

What the Wind Blew Up

by

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“Look what the cat dragged in,” he said to me in his grizzly, drunken voice.

“Look what the wind blew up,” was my standard response.

I rooted through the hidden pockets of my denim jacket to pull out my catch. Sometimes, he’d act surprised and happy with what I snagged. Usually, I disappointed him.

“Is that all, boy?” he bellowed, his stench assaulting my nostrils. “A can of tuna and a loaf of smashed bread?”

I had another prize I wanted to save for when he was really mean, but the wild look in his eyes made me pull it from my pocket now. “And this,” I said in my soft eight-year-old voice. I’d raided an old man’s jacket left in a shopping cart at the food store. The cigar lay gently in my palm as I presented it as a peace offering.

His eyes glazed over as he caressed the brown paper and ran the treat along his nose, inhaling the stink and rubbing it against his stubbly face. “You done good, boy.”

We had survived another day.

I scampered to the kitchen to clear the black mouse spots from the counter and make a place for the bread. Tuna sandwiches were a treat, even if the bread had gotten squished under my jacket.

Stealing was getting easier. I’d visited Gordy’s, Krazy Kyle’s, and Friend Mart at different times throughout the day, believing this would keep my thievery a secret. The only thing I wouldn’t take was the drink that turned him mean.

When I wasn't prowling for food, I visited the places I could walk to from our apartment. I liked the pet store, but the smell sometimes made me sick. The antique store was better, but Mr. Sary told me to leave because he was tired of watching me. I went to all the gas stations. Candy and gum were easy to snatch there.

Sometimes, I slipped into the tall, brick church with the statue of the lady out front. There was something like a tickle in the back of my head whenever I pressed the door open and tread softly on the thick red carpet inside. It smelled like a memory from long ago. When people were there, sitting on the benches, I hid on the floor and slithered through the seats to avoid them.

Some of the people lit candles. Others read books or just sat. I wanted to light a candle, but I didn't know why, so I swiped one. It smelled like a memory too.

One day, when I was flat on my back under the benches smelling my candle, my feet betrayed me. A giant dressed in black yanked on my bottom end and pulled me out so fast I almost wet myself. I struggled to run away from this whopper of a man, but he circled a fat arm around my skinny waist and forced me to stay. I kicked at him, but it was no use. I was busted.

"What're you doin' under there, Little Man?" the giant said.

"You can have it back!" I yelled, still struggling to free myself. I dropped the candle and it fell to the floor with a *thunk*.

"You takin' a candle?" he asked.

Out of all the things I'd made off with, I couldn't believe I'd been caught stealing a candle.

"I'm sorry," was all I could squeak out. Then, I started to cry and couldn't stop. I bawled so loud I thought everybody in the whole neighborhood would come running, but they didn't.

Then the craziest thing happened.

The giant hugged me. He *hugged* me. So, I hugged him back. It felt as good as my memory smelled.

When I stopped bawling, the sniffles attacked me for a while.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Jack,” I said. “What’s yours?”

His bushy eyebrows rose as he chuckled. “I’m Father Henry. It’s nice to meet you, Jack.”

“Are you mad?”

“Mad? About the candle? Nah. We give those away.”

“You do?”

“Yeah,” he said. “And you know what else we give away?”

“What,” I asked, hoping for some tuna or cigars.

“Bibles.” He smiled, showing me a line of sparkling white teeth.

“What’s a Bible?” I asked.

“Show ya.” He led me to a stack of books at the back of the church. “This one’s for you and this one’s for your dad.”

I looked up in surprise. “You know my dad?”

“I do,” he said. “I know everyone in this neighborhood.”

I opened the book—my book. It had colorful pictures of trees and sheep and sky. One glossy page contained a picture of a man in white smiling at the children all around him.

“Who is that man?” I felt like I knew him.

“That’s Jesus.”

“He looks like he likes kids.”

“Oh, He does. He does indeed.”

“Let the children come to me,” I read under the picture. I was a good reader.

“This is your book, Jack, so read it all you want. Give this one to your dad.” He handed me another Bible.

I sat on a bench in the back of the church and read my book just like I’d seen others do-- like I belonged. When I looked up, the giant was gone. He’d been so nice, I thought I’d visit again.

I took my Bibles home. Today, they were all I had to offer.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” he said in his mean voice. The room was full of cigar smoke. The sour smell made my stomach churn.

“Look what the wind blew up,” I said and placed the Bible in front of him.

He snorted and laughed, the glint in his eye full of disbelief and rage, but I wasn’t afraid, because I had a Friend.