

MY DAD'S CROSS

Every Sunday before we go to mass, my mom takes me to see my dad. I was in the backseat while she drove up front with Jim on the passenger side. Jim isn't my dad, he's my mom's new boyfriend. One thing I like about Jim is that he doesn't mind if I don't call him dad. I asked Jim one time. Is it alright if I don't call you my dad? He just shrugged.

"Your father," my mom said while driving. "He's a bum."

"But he has a house," I said.

"It's a bum house."

"I thought bums live on the street."

"Your father, all he does is drink all day."

Jim turned around peeking over the edge of his shoulder then threw his usual shrug in my direction. Our car rounded a corner, and I hugged the left side of the car while looking out the window to see clean lawns that were mostly clean except small patches of yellow.

"Jim," my mom said. "Jim, you see, has a job."

"I'm only a salesman," Jim said. "But I do my best."

“A salesman is a great job. Very respectable.”

“It’s not so easy nowadays,” Jim said. “I’m sure he’s trying, but it’s tough out here.”

“He’s not,” my mom said. “He’s always drunk. With them red eyes.”

“With them what?” I said.

“Red eyes,” my mom said. “That’s how you know your father’s a bum. His red eyes.”

I learned a lot of new things about my dad after he started living away from the house.

We rounded another corner, but this time I was pushed towards the center of the car and almost tumbled all the way to the other side. But as we straightened out again, I did too. I peeked at the faint reflection in the door window to adjust the crook in my little bow tie. Need to make sure it’s straight for mass. One time I asked my mom why dad didn’t come with us, and she said it’s because he fake believed it, that he was a liar.

We passed by little houses, smaller than the ones in our neighborhood. But they didn’t look like bum houses. Maybe a little lonely, the way they squatted down with so much space in between one another with nothing but some dented cars out front. But they didn’t look like bum houses at all.

We pulled to the curb of a house, and I knew it was my dad’s because he was sitting down on the porch stairs. I was too far away to see if his eyes were red, but when he looked up his face grew into a wide smile, teeth shining brilliant between his tannish skin. I always liked my dad’s smile. A lot of kids want to be things when they grow up. You know, things like people things. But I only wished I could grow up to smile like my dad.

My dad waved, and I waved back. I looked over at my mom who didn’t wave but instead stared at something out the front windshield. I looked over at Jim, and I expected him to look

over and give me another shrug. But he just kept his eyes down towards his clasped hands. I opened the car door.

“You come back in half an hour,” my mom said. “We’ve got to get to church.”

I got out of the car, and when I looked back through the car window my mom was still staring out the front window. Jim turned over for a second but seemed to get frightened when I saw him and went back to looking at his hands again. I walked over to my dad. His eyes were a little red, but sometimes they could be that way if you were just tired.

“Your mom, she doesn’t want to come in,” he said as the smile left him.

“She says you’re a bum.”

“Maybe a little bit. But you don’t mind, do you. You’ll come in, won’t you?”

I held his hand, and we went into the house. I’d been in the house before. It’s made of wood, and smells clean like it’s been empty for a long time. There wasn’t much in there, just a few wooden tables for eating or reading with some wobbly chairs on the side. There’s also a bedroom in the back, but I’d never been there before. He led me through the house and took me out back where he had set up a small picnic area in the yard with three sets of plates. When we sat down, he picked one set of plates off the blanket and put it to the side.

There was a lot of food. Moon cut apples. Butter pancakes with a dish of maple on the side. Roasted potatoes still steaming and a pan of scrambled eggs. Normally when I see so much food, it’s like a feast. But this time, with so much food for the two of us, I wasn’t so hungry. My dad pulled out a small cloth bib and tied it around my neck over my nice church clothes. Then he took my plate and put some potatoes and eggs on it with that smile. Once I started eating, I got hungry all over again.

“Son, are you full?”

“Not yet,” I said.

“Is that Jim in the car?”

“Uh huh,” I said as I pulled a pancake to my plate. “He’s a salesman.”

“He seems like a nice man.”

“He’s okay,” I said. “We’re going to mass afterwards.”

“Well, then he can’t be so bad.”

I spooned a bit of maple over the pancake, spreading it in a circle.

“Why don’t you come with us?”

“I don’t think your mom would like that,” he said.

I was about to tell him that it was because he didn’t believe it, but then I saw that his eyes were getting red. His plate was empty, and he hadn’t eaten a bite but he’d poured himself a bit of wine that was just like the wine that we drink at the end of mass. I could smell it, and he was swallowing it down. Whenever the potatoes disappeared from my plate he forked another and set it down to fill the empty space. I kept eating, and he kept on drinking until I couldn’t eat anymore. There was still a lot of food left when we finished.

“Son, you must be full now.’

I nodded. When I looked up at my dad, his eyes were red. But still they were kind eyes. There was a loud honk from the front of the house.

“What about the rest?” I said.

“I can finish it later.”

He took my hand then led me back into the house. The honk came again as we were going through.

“I think you have to go back now,” my dad said.

I didn't want to leave, but I knew I would see him again the following week so it wasn't so bad. He was about to open the front door, but then he stopped.

"I almost forgot. I have something for you."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out something that he must have been carrying the entire time. It was a small stitched pouch. He handed it to me, and I held it in my hands. There was some weight to it, and it was tied by a bit of string. I tried to undo the string, but it was so tight I couldn't undo it.

"Here," he said as he undid the string with ease. Then he handed it back.

I opened up the top and looked inside to see it was a small gold cross.

"That's pure gold," he said.

I knew gold was expensive. I'd never had something so expensive in my hand before.

"You should keep this, dad."

"Come now, son. You keep that near to be safe."

"What about you? Don't you need to be safe too?"

He smiled. Another honk came from the outside, but this time it was followed by another and another. He tied the pouch back up in my hand, then guided my hand down to put it into my pocket. I felt it settle there in the bottom of the pocket.

"You better go now. Your mom will be worried."

The honking came again, but quickly stopped as we opened the front door. I held my dad's hand as we went down the front porch steps. He let go on the last step, and I walked back to the car alone. When I got back to the car, I opened the door and went inside. I looked back toward my dad who was sitting on the porch but this time I could see his eyes were red even from the car. While we were waving bye to one another, the car pulled away.

As soon as we turned the corner, I couldn't see my dad anymore. That's when my mom started talking again. Jim started talking a bit too. They talked about the mass we were going to and wondered what the parish would serve for food afterwards. Jim talked about the coming week, going out of town for a few days to see about gaining a new client. My mom said she'd try out a new baking recipe for Wednesday supper when Jim returned. They asked me about school, if my marks in social studies and history were up to par even though they always were.

They always liked talking a lot after leaving. They talked about a lot of things too. Almost everything. But there was one thing they never talked about at all. They never talked about my dad.

THE END