

Chapter 11

Trophy

The knock at the door woke me from my Saturday afternoon nap, having been lulled to sleep by the buzz of a noontime beer and the drone of a golf match on TV. I stumbled my way to the front door while looking through fish eyes for the flip-digital clock on the mantel, attempting to focus on it as the paddle swept down with a soft click indicating three o'clock.

Damn, I thought. Teresa's going to be home soon and I haven't finished the chores she asked me to finish. Opening the door, it was the smell that hit me first -- something between urine and mildew, like a forgotten sleeping bag excavated from the tent of a hastily packed backyard campout. I stared at the man on my doorstep who looked like he'd just walked in from the desert. Wearing a drab oversized army jacket and dirty sweat pants and flip-flops, he gripped his elbows as if warding off the chill that defied the seventy-five degree Southern California afternoon.

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“Yes?” I asked, hardly masking the annoyance in my voice. My question startled him and he shrunk further behind his forearm barricade. He stood speechless for a moment, hunched over on the doorstep as his cracked lips moved wordlessly.

“Can I help you?” I repeated, the irritation now obvious as I imagined the effort to get rid of him and feeling the lazy comfort of my nap slipping away. I could feel the beginnings of a beer headache coming on.

“Uhh, yeah man, I mean yeah, uhh do you have any yard work I can do?” his voice wheezed, like expelling air from an old tire. He scanned the front yard briefly with stained eyes. “If you lend me the tools, I can do any work you want.”

“No thanks. No yard work to be done. And I couldn’t allow it even if there was. I can’t risk you getting hurt on the property,” I said. It was a nice and tidy answer. Rational. He looked directly at me this time as another wave of smell hit me, this time smelling of vomit and beer. I fought off vomit reflex as I turned my head to gulp fresh air.

“Please man,” he pleaded. “I need some money to buy food. I haven’t eaten in over a day.”

“Sorry man,” I said looking beyond him. “I don’t give money.” We were still new to Los Angeles, having moved down from Seattle a few months prior. It had not taken long to get the lay of the land given the amount of driving I was doing for my new job with GE Plastics. Easily covering 200 miles a day from Huntington Beach to San Diego, within the first couple of months I had experienced the gamut of Southern California culture. Compared to Seattle, the panhandlers in LA were downright sophisticated entrepreneurs. Once during my first weekend in LA while waiting at a stoplight a guy

sitting on the curb jumped up and started washing my windows. I thought it was a joke. He asked me for a buck when he was done and then offered to Armor All the tires for another two. I was impressed with his enthusiasm and gave him five. It didn't take long for the novelty to wear off however and I soon was cured of my stoplight philanthropy and perfected the *no look*.

The no-look is when you look directly at someone yet look right through them. The no-look stares them down and says, "You don't exist." I knew I'd perfected the no-look when I came to a stop at the top of a freeway off ramp a few months after the stoplight auto-detailing episode. The guy with the sign looked at me and without hesitating, I gave him a full frontal *no-look*. Finding no acknowledgment, he moved on to the next car. I smiled to myself, as if I had accomplished something worthwhile.

It was too late to try the no look with the guy on my front porch, however. I'd already engaged him in conversation and in spite of his raggedy condition, there was something about him that kept me from sending him down the road. What if he was Jesus? I heard my thoughts say and damn near laughed out loud. That'd be just my luck...refusing the Son of God because of a Corona headache. Didn't think that would play too well with St. Peter at the Pearly Gates.

"Tell you what," I said, resigned my nap was gone for good. "I can make you a sandwich if you want?"

"Yeah. Uh, yes please," he said, the words sounding like crumpled parchment as his eyes returned to the imaginary spot on the threshold. He stood on the doorstep as if not sure what to do next.

“Have a seat on the porch and I’ll be back in a few minutes,” I instructed as I leaned out through the doorway, pointing toward the parapet wall framing the small patio. He shuffled over to a sunspot on the concrete and lowered himself to the floor. Tilting his chin upward, he rested his head against the stucco’ed wall and closed his eyes, and the ebony Jesus napped while I made him a PBJ. I woke him a few minutes later and handed him the plate with a glass of milk and a banana, and I sat down next to him to watch him eat. He inhaled the sandwich, drained the milk in a couple of gulps and returned the plate with the banana still on it.

“Bananas give me heart burn,” he said.

“What’s your name?” I asked, setting aside his plate and grabbing the banana. Holding it upright by the stem, I cut into the fleshy skin at the top with my thumbnail and then slowly peeled it, working my way around the circumference exposing the ripe fruit.

“Ray,” he said.

“Rick,” I said, holding out my hand while shoving the rest of the banana in my mouth. He stared at my hand for a moment, not sure what to do. As if I had been handing out pamphlets to turn or burn and I wondered if I was the first one to ever try converting Jesus. Ray-sus reached for my hand with a hint of reluctance and I had my answer. This wasn’t the first rodeo for the Son of God. His hands were cool and stiff, like a pair of deer-hide work gloves that had been left outside too long.

Emboldened by the handshake, I began to satisfy my curiosity with questions about his life, equally fascinated and unable to fathom the picture he was painting. At thirty-four years old (seven years older than I), he hadn’t had a permanent home since he’d the age of fourteen. Though the other details were equally as amazing -- multiple

children by multiple women, drug use, violence, and hunger -- I kept thinking about the homeless part of it. Twenty years! Twenty years he had been without a place of his own to call home.

Ray indulged my questions patiently, engulfed by his story, so much so that I did not hear the patrol car pull along side the house. Only when the squawk of the radio and stab of strobe lights appear did it catch my attention. Even in the brightness of the mid-afternoon, the arcing strobes lit up the block. Ray and I stood immediately from behind the parapet wall and caught the patrolman unaware. He froze in in tracks for a moment while the heel of his palm found the butt of the pistol hanging on his belt.

“Is this your house?” he asked, not asking.

“Yes sir,” I said, trying to sound calm while warble in my voice gave me away.

The patrolman sized me up and turned to Ray.

“You live here too?” he asked in a way that indicated he already knew the answer.

“No, sir.” Ray said.

“Do you live in the neighborhood?” Again asking while knowing the response.

“No sir,” Ray said. The sound of his tone suggested he too knew where this was going. As if resigned to play the Q&A game like a campy rerun of a 1970’s Adam 12 cop show.

“Where do you live?”

“Around.”

“Around? Around where?” the patrolmen said, now sharpening his questions.

“Just around, sir.”

“You do not have a place of residence?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you have identification?”

“No, sir.”

“Please stand against the wall,” the patrolman ordered while taking a step back to gain some distance between him and us.

“Excuse me?” Ray asked. I looked at Ray trying to catch his gaze, wanting to tell him to stop fucking around however he wouldn’t look at me.

“Up against the wall”, the patrolman repeated, this time absent of any civility and with a tone that marked an alarming elevation in the tension as his fingers inched their way down the pistol grip. I looked back and forth between the patrolman and Ray, Ray and the patrolman. With a knowing look on his face, Ray turned to face the wall and interlaced his finger behind his head. Blue and red streaks lashed his backside.

“There has been a report of panhandling in the neighborhood,” the patrolman explained as he began to search his pockets.

“What is your name?”

“Ray.”

“Ray what?”

“Ray Smith.”

“Ray Smith?” the patrolman repeated with more than just a hint of sarcasm.

“Yes, Ray Smith.”

“Well, panhandling is a misdemeanor in LA County, *Mr. Smith*. Have you been knocking on doors this morning?” the patrolman asked as he pushed deep into Ray’s

front pocket. He came up with a small handful of items; a few pennies, paperclip, a lighter and several foil balls.

“What do you have here, Ray?” the patrolman asked mechanically as he fingered the balls of foil in his palm. Placing the contents onto the top of the parapet wall, he handcuffed Ray, first the left hand and then the right. Grabbing him by the arm, he led him up to the patrol car and placed him in the rear seat.

“I’m going to take you in to verify identity,” the patrolman continued, “at which point you will be cited for misdemeanor panhandling and possession.”

Following them to the car not knowing what else to do, it was then that I noticed the audience assembled across the street. Several of my neighbors were lingering on the shoulder across from us, arms folded and leaning into each other’s ears, exchanging highly prized insight on the situation unfolding on my front lawn. I smiled and waved and received a half-masted wave in return from one of them. The others continued to stand and stare while the waver leaned into the neighbor next to him revealing further information, eliciting a smirk from the recipient.

“Rick. Yo, Rick!” Ray called, his raspy voice pulling me back to the patrol car. He was talking to me through the open window in the back seat. As the patrolman got into the car, Ray shouted, “Keep my bag for me!”

“What?”

“Keep my bag for me. I’ll be back for it when I’m out.”

“What bag?” I shouted back as the patrol car pulled away. I watched the car pulse the brakes at the end of the block and then turn south onto Lake Avenue, disappearing from view.

Scanning the front of the house, I didn't see anything at first and then I did a double take on something in my periphery. In front of the Bougainvillea overtaking the trellis on the east side of the porch, a small rucksack sat inconspicuously on the grass. Now that I noticed it, the dirty green bag looked out of place against the pinkish, purple blossoms. Picking up the bag, it was heavy and something was trying to poke its way out of one end. Holding Ray's rucksack in my hands, I looked across the street to see if anyone was watching. Two neighbors were still across the street talking -- the Waver and the Smirker. They were facing each other, deeply engrossed in conversation and oblivious to the dilemma I now held in my hands.

I stared at the bag while mulling over my options. Throw it away, take it to the county jail, or keep it. I felt the pressure to make a decision, as Teresa would be coming home soon. I needed to be formulating the story I would tell her about today's events, making sure I got my version right before she any of the neighbors in the gallery asked what was up.

"Lovely," I could imagine her remarking in a voice dripping with sarcasm. "Just one more person to show up on the door step when you are not around!"

There was truth in her sarcasm. In the six months we had lived in Altadena, we had received a number of unannounced visitors on our doorstep. And all choosing to visit when I was on the road traveling, leaving Teresa home alone to fend for herself. The visitors were a variety of people looking for the former tenants and we learned a few things about them in the process:

1. They had left town without telling anyone
2. They owed people money

3. These were not long lost friends looking to reunite

Not knowing what else to do with the rucksack, I placed it in the back of the garage figuring I would deal with it later. My priority at the moment was figuring out what my story would be about the day's events. Teresa arrived home later that day and I casually engaged her in small talk, doing my best to mask the lead up to the Ray episode. She told me about her day at work, the demanding customers, the latest gossip amongst her co-workers and her work schedule for the coming week. When the conversation paused long enough to indicate an opening, I jumped in.

"You'll never guess what happened today," I said without expecting a response. She gave me a knowing, wary look. Though we had been married just over a year, she had learned quickly to expect the unexpected from me. I shared the story from the day's events, all of which she took in stride until it came to the rucksack now occupying space in the garage.

"Oh great," she said, "he's going to come back for it when you aren't here!"

Bingo.

"I want you to take the bag to the jail as soon as possible," she said. in a tone that suggested it was not a debatable point.

I readied for my counterpoint but then thought otherwise. Her expression indicated it was not a debatable point. "Okay honey, okay. I'll do it on Monday," I said, trying to placate the situation. I changed the subject and that was the last either of us mentioned it until the letter arrived a few weeks later. Postmarked from the LA county jail, it was addressed personally to me with only my first name and address hand printed

on the envelope, as if someone had taken great care to scribe each letter. Funny the light bulb did not go on right away. I mean, it's not like I knew *anyone* at the county jail.

As I started reading the letter, Ray's face immediately came to mind, as clear as the last time I'd seen him. I settled into the couch and soon found myself laughing out loud. Along with the requests for snacks, toiletries and money, Ray described life in his cellblock in vivid detail -- a random assortment of inmates that could happen only in Los Angeles. B-grade sitcom actors, directors, agents, musicians of notoriety. All mixed amongst the petty thieves, drug offenders and transient lifers like Ray. Of course, it could all have been a pile of bullshit, but it didn't matter. It was funny, period. He'd ended the letter with a repeated appeal for money.

"*That's* not going to happen," I told myself as I contemplated what to do. Ray had somehow tracked me down, remembering my address. Amazing, given his state when arrested on my doorstep. How was I going to explain this to Teresa? As if thinking it had conjured her to appear, she walked into the room.

"What's so funny?" she asked. Her thick mane of red hair was tied under a bandanna and she sported dual yellow rubber gloves, armed with a sponge in one hand and bottle of Mr. Clean in the other. Straight out of the commercials, my wife was a marvel of cleaning when locked and loaded. The temptation to claim ignorance on the letter and dismiss it as a wrong address or some other misdirected solicitation crossed my mind. Perhaps it was the yellow gloves, however, she commanded an authority and resistance was futile. Failing any immediate explanation, I handed her the letter and watched her face carefully as she read it, hoping for some visible sign of humor. Her lips

slowly drew thin and pursed as her eyes narrowed as she scanned through the letter.

When she was finished, her expression said it all.

“He’s going to show up when I’m the only one here, I just know it,” she said in a huff, tossing the letter on the couch and returning to her cleaning project. She hadn’t even laughed at the part about Ray sharing a cell with Ike Turner. I stuffed the letter into a desk drawer and soon forgot about it as I turned my attention to redeeming myself to the Goddess of Clean.

* * *

The LA summer came early in 1989. Hot, stuffy and smoggy. Though the San Gabriel valley tended to trap the brown crud from the LA basin, one of the benefits of our address in the foothills of Altadena was being close to the mountains and afforded me the chance to get away from the mass of humanity in short order. Being within a half-mile of the trails behind NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratories that lead up to the Mt. Wilson observatory, Saturday mornings usually found me pedal pumping up the dirt road as the congested freeways and city streets fell away below. Stopping at the 2,000 foot elevation for a breather, I would pull off at the overlook and take in the view. The panorama of the valley was spectacular. Even with the ubiquitous smog layer, Catalina Island was still visible and the skyscrapers of downtown Los Angeles poked out of the brown haze. Below me to the west was the JPL facility sprawled amongst the arroyos and moraines of the San Gabriels. It was a beautiful sight and a fitting reward for the climb.

Riding a bit further I would take the cutoff at the El Prieto trailhead. With a vertical descent that would challenge the most daring downhill skier, the El Prieto trail is a series of switchbacks down through the arroyo canyon. Covered in cactus and very large round river rock, the challenge was to make it down without dismounting or impaling oneself on the formidable cactus spines.

I arrived home mid-morning on a Saturday in June after hitting the trail early. It was a satisfying ride as I was the only biker on the trail in the early morning and had managed to stay in the saddle the entire descent. As I coasted down to the house, I could feel the heat from the valley pushing up the foothills and began coughing, an indication I had entered the lower elevations enveloped in the dirty haze of the valley.

After showering and drawing a satisfying pull from the espresso machine, I'd sat down to read the morning paper when I heard a knock at the front door. I glanced out through the living room window as I got up to answer it, looking to see if there was a car in front. There wasn't any so when I opened the door I expected a solicitor and was already preparing my brush-off. Of late we'd been getting hit hard with the Moonies. Fresh off the boat from Korea, the young converts were selling laser art, a genre on par with the glow-in-the-dark velvet Elvis paintings, sad clowns and poker playing dogs that were the fare of carnivals. As with the Witnesses, sometimes it was best not to answer or one would spend the next twenty minutes trying to shake them. I am not the door slamming type, however. Always wanting to be respectful but with a finality to it, I would give them three no's, each progressively more assertive than the prior before I busted out Pissy Rick and ordered them off the property.

Steeling myself for the pitch, I opened the door and was caught off guard by the person standing in front of me who filled the doorway and was grinning at me like he knew me. Before I could register the face, he stepped through the doorway and wrapped me in a bear hug.

“R-Ray!” I exclaimed, blurring his name at the last moment. “You’re huge!” I said as I backed up a step in half-belief. He was truly big. As I absorbed the entirety of him my eyes kept landing on the biceps that bulged from below the short sleeves of his blue meshed shirt like cantaloupes in panty hose.

“Hey man,” he said, “When you got nothing else to do but lift weights all day, ‘ts what happens.”

We both laughed, easing any awkwardness of the sudden reunion.

“When did you get out?” I said.

“Last week. Been taking care of some things but I wanted to see you,” he said.

“That’s awesome Ray,” I said, still taking in the person in front of me and trying to reconcile it with the spent person from the first meeting.

“Rick,” he said, his voice dropping a note while he looked at me sincerely. “I got something to say. You saved my life,” he said.

“What?” I said, disbelieving. “What did I do?” I said, laughing.

“You saved my life. When I came by your house last year, I was really messed up. I was dealin’ and druggin’.” He paused as if to recall his former life and then shuddered. “Getting busted that day was the best thing that could have happened to me. If I hadn’t, I’d probably still be out there doing all that stuff, or maybe I’d be dead.”

“There is something different about you,” I said as I imagined what he must have gone through to get off the drugs.

“Yeah, it’s called three squares a day man!” he said.

“No, no I mean something else,” I said. We shared a look that suddenly became intimate, beyond the comfort of the conversation and self-conscience took over. He looked away, his eyes scanning the patio, landing on the spot his eyes had rested on six months before. He paused, silently contemplating the shaded stucco path and then nodded his head as if to acknowledge the person he was, and no longer is.

“I don’t know man. I’m just feelin’ good and stayin’ clean. Like I’m a kid again,” he said and I shared his laughter, suddenly recalling the green rucksack that I had tossed into the back of the garage last year.

“Hold on just a minute,” I said as I ran passed him to retrieve the bag from the garage. A panicked thought flashed through my mind as I searched for it. Did Teresa throw it away? Rummaging through the odds and ends in the back of the garage, at the bottom of the pile was the rucksack. Grabbing it by the strap I yanked hard and a mini-avalanche of catchall stuff stored on top it cascaded down around me. I picked my way around the junk and ran back to the front porch, bag in tow.

“Ray, I’ve been keeping this for you,” I said out of breath, thrusting it in his arms with a bit more energy than I intended. Ray smiled as he grasped the bag, unfazed. Squatting to the concrete, Ray placed the rucksack on the ground, unzipped and reached into inside. A brief wave of anxiety rushed over me wondering what he was going to pull out of the bag. He rummaged around and then grabbed onto something, struggling for a

moment to pull it out. Yanking hard, he wrestled it free and extracted a long object from the bag.

“I want you to have this,” he said holding it out.

It was a small spinning rod. Cradling it in my hands, I turned it over several times, admiring the cork grip, the bright chrome reel and the finely wound guides. It was in beautiful condition. I cranked the reel handle several times, watching the bale spin smoothly while the spool pumped in and out, in and out. Testing the drag, I grabbed the line and gave it a firm yank, the reel responding with solid resistance and emitting a satisfying “zzzzzzzzzzzip,” as it paid out the clear line.

“Beautiful,” I said as I handed it back to him, “but I can’t accept it.”

“No, you don’t understand,” he said while looking at me with intense eyes. “You helped me when I was down.” I’ve got nothin’ to give you but this. Please.”

Looking at Ray’s face more intently now than I had before, his face was full. The gaunt features of six months prior having been replaced by smooth skin, the deep ebony color contrasting vividly with his blue meshed t-shirt. He wore a warm smile and his eyes were clear and bright.

“Take it,” Ray said, speaking more as demand than request. Refusal was futile.

I contemplated the rod in my hands and finally relented. “Thank you Ray,” I replied, standing the rod in the corner of the patio. We stood awkwardly for a moment searching for something meaningful to say but knowing that saying anything would demean the transaction.

“Where do you go from here?” I finally managed to say.

“I’m staying with some family. I need to get working as I’ve got bills to pay and relations to work on.” For a moment I thought he was going to hit me up for money, my mind already jumping to conclusions. After another pregnant pause Ray kneeled, zipped up the rucksack and stood, squinting as he looked up and down the street as if deciding which way his compass was pointing next. Turning to me and holding out his hand, I grabbed it and he pulled me toward him one more time in an embrace. He smelled good. Old Spice, I think.

“Peace, “ he said as he turned away, walking through the yard with purpose. I followed him to the street and watched him walk away, heading west down Athens Street and then turning south on Lake, disappearing around the corner. Closing my eyes, I framed the moment, watching the negative image fade against the back of my eyelids. When I opened my eyes, the street was empty. Just me and the large sugar pines rustling in the warm breeze coming up from the valley. Returning my gaze to the front yard I heard the familiar sounds of Saturday morning. Music playing, kids squealing and a lawn mower running somewhere down the block. Looking across the street, the neighbors were absent, oblivious to Ray’s return. Walking onto the porch, I picked up the fishing rod and looked at the roses now in full display. Tropicana, JFK, Peace. The Peace was amazing, fully bloomed with peachy pink hues.

Entering the house, I set the rod in the corner of my office and went on with my day, smiling to myself as I did. When Teresa returned home later, I filled her in on the details, showing her the rod. She was not impressed though and spied the rod suspiciously. I carried it out to the garage, placed it discretely in a back corner and hoped it wouldn’t be found and tossed out in the next garage purge.

That was the last time I saw Ray, having all but forgotten him until I discovered the fishing rod while unpacking boxes in our new home in Washington State two years later. I held the rod in my hands, working the reel, bale spinning and spool pumping as smoothly as it had the day Ray had given it to me. The memory of his face come flooding back, his deprived state alternating with his redeemed. Overcome by the memory I kneeled for a moment and said a silent prayer, not entirely sure whom I was praying for. Ray, or myself.

Like a talisman with a purpose all to its own, the fishing rod would alternately appear and then disappear at unpredictable times over the next twenty years. It eventually found it's way to Olympia where my in-laws lived on the water in the South Puget Sound and I taught my kids how to fish with it, my son Michael hauling in a record sized sea run cutthroat on it before my father in-law accidentally knocked the fish off the lure with the net. But that is a story for another day.

I still think about Ray. I think about our brief encounter and am left to wonder in the entirety of it all, who was the redeemer, and who was the redeemed.