

Reunion

I was checking in to a hotel in Washington when I noticed my father in the lobby. He was dragging a trash barrel on wheels behind him and emptying waste baskets into it as he passed them. He looked thin and darkly suntanned and was dressed in green work clothes that were bunched up around the waist under his belt.

Most of my life I'd dreaded running into my father again, but for some reason seeing him that day didn't phase me. I simply walked over and said, "Hello, Dad."

He turned to face me and we stared at each other for a long moment. "Hiya, kid," he finally said. "What're you doing here?"

"Traveling for business," I said. "Meeting with some people from the government tomorrow."

"Oh, yeah?" His few remaining teeth were small and stained brown from years of chewing tobacco. "What kind of work you in?"

I thought about how to explain the idea of a cloud computing startup to a man who had probably never used a laptop or smart phone. "Computers," I said. "I started a company with some guys from college."

"No kidding. Businessman. I always said you was smart. Some kind of big deal going down here in town?"

"I wish. I'd call it a medium deal. Business is slow. We're doing anything we can just to stay afloat."

He nodded and said, "'Look not to the riches of this earth for comfort.'"

"I'm done looking for riches," I said. "At this point just paying the rent is enough comfort for me."

"Look to Christ, he'll pull you through."

I smiled. "If you talk to Him, put in a word for a little company called Interframe, okay?"

He grabbed the handle of the trash barrel as if to walk away but then reconsidered. "I talk to him every day," he said, "in prayer."

"Okayyyy..." I said. "Do you live here in DC?"

He shook his head. "Working people don't live in DC no more. Rent's too dear. I live in Maryland."

"Jill and I tried finding you a few times over the years," I said.

"I moved around a lot," he said. "Out west, then Florida, Georgia. Wasted years at the bottom of a bottle of booze. Finally settled here and was saved."

He stood there with his hand on the trash barrel, staring at me. The silence started to make me uncomfortable.

"Any good fishing around here?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Everything's too growed up. Used to go up the Chesapeake but even that's petered out."

"You remember that fishing trip we took that time?"

"Which time was that?"

"To Flicksburg."

"Pittsburgh?"

"No, Flicksburg. Up north. You paid that old guy five bucks to borrow his boat? We ate in that old hotel and you let me sip your beer."

He shook his head. "Don't remember. I'm not that man any more. I become a better man through Christ."

"That was the only time you took me anywhere," I said. The words just came out of me, almost reflexively.

"I took you kids lots of places," he said.

"No. No, you didn't, Dad."

He shrugged. "You got a family?"

"No, just me. I was married but it didn't work out. Never had kids," I said. "Well, not yet. Maybe some day."

"It's easy to criticize when you never done something."

"Anyway," I said, "what time do you get out of here? Maybe we could grab a drink. Catch up some

more. I wish I had more time, but I'm checking out first thing tomorrow."

"I don't drink no more. Quit years ago."

"Okay, then. How about dinner?"

He considered the idea and said, "I'm through here at six."

"Great. It'll be my treat."

"Son," he said. "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your lord and savior?"

"I'm not very religious."

"Don't you go to church no more?"

I shook my head.

"Your mom took you and Jilly every Sunday when you was kids. Me, I watched wrestling on the sofa, hung over. I'm ashamed of that now. Your mom had the sense to throw me out and raise you kids right."

I shrugged. "Things happen."

"How is your sister?"

"Great. She's married with a baby girl named Kayla. Living in Penn Hills."

"She baptize the baby?"

"Not that I'm aware of, no."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a paper card. He extended the card to me and said, "Something for you and her to read."

The front of the card showed a cartoon of howling, skeletal-looking people burning in a lake of fire. Underneath, the caption read, "THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY TO HEAVEN: BUT MANY WAYS TO HELL."

"My church. We're on email, too."

"I don't want this," I said, and extended the card back to him.

"Someday you'll need it. You'll see. Your heart is full of anger."

"Is that so? You haven't seen me or Jill in, what, 25 years and you know so much about us?" The irony was not lost on me that I was, in fact, getting very angry.

"I know it, because I was in a rage, just like you. A quiet rage. Christ is the only remedy for it. But He won't seek you out, you got to seek Him for salvation. When you do, you'll want that card."

"Fair enough," I said, and put the card in my shirt pocket. "See you here at six, then?"

He nodded and went back to his work.

I walked back to the reception desk to finish checking in. The clerk said, "I'm sorry if he bothered you."

"He's been bothering me all my life," I muttered.

She smiled and handed me a plastic key card. "Enjoy your stay."

I ate a late lunch in the hotel cafe and worked in my room all afternoon. At quarter to six I went down to the lobby and took a seat in view of the front entrance and waited. At six thirty he still hadn't shown up. I described him to a young bell-boy and asked if he'd seen him.

"Oh, him," he said. "Are you here to pray with him?"

"Uh, no. Does he pray with other guests?"

"Sometimes. We call him The Reverend. He's kind of, like, a preacher or something?"

"He's my father."

"No way, really?"

I nodded. "I haven't seen him in a long time. Do you know him very well?"

"Not a ton, no. But he seems like a nice guy."

I thanked the kid and returned to my seat. I watched through the tall windows as the sky darkened outside and began to pour rain onto the pavement. Taxis came and went, the passengers dashing out of them to the revolving door under the hotel awning.

I waited until dark but finally gave up and headed for my room. I took the insane Hell fire card out of my pocket and looked at it again. There was no phone number on it, no website, no mailing or email address. To whom was I supposed to present this ticket to salvation "when I needed it"? I

placed it on the coffee table for some sinner who needed it more than me.

When I got to my room I laid on the bed and stared at the ceiling. It galled me to admit it, but he was right, I am an angry person. A therapist had told me as much years ago and suggested that I join Al-Anon, and I immediately stopped seeing her.

My anger is not like my father's. I don't insult strangers, throw things, brawl in roadside bars, drown my pain in alcohol. No, I am a quiet rager; droll, sarcastic, smarmy, snobbish. All day long, scenes play out in my mind, revenge fantasies against all the people who have wronged me. Instead of booze, I drown my pain in work.

I thought of calling my sister to tell her what had happened, and that our father was alive and had found peace. Mostly. He was born again, on speaking terms with Jesus Christ, and destined for Heaven, but despite all that, he was still incapable of showing up.

I would tell her eventually; at that moment she was probably putting Kayla to bed, and I was simply too tired. Instead, I closed my eyes and dreamed of a boy in a boat on a lake of fire, rowing frantically for the shore.

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