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A Deliverance Story

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Author Bio

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A Deliverance Story

Mrs. Wortlack looked down her beaky nose. Her nostrils flared. My teacher's expression, already intimidating, was especially accentuated by today's full Queen Elizabeth regalia. Hoop skirt, powdered white face, ruffled white collar—Wortlack had everything short of the red wig. I gulped and rubbed my neck, resolving to enjoy my last few moments with a head. Her face really did look like a powdered donut, but I immediately regretted saying as much out loud. She began to stride over to me, but stopped as her deep red hoopskirt thunked against a desk like a clumsy spirit. She tilted her head so far back I couldn't even see her eyes. All I could see were those nostrils.

When displeased, the tip of Wortlack's nose would align with whoever it was she didn't want to see or, as it appeared from her disgusted expression, smell. I wondered if Trevor was really absent today or if he was imprisoned under the hoopskirt, released only at night to feed the class rat. But I shook myself out of my trance. Queen Elizabeth was a substitute; Wortlack was gone. Anyone who mistakenly addressed her as such felt the full brunt of Elizabethan wrath.

When pressed, she had told us that our teacher had left for the day due to "most dire circumstances of an unforeseeable nature."

"Hey Mrs. W., is it a last-minute funeral you're at today?"

"Methinks thou art confused."

"What? A wedding then?"

"I am Queen Elizabeth the First. You can—I mean, Thou canst refer to me as 'Milady', 'Your Worship', or 'Majesty'. I am not 'Mrs. Wortlack'."

Wayne, who sat in the desk next to me, raised his hand. Elizabeth primly called on him.

"Well, Your Worship, I guess we're all wondering what happened to our favorite Science teacher ever. We want to know if she's all right, and will she come back soon?"

"Oh yes, Lord Wayne, how sweet of you. I assure you—thou be assured—that Mrs. Wortlack shall return."

"If they can spring her from the asylum, that is," Connor, the class subversive, whispered to me from his desk behind Wayne's. I started to chuckle and couldn't hide it. I felt those regal nostrils pivot in my direction, but Wayne saved me.

"When will she be back?" he asked, his face a portrait of cherubic innocence.

"Tomorrow, young Lord! Do not fret!" said Elizabeth, her smiling maw nearly as wide as the English Channel. She explained that due to those "unmentionable dire circumstances," O'Shanasy had given her a quick call, Principal Reinbach had pulled a few strings, and voila!—The Virgin Queen was here to teach us a lesson on etiquette. Pleased with her story, she swiveled to the chalkboard and began to write words like "chivalry," "manners," and "class participation" in flowery calligraphy.

"Lord Wayne, teacher's pet," whispered Connor. Wayne gave him a withering glare, and I tried to diffuse the situation.

“Her face looks like a donut!” I said, louder than intended.

“LORD JOSEPH!”

“Oh gosh Mrs. W! I’m so sorry!”

“Your Majesty. And that is no way to speak to a lady!”

“I’m sorry! Like real sorry! Can I go to the bathroom?” I needed to escape.

“Lord Joseph! One doth not say, ‘Can I go to the bathroom?’ One says, ‘Pray may I go to the privy!’”

I had no idea what the heck she was saying, but I was sure it wasn’t in English. I gawked at the towering figure. Wayne, my moonfaced compatriot, nudged me.

“Try it: Pray may I go to the privy.”

I was still gawking at her nostrils.

“Thou hadst better—”

“But I have to PEE,” I said.

Disdainfully, Wortlack gestured toward the door. At her command, I stutter-stepped to grab the hall pass. The pass was like the key to Narnia, or at least an escape to a world where I could catch up on the day’s news and practice WWE wrestling with Connor. I would clutch that white pass so tightly it left purple lines on my palms. It always looked otherworldly and fluorescent against my grubby fist. My hand went numb and I checked to make sure the pass wasn’t drawing blood. As I got closer to the fifth and sixth grades, I heard the sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Nairdly, screaming at someone.

Nairdly was squat and compact with a neck as thick as a linebacker’s. She taught geography to the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades with the watchful eyes, iron talons, and plump torso of a mid-sized screech owl. She was quite partial to denim dresses with floral prints, but her bright red buzzcut was her most distinctive feature. It was fittingly militant, as to give even her own hair half an inch of leeway was not in Nairdly’s nature. The screeches were from within the classroom were harrowing, but things could have been worse. When particularly mad, Nairdly would swoop in and grab the offender by the arm, carrying him or her off to the nurse’s office to shout.

“YOU THINK PHILADELPHIA IS THE CAPITAL OF PENNSYLVANIA?”

“I thought—”

“MY GOD! ARE YOU INSANE?”

“No.” The voice was the most piteous sound I’d heard since the last week’s victim’s sobs.

“IGNORANT, IGNORANT, IGNORANT!”

I could almost hear the foam forming on Nairdly’s rubbery lips, and see her bulging, watery-red eyes straining in a contest to spring from her skull. I pressed on as Ms. Mulder, the insubstantial, quiet religion teacher, tiptoed out to close her fifth grade door, flinching from the screams. I darted around her, dove into the bathroom, and peed for about five minutes.

Fear is a large part of what I remember from that day. But, I will never forget the day because of Connor, not the teachers. He was the most hyperactive, violent, and unhinged person I ever met. As something of a fly-under-the-radar, hold-grudges-against-teachers kind of a guy, I was enthralled by my classmate—how he’d back talk any authority figure and never hesitate to kick anyone in

the balls. He was chivalrous, too. Never violent toward women, Connor would merely steal a girl's backpack or share a frank appraisal of her smell. Queen Wortlack had taught him well.

At lunch, I asked him for an honest opinion of my science fair project—"Overall, good. Needs some flesh-eating aliens." The project was on space exploration, and for the piece-de-resistance, I'd made a clay Neil Armstrong and a pipe-cleaner Eagle. The display board bent in half under the weight of about four gallons of dark blue spray paint. The astronaut became crushed and lumpy—maybe the gravity of the school cafeteria was one hundred times greater than that of the moon. Neil's foot fell off.

"Houston, we have a problem!" shouted Connor, grabbing the crippled tiny clay astronaut and throwing him violently into the air.

Later that day at recess, we began a manic game of kickball in the parking lot—the field that once held a decaying convent was off-limits; we were told we'd ruin the grass, and the water from the storm drain by the demolished convent was "unsafe and unsanitary."

The parking lot itself was a death trap. First base was situated on a veritable 45 degree incline. A quarter inch of white-grey gravel covered the lot, making slipping and falling routine. A minute into our game, one of those pebbles lodged in my left palm after Connor tripped me with a particularly nasty slide tackle. The nurse cleaned and dressed the wound, and I was left with an empty hole that gave me newfound appreciation for Christ's stigmata. Desperate to get back to the game, I wept to sway her.

"Be careful not to die out there," she said with a justified eye-roll. She wrapped my hand with more gauze than was necessary. "I know a lot of grown-ups who would kill to have your health."

I was touched by the unexpected sensitivity. "I know. I won't."

Outside, war raged on. It was the bottom of the fifth, and my team was up 4-3. Wayne, Aaron, and I, along with several carefully-selected underclassmen, could taste victory. It was our best chance yet to break a seven day losing streak.

Elsa kicked a screaming line drive, but it went foul and trickled down into the graveyard along the third base path; kickball etiquette deemed this an automatic out. Now if there was one place on the planet sorrier-looking than St. Vincent's tiny parking lot, it was St. Vincent's tiny graveyard. It was somehow built on an even steeper slope than the lot. Instead of little coffin houses, the dead here probably had to live in cramped, towering coffin-condominiums that gave them vertigo.

Connor was up next. Wayne rolled him the ball bouncily—borderline unkickable. It didn't matter. Connor slammed it with his foot and it soared. But not very far, just up. And up. The damn thing just ascended.

Everyone watched the mile-high red speck rocket upward.

"RUN!" bellowed Elsa.

By the time the ball reached its zenith, Connor had already rounded first. Then, the ball started to shoot down.

"I GOT IT!" screamed Wayne from the mound. Connor rounded second.

"NO, IT'S MINE," howled Aaron, sprinting in from left field.

"NO, I GOT IT, IT'S ALL—"

BONK. Wayne got it all right, right on the head. I ran over from first,

faltered between the ball and the boy, and decided to help Wayne. Aaron didn't even hesitate—he fluidly scooped up the red rubber ball, pivoted, and sprinted like a heat-seeking missile at Connor, who was now barreling into third. He could've stopped there, but he didn't. Suddenly, I was distracted by a searing pain in my left hand as Wayne's fingers grabbed right through the gauze. I forced myself not to look away from the legend unfolding.

What happened next was a moment so terribly beautiful that I hesitate to recount it for fear of not doing it justice. Connor, like a speeding juggernaut, veered from the lime-on-asphalt base path to avoid Aaron's desperate lunge with the kickball. Successful, the baserunner tore down the edge of the graveyard, hurdling gravestones with ease. With a little glance over his shoulder, he saw Aaron's last ditch throw fall short and hit an urn. Connor knew he was free. He laughed like a madman.

And then, he saw it. A two-and-a-half foot slab of black granite bearing down on him. With one fluid stride, Connor's left foot struck the top of the gravestone and he launched himself into open space. He couldn't keep his balance or stop his momentum. His arms flailed helplessly. Briefly, the sunlight peeked through the dust-grey clouds, illuminating both toppling stone and student. They crashed down to earth together.

We formed a small huddle on top of the grave. Connor tried to pry his fingers underneath Siegfried Bialystok III's tombstone to raise it, to no avail. Aaron and I joined in, but three sets of fourth-grade fingers wedged between the marker and the February ground succeeded in maybe budging it an inch before it fell. My fingers still beneath the slab, I yelped and wriggled free.

We weighed the options. Just play it off as if nothing had happened? Gravestone, what gravestone? Useless. Nairdly, the self-appointed disciplinarian, would head a full scale investigation, leaving no stone unturned and no child left alive. The recess proctor? We watched at an in-character Wortlack/Elizabeth try to break up a jump rope fight in the distance. Connor would be tried and executed if we went to her. We decided to appeal to a higher power: Father Toomley.

Father had thinning hair, a booming, cynical voice, an enormous stomach, and an ever-present, enormous, coffee mug—more pail than mug. He would occasionally pop into classrooms to commandeer a class with riddles or a delightfully un-priestly anecdote. It was the best in Mulder's. She'd squeak and drop the chalk when Father came in booming, "You know what? I really hate people. God agrees. He just winked at me." As he said this, he would point at the ceiling. Most of the class and I (including Mulder) would gawk at the fluorescent lights.

We dragged him to the graveyard to show him the desecration. Father rested his mug precariously on a neighboring grave and flipped Glebbenshork's back into place. It had seemed almost as effortless as flipping a light switch; maybe repositioning tombstones was a typical day's work for the gargantuan priest. Father rose and chuckled at the terrified faces that formed a frozen semi-circle around his waist.

"Relax! No one's dead...er! Wait 'til the teachers hear about this!"

He ambled toward the rectory, still laughing. We stood in the icy lot, unsure what to do in the final minutes. Aaron bounced the kickball.

“New game?” he said. No one responded.

A shroud of silence hung in the air. The perpetrator silently stared down at the stone that sealed both his doom and Bialystok III’s. Breaking the water fountain, putting his spelling test in Wortlack’s rat’s cage, even nicking staples off Nairdly’s desk: nothing compared to this. I could gauge the general sense of frightened anticipation, but I could only imagine what Connor himself was feeling.

“You’re going to be flogged,” said Wayne, his chubby moonface wobbling with excitement.

“You’re going to get *detention*,” said Elsa. My heart stopped. Elsa was so blonde and so authoritative.

“You’re going to be keel-hauled against the barnacles! You’re going to be drawn and quartered!” I told Connor.

His pained half-smile faded.

“What’s that?”

“Ripped apart by horses. They’ll probably feed the scraps to Nairdly.”

“I’m not worried,” said Connor, barely audibly.

Wortlack loomed in the distance. Her black hooded coat covered all but her irrepressible hoop skirt. She raised the rusty bell meant to signal recess’s termination, and brought it down with a cold clang. Today, the bell tolled for Connor.

We wouldn’t have to face Wortlack just yet, though—we had Religion class next, and she never taught that. We walked up flights of clattering wooden steps and into our little classroom to wait for Mulder and for justice.

Adult stomps echoed up the stairs. Several murmuring voices came closer and closer, then halted. Plastic beads clicked; Connor was using a rosary Mulder had rationed out for religion class—the same one he’d almost broken experimenting to see how many times it could wrap around Wayne’s neck. But the first voice we recognized was not Mulder’s or Disciplinarian Nairdly’s or even Wortlack’s. It was Father Toomley’s. To Connor, it must have sounded like the voice of God Himself.

“So anyway, I handled it. No harm, no foul,” boomed the voice. “But kids have to crack you up sometimes. Graveyard kickball?!” Mulder laughed weakly here, sounding like chalk squeaking on a blackboard. “Don’t you have class, Naomi?”

“Yesssss,” hissed Nairdly’s voice.

We heard the door to the sixth grade slam. Mulder slipped into our classroom, looking shell-shocked. Wordlessly, we opened our religion books to start a unit on miracles.