

A  
JOLLY  
GOOD  
FELLOW



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by  
Stephen V. Masse

Good Harbor Press • Boston

*A Jolly Good Fellow*

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Dedicated to the fond memory of  
Henry A. Christopher  
and  
Nora Baldassarre Mustone



The small man builds cages  
for everyone he knows.  
While the sage,  
who has to duck his head when the moon is low,  
keeps dropping keys all night long  
for the beautiful rowdy prisoners.  
—Hafiz



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# TAPE ONE

He's out there hitchhiking. I'm driving back up West Border Parkway in the morning snow, and I know right off it's him because I watched him come out of his house three times last month, and just saw him go in the variety store all alone about twenty minutes ago, hanging around while the school bus came and then took off without him.

He looks in the car window quickly, then opens the door and piles right in. He rubs his hands together and breathes on them. I can see they're pretty red from the cold. He's smaller than I thought he might be, like I could push or pull him with one hand. I look at his face, all rosy with a few snowflakes melting, though his eyes look unhappy or mad or something. "You okay over there?" I ask. "What's with the hitchhikin'—you forget somethin' at home?"

"Me? No. Just trying to get a ride."

"Where to? You skippin' school and goin' to the mall?"

He says nothing, just wipes his face with his hand.

"You really shouldn't be out there hitchhikin'."

He shrugs. Then he puts his fingers right in the defroster vents and shifts his feet, kicking the roll of duct tape on the floor. “Maybe I should just get out and try another ride.” He puts his hand to where the door lever should be, but finds the stem part broken off.

“Let’s not get hasty here,” I says. “You’re in outa the snow, you got nice warm heat. It’s just not every day some kid jumps in my car. How’s those hands? Warmer, I bet.”

He looks at his hands. I can see they picked up some dust from the dashboard. He wipes them on his coat front, and it makes a kind of whistling sound. “This is a pretty old car,” he says. “I never knew anybody that drove such an old car.” Kid starts telling me his father has a brand new Jaguar XKR convertible that makes my car look like some dog butt jalopy.

“You’re gettin’ a little harsh there, don’t you think? This car’s a classic—a Dodge Dart with slant six engine. I’ll betcha there’s only five or six people that have one of these. How many hundreds have a Jag? Besides, you shouldn’t be talking like that.”

“Like what?”

“When I was a kid, I never said that kind of stuff in front of respectable adults. Think you’d have a careful mouth, coming from such a high class town as you do.”

I can see he’s a little scared. He keeps looking at me like he thinks I’m going to hurt him or something. Maybe he can see I’m scared too, with him suddenly here before my eyes.

Pretty soon we come up to a red light, and before I know it, he’s fiddling with the broken door handle. I jam the brakes hard. “Whatta you think you’re doin’?” I says.

“I—I was just trying to close the door tighter.”

“Can’t you see it’s busted?” I says. “Don’t you try that stuff, or else you’ll get hurt. You get that?”

“What’s everybody’s problem with me today?” he says. “If you don’t mind, your stinking door’s loose and I don’t feel like falling out.”

Just as the light turns green, I catch a look at his face and see some tears. Now I feel kinda bad. “You don’t need to cry,” I says. “Just don’t be messin’ with the door, you won’t get yourself in trouble.”

“Easy for you to say. I’m already in trouble.”

“For what?”

“Well for your information, primarily, blowing off school. Then, in case you didn’t notice me out there hitchhiking? My mother’ll kill me, and my father will ground me until I’m twenty-one. And plus, I’m stuck in this old car with you, and no airbags, and I don’t think I should be doing this.”

“Just don’t worry,” I says. But I realize I’m the guy with the worries. I figured and calculated a dozen different possible things, but never imagined him just jumping in my car.

We drive a while more and get into downtown by and by. He gets busy looking at the holiday decorations all around the city, and seems to calm down. “Now,” I says, “you’re in my car and not in your old man’s hotshot convertible, which if you think about it, ain’t too practical on a snowy day. And besides, if you love his car so much, how come you were so quick to take a ride with a stranger?”

“Can we just drive?”

“We are driving.”

“If you really want to know, I was cold. And besides, nobody stops to pick up a kid.”

“Except maybe a school bus?”

“Duhh—does it look like I want to be in school?”

“Don’t look much like you want to be anywhere. Not school, not home, not in my stinking rattletrap jalopy, and I’m

beginnin' to wonder how I got so lucky to get you, the Booker kid, all to myself?"

His eyes jump right to me. "Hey! What the—how do you know who I am? Do you work for my father?"

"I just know your name's Booker," I says.

"Do you work at my school?"

"Hardly, kid. So what's your first name?"

He don't answer me, just wrinkles up his forehead and shifts in his seat.

"Ain't you got a name, kid?"

He's irritated now, like he's more mad I'm trying to pry out his name than he is about getting driven off by a stranger. "Okay, it's Gabriel," he says almost too soft to hear.

I reach out my hand for a handshake, and he looks at it like he don't know what to do, so I wiggle my fingers until he finally puts his hand in mine and I shake it. "Nice to meet you," I says.

We drive a half block more and nobody talks. Then suddenly he says, "Pretty hammy name, isn't it? That's my mother's idea. Gabriel—sounds gimpy."

"How old are you, anyhow?"

"Eleven," he says, then he looks out the window again.

"Just like I thought," I says.

\* \* \*

Back to my part of town, and I get the creepy feeling I shouldn't smuggle the kid in the apartment yet. All I can think of is if anybody sees me with some school kid, and school not out yet—maybe I should wait till dark. But I don't want to keep him out in broad daylight, snow or no snow. By luck there's only one guy out on the street when I drive down, and he's way

up ahead getting in his car to drive away. I just park and get out, then go to the kid's side and let him out. "Follow me."

The kid does just what I say, so I don't have to get rough. He looks up and down the street at all the different apartment buildings standing shoulder to shoulder. It's a small street off of the main drag, has only a couple real old trees that the city keeps chopping branches from. Mostly professional people live here, so there's hardly anybody around during work hours. My building is a brick walk-up—four old granite steps and a big front door, and four floors. I'm on the third floor. We get inside with no problem except some snow to brush off of ourselves. This could be some easy money for me, I think. The kid seems quiet enough, maybe from being scared, but I'm keeping a close eye on him just in case. Inside, he starts gawking all around. He goes over to the stove and picks up the coffee pot. "Wow, my grandmother has one of these in the garden. She grows parsley from it." Then he sees the statue of Saint Joseph on the counter, picks it up.

"You gotta touch stuff?" I ask, taking the statue from him and looking it over. "This was broken once, I had to glue it back together."

He pulls his hands down to his sides, like he's ashamed.

"Oh, the hell," I says. "It don't matter. You're gonna be here a while, you might as well get used to it."

"You don't mind if I stay?"

I look at him, try to figure out if he means it for real. Maybe he thinks I'm a relative, or one of his father's flunkies. "Of course you're gonna stay."

"Because I need certain things," he says. "Like for breakfast, Cap'n Crunch and Fruit Loops, and Frosted Flakes. And Hostess Doughnuts. Then for lunch, macaroni and cheese, frozen pizza, stuff like that."

“Okay, okay. But I got work to do.”

“Well then, just give me some money and I can go get some stuff myself.”

“Wait just a minute here, kid. Number one, you don’t get nothin’. You stay right here.”

“So what’s so tough about me going to get some things? I’m old enough to buy lousy groceries.”

“Because, smart guy. Ain’t you got the idea of what this is all about?”

He looks at me again with them eyes. Then his lip starts to go like he’s ready to say something a few times, but then he just keeps staring at me instead, and says nothing.

“Look, kid—we need to talk. Why do you think I brought you here?”

“Okay, so I’m not sure. Unless you’re going to try to get gay with me or—”

“Whoa there, boy,” I clap my hand over his mouth. “Let’s not get complicated. Must be some nice pals you got, teaching you all that rotten stuff.”

“Okay then, so what do you have me here for?”

I go in my room and take out the clothes line rope I saved under my bed. “Now you got the idea, kid?”

He shrugs his shoulders.

“This is for tying up your victim. I just kidnapped you.”

He stops cold and looks right at me. “But—kidnapped me? I don’t want to be kidnapped.” He backs away, and I see his face turning pale and his eyes growing wider. I step closer to him, and he puts his arms out like he’s trying to hold me away from him.

“Well, ain’t that too bad. ’Cause number one, you’re not just some runaway kid. I know who you are, and I know where you live. Number two, I know your old man is Winthrop Lowell Booker the Third, known to his loyal backstabbers in

the State House as Win Booker. So just because I didn't have to grab you offa the street and duct tape your mouth shut and shove you in my trunk, don't mean I didn't kidnap you."

Now he looks at me more scared than I ever thought he could be. His breath is fast and ragged, and he shrinks back till his leg hits a chair. "But—" he puts his hand up to his neck. "You want to chop off my head and show it on the Internet?"

"Hey, hey—you're gettin' ahead of yourself here, kid." I put the rope down on the counter. "Nobody's choppin' anything. What do you think this is, Baghdad?"

"Who are you, anyway? What kind of money do you think you can get from my father?"

"Shhh. Calm down, kid, willya?"

"He won't pay anything."

"Oh, yeah? I betcha I can get a hundred thousand bucks to return you safe to home."

"No way, that's bull sh—"

I crack him on his hand, not very hard. "Watch the mouth!"

"I didn't mean it," he yelps, yanking his hand away to rub it. Boy, is this kid a case. He don't even get up and start swinging and throwing stuff around, like I'd do if I was a kid and somebody kidnapped me.

"But I ran away from home in the summer, and they didn't even come to look for me," he says.

"That's a lie if I ever heard one," I says.

"I did run away."

"They looked for you, and they worried, too."

"They sent my uncle to look—and the police."

"Same thing, ain't it?"

"I stayed away four days, and I found my own way home. When I got there they were sore," he says, and looks at me with them eyes again.

“What made you run away?”

“Nothing much. I just wanted a vacation. I took two hundred dollars and went for a bus ride to New Hampshire and bought a sleeping bag and some food. I went to live in the woods the whole time. Then I got tired of it, and took a bus home.”

“Took two hundred bucks? That’s a lot of money for a kid to steal.”

“I didn’t steal it,” he says, like I’m supposed to know all the time.

“So how did you get it?”

“My own money. I save up my allowance.”

“Allowance?”

“Yeah. I get fifteen dollars every week.”

“And your father can’t pay that hundred grand?”

He looks at me again, like he’s studying me. “Well, I suppose he can. Not that he will, but I guess he can if he really wants to.”

“So, there you go. You bet your life he’ll pay.” I go to the fridge and take out some milk. “Now—before we do anything else, we gotta get something to eat. You hungry?”

He looks around and shrugs his shoulders. “This kitchen is kind of crappy,” he says.

“Hey—one more like that you’re gonna get a cauliflower ear,” I says, wagging my finger at him. “Sit down on that chair.”

“That one? It’s all shaky. And look at this, it’s all dirty. My mother’ll kill me if I get all that sh—stuff on my trousers.”

“Trousers? Can’t you call them pants?”

“Pants means underwear in England.”

“Well, this ain’t merry old England. And don’t worry about your mom, kid. You ain’t about to see her for a few days, anyhow.”

“So, big deal. I didn’t want to be home today, anyway.” He goes to the sink and grabs an old sponge next to it, wets it up and starts washing the chair.

We eat some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch. He likes the way I make them, only he makes me cut the crust off of the bread. He eats two, and says I don’t seem like much of a kidnapper because I use the best jelly, Smucker’s grape, instead of making him eat just bread and water.

“Never mind—I’ll show you kidnapper,” I says. “The only reason you’re gettin’ this is because you ain’t a troublemaker, see? And if you do make trouble, you’ll be eatin’ stale bread crusts and suckin’ canal water.”

“But if I don’t make trouble, how come you want to tie me up with rope?”

“Cause that’s part of being kidnapped. Now just sit down so I can tie you up.” I hear what I’m saying and I realize it’s way off what I planned a dozen times, to just grab the kid and stuff a hand towel in his mouth, and wrap duct tape or rope around and around him while he fights and squirms and kicks.

“How come?” he asks. “For a long time?”

Some kid, a real character. “Well, as long as it takes for cripes sake,” I says. “Don’t worry, it ain’t gonna hurt. Not unless you get wise, you hear?”

“Yeah, but it’s going to get awfully boring.” Then he waits a while and keeps still—just looks at me. Kind of a nice face to look at, he’s missing a tooth at the side and it makes his words slip out kind of lispy when you least expect it. “Well,” he says, “if you have to tie me up, can you do it in front of the television?” Television he calls it, not TV.

“Okay, okay,” I says. He could have been worse, kicking and biting like in the shows. I look at him, still worried in a way. Maybe he’s planning something wise. He seems a lot smarter than I thought a kid would be. He’s giving me the

willies, though. Just kinda keeps looking at me with them big brown eyes, scared a little and yet not so scared. “Well,” I says finally, “what the helly’a lookin’ at?”

He looks down at the floor real quick. Then he don’t look at me anymore.

\* \* \*

It takes ten minutes to get him tied up in front of the TV, he’s so bossy about how I do it. “Not around the stomach too much, don’t go near my neck, don’t make it too tight around the wrists or else the hands go numb,” on and on. And all the time he’s asking how long he’ll have to stay like that, and I says as long as it takes for me to get back from my work. He asks what I do for a job, and I says, “Charity work,” kind of sarcastic, but he don’t take it that way.

Finally, I’m free to go out and work my charity corner. It’s a pretty good cash thing, this is my third year doing it. I have a real fancy Santa Claus outfit, the kind with a wig that covers your whole head, none of that cheapie Santa stuff that shows all your whiskers and hair through it. With that outfit and a beggar pot on the street and ringing my bell, not even a world-class detective would know the difference between me and the real Santa Claus. I never once got asked to show my I. D. card, which I have a fake one of anyhow. Out on the street is a good way to get that old Christmas feeling. “Money for the needy,” I says, ring the bell like crazy, make eighty or a hundred bucks a day. And I’m the needy, I get the money.

I can see a lot going on today. There’s people selling neckties, sweaters, jewelry, all kinds of things. Across the way a few people stop to play some Christmas tunes with horns. Later on the artist girl stops by. She comes around sometimes, sets up her stuff and draws sketches of people. She’s pretty in a funky

kind of way, sorta puts her face close when she talks. She drops a dollar in my beggar pot. “Someday I’m going to draw you,” she says.

I nod, but I’m not paying much attention. I guess I’m still a little numb inside, like I can’t quite believe I kidnapped Gabriel. I don’t know about kid stuff, and I sure don’t want to be hanging around at home. He’ll probably be less scared if he knows I got stuff to do. It’s kinda strange the way he let me tie him up, almost like he thought it was some kind of game or adventure.

What happens next while I’m ringing my bell, some guy looks familiar stops right in front of my beggar pot. He’s staring at me and starts screwing up his face. He says, “I know you—Wagner! Duncan Wagner! I never knew you to play Santa Claus.”

I couldn’t believe my ears, and my eyes weren’t telling me as much as I wanted to know. He tells me, “I can tell it’s you by your laugh and your eyes.”

“Well, damn. You look familiar,” I says, getting fidgety.

“Don’t you remember me, Dick Murphy?”

“Oh man—for cripes sake! From the Towne Diner! Richard F. X. Murphy. Last time I seen you was about ten, twelve years ago. What brings you to Boston, anyhow?”

“A job,” he says, “and a woman, too.” He pats my arm and says he has to get going.

“Well, wait. Do you work around here?”

“Sure, I’ll see you again. We’ll talk,” he says, and pretty soon he disappears among the people.

If it wasn’t old Dick Murphy. I remember that Towne Diner well, and I give out this real big laugh to think of the crazy fun we used to have there—old Nellie teaching me how to cook eggs, and Dick in the background telling me not to scramble them with a hammer like the Three Stooges. I

remember the Daily Special signs Dick used to draw on the chalk board, like Hot Puppies and Beans with the hot dogs drawn on a leash. And the fortieth birthday party we had for Alice the boss, when somebody gave her a bra made from two cabbage leaves, and she wore it over her blouse half the night while everybody laughed till they almost fell over. That ho-ho-ho gets me a lot more dimes and quarters, mostly from kids. They like standing around and listening to a real laugh from a pretty classy looking Santa Claus. Funny, I ain't the least bit fat, but the kids don't care. Guess they know times are tough.

\* \* \*

I get to my door almost forgetting I'm in my Santa Claus suit. It was hard enough to wrestle it on in the first place, because I had to dress in the dark cellar without a mirror for the makeup. But I know there's no way I can let the kid see me dressed like this. It would give him another handle on me that could get me turned in. I lean my ear close to the door and I can hear the TV still on. I hurry back down the stairs all the way to the cellar and take off the costume as quick as I can, roll it up under my arm. I go back up the stairs, wiping the red cheeks and cherry nose with a rumpled tissue.

Real easy, I open the door and sneak in. I look in the den, and what do I see? No kid. He's gone—out of the chair with the ropes left right there. Now I'm so mad I can't see straight. I nearly have myself a heart attack, run in my room and look out the front window to see if the kid is just on his way down the three stories of fire escape. No kid.

I drop my Santa Claus suit on the floor. Then I turn around and suddenly see the kid lying curled up on my bed sound asleep, with his hand all mushed up under his cheek.