiches—tuna or bologna—or a casserole she had left over from her church group; but she needed the company and, without a TV, I had nothing better to do. She stood the width of her shoe soles above five feet, though she remembered once being five-foot-four, wore her gray hair long, dry, and snarled, and smelled musty, as though she hadn't showered more than once a week—not that I smelled any better. Her house looked like a cheap funeral parlor, with plastic flowers and metal folding chairs—clean, quiet, and dead. She never told me her age, but she'd been married for forty-five years when her husband died. After they'd returned from missionary work in San Salvador, he'd opened a small plant nursery on a corner lot in town. He retired when the city tried to take over the lot by eminent domain and found out that the old man never owned the lot in the first place. He told the city that God's land belonged to everyone, but they didn't agree. He battled the courts and, finally,

gave up his breath with a massive heart attack as he spewed forth God's vengeance on them from the floor of the City Planner's office.

As we ate, she would tell me about her church group, not that she was proselytizing—or, maybe she was—and, then, we'd sit and watch a couple of sitcoms on the TV. The evenings dragged by with the monotony of ritual, but I was isolated from my friends, and my bare room, with no TV and no Ipad, was even more monotonous. I said that she must be lonely, living as she did, and she said that she needed the solitude to discover what was true in life. Occasionally, she'd give me a book to read—something by Anne Morrow Lindbergh, or Elizabeth George—but, I never read them. When she asked me how I liked the books, I'd mumble something about them being interesting, and she'd launch into rambling summaries of her favorite passages. I kept saying to myself, "Get to the point! Get to the point!" Most of what she said was so foreign to what I knew about life that it made little impression on me and all I could tell her was, "Yeah, maybe I'll read that again," and try to change the subject.

Eventually, I was able to buy a couple of pairs of jeans and some plaid shirts from the local thrift store, and began saving for a bicycle. The warehouse was three miles from the old lady's house, and I had to leave as the sun rose each morning to get to work on time. Before long—I think it took another three or four weeks—I went back to the thrift shop and bought a heavy red Schwinn with some rust spots and flew off to the warehouse like The Dark Knight of his Batpod. I locked the bike in the bike rack outside the warehouse and kept it in my room when I got back. It wasn't pretty, but I was proud of it; I had earned it on my own, and it added some character—though, some would say comic character—to my bare room.

Sometimes, I thought of returning home, but apology wasn't in my blood—probably, a genetic trait. I couldn't remember my dad ever apologizing about anything . By necessity, I'd lost some weight and began thinking about buying a small refrigerator for my room. I hadn't discussed this with Marge, the old lady, and, when I'd saved enough, I set my savings back again by getting a Batman tattoo that covered most of my right calf. Come summertime and I could get a pair of shorts and ride back to my friends and show it off. I had turned eighteen, and I could escape the truancy stigma.

Marge often asked me what I intended to do with my life, and I told her I'd probably go into business, or join the police force, or enlist in the Marines. It was all a lie, but humans were born to lie, so I didn't feel badly about it. I think she saw the lie but didn't call me on it. She talked about how we pursue the outward material qualities of life and miss the inner substance that makes us whole. It was all gibberish. The guys at the warehouse laughed about it in their profanity laced ways and said I was too good for the Marines. In their insular world, nature had provided for beer, broads, and broken promises—the first two were the substantial objects of reality; the last was their creative addition to life. One of my colleagues, Bart, got in a motorcycle accident and couldn't return to work. The guys said that he should apply for workman's comp, but the accident was on his own time, and the police reports were in, so he hadn't a chance. It was too bad for Bart, but it was the only good thing anyone had ever done for me. The supervisor gave me a small raise and a trial run as a stacker. I felt like the world was beginning to turn in my favor.

Then, tragedy struck—not the Freddie Krueger type tragedy, but enough to upset my little closet in the world. I left work one evening and discovered that somebody had

clipped my chain and stolen my bike. I was furious. I taped an obscenity laced message on the bicycle rack telling the shit who stole my bike that I'd worked hard for it and that I'd track him down and take off his bleeping head. It wasn't classic prose, but, probably good enough for a brief run in today's literary market. Then, I sulked back to my room—the longest walk I'd ever taken.

Marge knocked at my door that evening to invite me to dinner, but I told her I wasn't hungry. I wanted to be left alone, and, I'm afraid, I wasn't overly polite about it. My room was cold, bare, and dim. I didn't have any comic books to read, any discs to play, or any telephone to whine into about my problems. I sat on the sagging mattress and dwelt on my revenge; but, nothing came of it. After stewing for another half-hour, I stomped, in a temper, regretting every step, to the front door and accepted Marge's offer. It hurt my pride, but my stomach, growling like a lion, forced me to it.

"You seem out of sorts, young man," she said. Marge usually called me by my Christian name, though she must have known, by now, that I wasn't much of a Christian, but she seemed to sense that I was more upset than usual. She never laughed, but had a gracious little smile like a mother psychologizing with her wayward child.

"Sorry," I said, surprising myself when I realized I'd used a word that wasn't in my working vocabulary. "Some," I said, fishing for a word that wouldn't shock her morals, "Somebody stole my bike."

Marge invited me in and gave me what was left from her dinner. She had already eaten and sat with me in her over-heated room as I pawed through the re-heated casserole. I think it was some kind of eggplant and spinach. She tried to tell me that it wasn't the worst thing that ever happened to mankind, that thieves are often misunderstood, and that

God works in mysterious ways. Wonderful! None of it did any good. We watched a cop show about a hit-and-run driver who'd killed the father of a poverty-ridden family—just what I needed to cheer up my evening—and she continued to talk about all the real tragedies she had withstood in life: how one of her daughters had died during their missionary work, shot in a burst of gunfire between the mountain rebels they were trying to civilize; how her other daughter had run off with a punk—she described him like the tattooed man in a side-show—and ended up in prison on drug-trafficking charges. If she was trying to make me feel better, it didn't work—I had my own problems to think about. I told her she must really be pissed off with life, but she didn't respond as I thought she would. She simply said that one needs to come to terms with oneself before one can come to terms with the world. Then, she said that saints rarely married. I didn't know what she meant, but she raised both eyebrows in high arcs as though it should enlighten me, or at least, that I should think about it. I shook my head, hoping to chase away any such ideas from tempering my self-pity. Then she gave me another Lindbergh book, one that she probably forgot she had given me before and that I'd returned unread. I tucked the book under my arm and walked back to my room. The cold night air felt good until I got back into my freezer-like room. Then, I curled up under my blanket and cursed until I fell asleep.

For the next three weeks, Marge seemed to have stopped trying. She didn't knock at my door and didn't invite me to dinner. I felt like—what the hell, she was no different than my dad, turning her back on me when I needed her most. The walks to and from work wore on my calves and bit my soul like a tiger sinking her teeth into a zebra and shaking it apart—every step became an imprecation against my dad, the old lady, and the

stooge who stole my bike. I gave up trying to save my money and began to go, after work, with the other guys to the bar. I made sure I put an envelope with the rent in the old lady's mail slot, but I gave up on the chores around the house. In the evenings, half drunk, I stared at the empty space in my room where my bike was supposed to stand. One evening, bored beyond toleration, I picked up the Lindbergh book and thumbed through the worn pages. I could see where the old lady got her ideas but, after reading a half-dozen random paragraphs, I threw the book across the room.

One evening, she knocked at my door, and I shouted out to her to go away. It was a dismal evening, and I was chilled from the long walk back from the warehouse.

"Come on, Chester," she said in her weak voice. "Open the door."

What the hell, I said to myself, it's her house and, if she wants to throw me out, I'd better leave before she brings the cops in. I went to the door, none too quickly, like a prisoner dragging his feet to the gallows. I began to understand how people wanted to drag out the final empty moments before death. When I opened the door, the first thing I saw was a chrome bicycle with hand breaks. Then, with a slight smile, she popped her head around the doorjamb and looked into my face. I don't know what she saw, but I looked back at her as perplexed as some Greek listening to the Oracle at Delphi.

"It's for you," she said.

For a moment, I didn't know what to reply. "Where'd you get it?" I said. I remember my voice being low and expressionless.

"Oh, don't worry about that," she said. "It's for you."

I wheeled the bike into my room and followed her back into the house and had some dinner. I don't remember what we spoke about, or if we spoke about anything, but

she'd baked a pumpkin pie for the occasion, and it made me angry. I took the bike without thanking her and puzzled about it for a long time. There was pain involved, real pain. She'd squeezed herself thin, like a camel passing through the eye of a needle. Maybe, she'd gone hungry for a few weeks, worked without sleep, and pawned her dead mother's wedding ring—all this so that she could buy the bicycle for me. But, it wasn't about the bike—it was about beauty, and goodness, and truth. She'd watched me degenerate before her eyes and knew that an evil had its hands on me. She must have wanted hard to break its hold. But, what did she know about me that I didn't know? How did she know I wasn't simply a taker, a soulless taker, sucking on the hulls of others like a barnacle that latches on for the free ride? Maybe I was.

Within a year, she died, and some relatives took over the house. I returned home; I walked back in without apologizing. My only regret—a regret that gnawed at me for years—was that I had never thanked her.

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