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This Old Man, He Played Five

3376 Words

### **Kindness is a Habit**

Lord knows he didn't want to stop. It was past midnight and he'd been awake more than thirty-six hours. Plus, the storm howling down on Route 9 was leaving ribbons of black ice hard to detect, making it difficult to drive. He was dead tired and didn't want to stop, but kindness was a habit Tom couldn't ignore. And the BMW, broken down and teetering on the shoulder of the road with its hazard lights blinking, needed help. So he pulled over.

"You guys okay?" Tom asked, gently knocking on the window – seeing the driver nervously gripping the wheel. Her young daughter rocking in the seat next to her. "Need some help?"

The woman cracked the door. "We lost power and the car died. I don't know how or what happened, but I can't get it to start. And now the heat's gone."

"Okay," Tom soothed. "I'm Tom. I happen to be a mechanic. So if you'll pop the hood for me, I'll take a look. Lucky I was passing by too. Almost no one uses this road anymore. Not since the bypass opened."

The woman blinked. "I'm Elise. This is my daughter, Mara. But I don't know how to open the hood."

“No problem.” Tom opened her door a little, reached in and hit the latch. Then went to the front of the car and popped the hood. Where he discovered the timing belt had snapped. “Your timing belt is fried,” Tom yelled over the blasting wind, “which is why you don’t have power. Give me a sec and I’ll grab one from my truck and replace it.”

When he had, he yelled, “Try it now.”

The engine coughed, then hummed to life.

“Oh, thank the Lord. You really saved us,” Elise breathed.

“Glad to be of service. You should be good to go now. Merry Christmas. Drive home safe.”

“Thank you,” Elise replied, “but I’m pretty sure we were never meant to make it home tonight.”

“What?”

Elise closed the car door without responding -- either because she didn’t hear or chose not to respond. And drove off leaving Tom standing alone in the storm.

*I probably misheard her is all, he thought. Sure. Cause who says something like that? Only he knew she said it. And worse, her words held the ring of truth.*

Tom drove home with the strangest sense of déjà vu – like he wasn’t in his own world anymore. Which wasn’t helped when he arrived home to discover twinkling lights of red and green adorning the house, a snowman dressed up in the yard and candy canes lining the walk. His house all nicely decorated for Christmas – something he and his brother, Billy, hadn’t done since their mother died ten years earlier.

Tom’s déjà vu grew worse the moment he reached the front porch. The light was on. And new wicker furniture had had been moved in replacing the oil cans, tool boxes and

assorted car parts normally stored there. And his key slid easily into the front door lock without him having to jiggle or adjust it. *What's happening here!? Did Billy have too much eggnog and fix the place up? Did we win the lottery or something? What exactly is going on?*

"Billy?" Tom called out stepping into the living room. "You here?" His older brother was usually up late helping their father get to bed. Dementia had slowed him considerably and, for some reason, required him to pee three or four times nightly before he could settle down for sleep. But since their father refused to wear the adult briefs they'd bought, Billy had the unenviable task of helping him to and from the bathroom on the nights Tom worked late at the garage.

"Who's there?" Tom's father asked stepping out from the kitchen, wiping his hands on a dish towel. "Can I help you, son?"

Tom looked confused. The living room was clean and all nicely decorated for Christmas, including a big holiday fir standing in the corner with a bright star on top. His father looked different too — same face, same crooked smile—but much younger. Now at least twenty years younger and nowhere close to the senile seventy year old he'd said goodbye to two days ago. "Umm, Dad... it's me."

"I'm sorry, son, but do I know you? I think you might have the wrong house."

Tom froze. "Wrong—"

"I've got it, Pop," Billy called out, quickly walking into the room. "He's, umm, a friend from school. We're in the same class so I asked him stop by."

"A little long in the tooth to be a freshman in college. What are you thirty? Thirty-five?" Tom's father asked.

"Tom's a little older, sure Pop, but only because he had to drop out of college the first time he went. His father got sick and his family needed help taking care of him."

“Ahh. Well good for you, son. Never too late and all. Sorry to hear about your father.”

Tom should've been offended. But he was too busy looking back and forth between his dad, who looked too young, and his older brother, who looked even younger. Both were not the same men he'd left at home when he went to work two days ago.

“I got this, Pop,” Billy continued. “Go on up to bed and I'll help my friend out. He'll be gone shortly.”

A woman from the top of the stairs came out onto the upstairs landing. Tom recognized her. It was Elise. The woman he'd just helped on Route 9 an hour earlier. “Is everything okay?” she called down.

*What's going on?! Tom screamed inside his head. This is truly some bizarre, It's a Wonderful Life shit! If I hear a bell ring and an angel get his wings, I'm gonna lose it!*

“It's okay, Mom. I've got this,” Billy called up. “You guys go to bed. I'm gonna take my friend home.” Billy turned, taking Tom by the arm, and quickly pulled him out the door.

Tom let himself be led, stumbling out onto the porch as their father called after, “Okay, son. You boys stay warm. It's cold out.”

The door shut. The lock clicked. The porch light went out.

“Don't say anything yet,” Billy whispered. “I'll explain everything shortly. Let's take your truck over to Minnie's Diner first and get some coffee.”

On the ride over, Tom looked around the quiet streets and darkened houses. Rahway, New Jersey was still the town he knew. Founded in the 1850's by British, Irish and German settlers and pretty much the same in architecture and layout. But there were dozens of subtle changes here and there. Many of the houses were decorated for the holidays. And there weren't any abandoned cars lining the streets or homeless men

sitting around metal barrels spewing fire along the downtown corridor. Tom had some serious déjà vu, fighting to understand why the familiar looked so strange.

“Billy,” Tom asked once they’d settled into a booth at Minnie’s. “What’s going on!? How are you younger? And who is that woman, Elise? I just saw her an hour ago stranded on route 9 with her daughter. I even stopped to help out.”

“All I can say is some kind of weird cosmic karma vibe thing is happening,” Billy replied. “I put Pop to bed an hour ago and was sitting in the kitchen with Natalya when everything changed. I saw you vanish from all the pictures on the fridge. And the house furniture changed. And instead of being asleep in his room, Pop called down from upstairs asking if Mom and Mara had returned from midnight mass cause they were overdue. Natalya noticed I looked younger too all of sudden, but she hadn’t changed. Then I realized I had two sets of memories. One with you and me where we were bachelors taking care of Pop, with his dementia and all. And the other without you where Mom was still alive and I grew up with an entirely different family. Then Mom and Mara came home and I nearly flipped out.”

“What?” I asked. “Mom was there? Our mom, Sandy? She died ten years ago. I only saw that woman, Elise.”

“No, not Sandy. Sandy was actually just your mom. Remember? Dad was married to my mom, Elise, before your mom. But Elise died in a car accident when I was four when her car broke down on the side of the road and a truck crashed into it. That accident killed her and my eight year old sister, Mara. Don’t you remember? Dad used to tell us that story every year on their anniversary when he got really drunk. In fact, Dad only met your mom, Sandy, after the funeral when he hired her to be my nanny. Then they got married and Sandy got pregnant with you.”

“I guess I forgot all that.”

“Natalya said she’d read about this kind of thing before in one of her soothsayer books. She said we were experiencing a chronurgical displacement in time.”

“Your girlfriend, Natalya? Where is she?”

“She went back to her place to get the book and said she’d meet us here at the diner.”

“I think I need a drink.”

Natalya walked into Minnie’s Diner thirty minutes later, saw Billy and Tom in the corner booth, and joined them. “Hi boys,” she greeted. “Well, Tom, I see you haven’t changed. Which answers one question about the time shift I had and helps clarify a few details.”

“You haven’t changed either.”

“No, but I’m not part of your family. So this time change wouldn’t affect me or my lineage directly. Except now my forty year old boyfriend is barely a twenty year old boy.”

“I’m still your boyfriend.”

“Sorry Billy, I don’t date boys. But that’s a conversation for another time. I’ve been reading up on temporal and chronurgical time shifts where it applies to genetic timelines and I learned they’re pretty much irreversible. So you’re not going to revert back to being my forty year old boyfriend any time soon. And if that woman who came back to the house is not Tom’s birth mother, and Tom isn’t in any of your photos, then there’s a good chance he may very well not exist anymore either. That’s what the book says anyway.”

“Tom doesn’t exist? He’s sitting right here.”

“I don’t think for very long,” Natalya responded. “Sorry Tom.”

“Because,” Tom reasoned, “if Elise didn’t die in a car crash, then she would still be married to Dad. And Dad would never have met Sandy, let alone married her and had a kid.”

“Exactly,” Natalya replied.

“But why?” Billy asked. “That doesn’t make any sense. It’s so random.”

“It might look random, but according to the book, these events generally occur in order to fix an anomaly in time that spun off its originally intended course. The book says, in order to correct the altered timeline back to its original, a person in the altered timeline must commit a quintessential act that skews everything back to the original. The one that was supposed to be.”

“Like stopping to help a woman stranded on the side of the road rather than letting her get run over by a truck in a snow storm?” Billy asked.

“Yes. If that was the catalyst.”

“After I helped Elise,” Tom said, “everything changed. I could feel it. And then Elise said the strangest thing. That she wasn’t supposed to make it home that night. Could she have known about the shift? Could she have known her and her daughter’s death had altered what was supposed to be?”

“I would say, yes. Temporarily at least. They may forget once their original timeline is completely re-established though. Sort of like paint drying. When it dries, it sets and everyone accepts their new reality.”

“Well, that’s messed up. Do something nice for someone and the universe screws you out of existence?” Billy questioned. “Is that what I’m supposed to believe? Is that what you’re telling me?!”

"I don't know, but the book says these changes are supposed to be a blessing. A correction from an illegitimate timeline back to its rightfully intended one – where things are better. Which seems to be the case for Billy, your dad, Elise, and Mara. But not so for you, Tom. Sorry."

"A blessing." Tom pondered trying to absorb the end of his reality. "My existence here on earth is not a blessing. That's a horrible thought."

"Look, Tom," Billy cut in. "Nothing has to change. You're still my brother. And Pop is still your dad. And Sandy is still your Mom and probably still alive. Somewhere. At least I think so. She's just not here. But we can go find her."

"And tell her what. Hi, I'm your son. Or would've been if my timeline hadn't been erased? Sorry, but she'll just think I'm crazy."

"So what do we do? What does the book say?" Billy asked Natalya. "We can't just let it happen like this. There must be something in your book that says, I don't know, we can make a few adjustments to the timeline to include Tom after the change?"

"No. But look at it this way, Tom. You saved two people's lives. That has to count for something in the grand scheme of things."

"I don't see how. I think I need that drink now."

"There is one little caveat," Natalya mentioned, turning the page in her book and reading the small print.

"NOW you bring up an exception?!"

"The book says that both timeline distortions will remain open simultaneously for a short period of time. Very short, depending on how big or small the catalyst event was. And that, until it fully closes, either timeline can remain."

“What does that mean?”

“I think it means,” Tom considered, “if I undo the catalyst, everything returns to the way it was. Is that what the book is saying?”

“It sounds like that, yeah. If you cancel out the catalyst you started, then Billy goes back to being forty, your Dad back to his old senile self, and Elise and Mara return to being a memory.”

The three of them stared at each other.

“Is that what you want to do?” Billy asked.

“Yeah, I guess so. Why wouldn’t I?” But then Tom realized what he was asking.

So did Billy. “Look, brother. I’ll do whatever you decide. Even if it means going back to the way things were. I guess that’s the right thing to do and all. And I don’t want you to think I’m being selfish, or don’t love you, but I admit seeing my mother and sister again tonight hit me right in my heart. Sandy tried her best and all, but seeing Elise and Maya made me realize what I missed out on. And Pop? Well, Pop being a better version of himself and not some miserable drunk? It’s gonna hurt to give all that up again.”

“You boys need to decide,” Natalya mentioned. “Cause the book says the rift closes pretty quickly after the catalyst. How fast I don’t exactly know, but I have a feeling it’s gonna be soon. Real soon. So if we don’t go now, I don’t think it will matter anymore.”

Tom paid the bill and they left. Driving straight through the storm back to Route 9.

“There,” Tom said, pointing. “There’s the car.”

Through the storm, they could all see it -- the moment of catalyst. The BMW stranded on the side of the road, Elise and Maya inside, Tom standing in front of the car with the hood up, flashlight in his teeth, changing the timing belt. Snow falling all around.

"That's me," Tom breathed.

"That's the catalyst," Natalya said. "You fix that, things reset."

"How do I change it?"

"You let them die."

Tom's stomach twisted. "What do you mean? How? You can see I'm fixing the car for them. Then they drive home, which, as we know, changes things. There is no accident."

"You're not going to like it," Natalya said, "but I think you have to cause the accident. Drive up and crash into them. Billy said his mom and sister died in a car crash on route 9 tonight, right? But I don't see anyone around except us. I think we have to crash into them. We have to cause the accident. Then everything returns to as it was. I don't see any other way."

Tom shook his head. "No. There's no way I can do that. I can't kill them."

The storm hissed all around.

"I think you have to undo what you did or it won't matter," Natalya said. "If you want to stop the time shift, that is."

"Well, if you're going to do it," Billy whispered. "Do it now. You have the right to take your life back, I guess. Plus, look at it this way. Elise and Mara died once before. They said as much and are expecting it. So you won't actually be killing anyone. They

already died. So just do it. I won't fault you or hold it against you, I promise. No one will."

"I will," Tom replied. Kindness was a muscle memory he couldn't ignore. "How can I do that? It would be selfish. Not to mention, what would we be returning to? Life wasn't so great for us before, was it? Mom died. Dad was an abusive, alcoholic jerk. Then he turned senile and now all you do is take care of him while I work a dead end job as a mechanic. In fact, the only good thing in our lives is Natalya. And she's your girlfriend, not mine."

Natalya leaned over and kissed Tom on the cheek. "It's your right to have your life. Not to surrender it to some cosmic force or karma or whatever set this whole thing in motion. Maybe they made the mistake in the first place. Who knows? But if you don't act now, I'm pretty sure you won't exist after the rift closes. According to the book anyway."

"I know," Tom said. "I've been thinking about that. But I can't do a bad thing just to keep my life when it hurts other people I love to do so. I promised myself a long time ago I wouldn't be a bad person, or harm others because of my own selfishness. That's why I dropped out of college and returned home when Mom died and Dad got sick. And why I work so many shifts now to pay the bills and keep the house. I always do the right thing. And here, once again, is my chance to do right. Even if it costs more than I want to pay."

"Tom," Billy whispered, reaching across for his brother's hand. "You're a good man either way. I love you."

Tom decided and put the truck in drive. Mashing down hard on the gas and spinning the tires till his truck lurched forward toward the BMW. Then turned the wheel and cruised past – leaving the BMW safely receding from sight in his rear view mirror.

"Let's go get that drink now," Tom said. "I could use a good belt before whatever comes next arrives."

Dawn came. The roads were plowed and cleared after the night's storm. And Billy woke in his bed feeling a touch sad. He didn't know why. Nor was it like him. Then he heard his mother calling from downstairs that breakfast was ready. And could smell the bacon and pancakes and coffee. And heard the sounds of his father and sister heading to the kitchen themselves, his father laughing at something Mara said. So he shrugged off the bad feeling, jumped out of bed, and headed downstairs to join his family for breakfast.

*It's gonna be a good day, Billy thought. Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to all! All is as it should be. After all, how can a man be unhappy when he has such a good family and such a good life?*

Still, Billy felt a twinge of melancholy – like he was forgetting something important. Or someone.

The End.