

Short Story

A Kind Gesture

by

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The boy stood in the bitter cold with his thumb held at half height around eight o'clock. Stuart had never picked up a hitchhiker. He was sure that most of them were fine, but he had never been prepared to take the risk. He was surprised at how quickly he was willing to drop his presumptions. He felt compelled to cut the kid a break, and so he stopped.

The young man's name was Jesse, and he was twenty years of age. Dressed in denim jeans and a flannel shirt, carrying only a well-worn satchel, he was headed for Milwaukee in the hope that extended family there would take him in. He smelled as if he hadn't washed in a while. Stuart was low on gas, and so he pulled into a gas station to fill the tank.

"When did you eat last?" he asked.

"Yesterday morning," Jesse replied.

"Come eat with me. My treat."

Jesse ordered a burger, fries and a cola, which he devoured in sixty seconds flat.

"You must be starving," Stuart chuckled.

Jesse nodded, his mouth stuffed with food. Stuart took the liberty to order apple pie with ice cream and a milkshake, and these Jesse also finished in record time.

"You'll make yourself sick if you eat that fast!" Stuart exclaimed.

After he had finished Jesse retreated to the restroom. When he didn't return after twenty minutes, Stuart finished his meal and paid the bill, then went to look for his passenger. He found Jesse sitting in a cubicle crying. They talked for a while; Jesse's father had been abusing him for years and his mother didn't care, so he had run away.

"You don't need to spend all night out here," Stuart insisted. "You can stay at my house and I will take you to the bus terminal in the morning. I'll buy you a ticket to wherever you want to go."

When Jesse was feeling better, they returned to Stuart's car. Once home, Stuart rustled up a towel and a bar of soap.

"I think I still have some old clothes somewhere," Stuart offered. "I could find them if you'd like something clean to wear."

Jesse emerged from the bathroom refreshed and smelling much better. Stuart still had some pizza vouchers pinned to his refrigerator, and was sure that Jesse wouldn't object to another feed. Once the pizza arrived, Stuart took some soft drinks from the fridge and he and Jesse ate in front of the television watching Christmas carols. Stuart found himself nodding off around ten o'clock.

"You'll have to excuse me," he said, pushing himself up out of his chair. "I'm exhausted, I'm going to head to bed. Make yourself comfortable in the spare bedroom."

Jesse looked at Stuart.

"Do you like men?" he asked. "Or girls, or both?"

Stuart was taken back.

"Women only, sorry," he stammered.

He smiled dumbfounded by the question. He felt a little strange on his way to his bedroom, and lay awake for some time pondering the awkward encounter. After awhile he heard the television switch off, and the house was silent.

After what he had been through at home Stuart was not surprised that Jesse was a little strange. He kid had been brave to escape. Although vagrancy wasn't much of a life, it was obviously better than the one he'd left behind.

Sunshine streamed in through the bedroom curtains. Stuart opened his eyes, his vision blurry. In his grogginess he was startled by a figure standing in the doorway; it was Jesse, holding a kitchen knife in his hand.

Stuart launched himself up out of the bed, and Jesse tilted the knife upwards. It caught Stuart's arm, drawing blood. He twisted the knife out of Jesse's hand, pushing his head into the wall.

With Jesse dazed, Stuart kicked him against the wardrobe. Jesse lashed out, kicking Stuart in the stomach. Stuart grabbed him and wrestled him to the floor, and overpowering him in seconds. Straddling his body, Stuart plunged the knife into Jesse's chest over and over again until he was still.

Covered in blood, Stuart stood to his feet, leaving Jesse on the floor. He walked out of the bedroom to the kitchen; there on the table, a carton of eggs lay open next to a slab of unsliced bacon. Jesse had set the table for two.

Dragging Jesse's body down along the narrow hallway, Stuart stopped just short of the manhole in the floor. He manoeuvred himself to fit first into the square opening, lugging Jesse in after him.

On hands and knees Stuart dragged Jesse through the dirt to a far corner of the crawlspace. He dug into the ground, and when the hole was deep enough, pushed Jesse's body into the shallow grave. Jesse's face slowly disappeared beneath the dirt, and when it was done, Stuart smoothed out the patch of dirt with the back of his shovel.

He hadn't planned for it to happen this way. He had never intended to take Jesse to the bus station, and Jesse was going to have ended up down here no matter what. But Stuart had not expected the turn of events that had unfolded that morning, for things to get so out of his control. And all Jesse had tried to do was show some gratitude for Stuart's hospitality.

Stuart spotted an odd sneaker that he had overlooked on a previous occasion, and promptly covered it with dirt. The stench coming from beneath the house was generating complaints from the neighbours, and the maggots had even started coming up through the plumbing. He was running out of room in the crawlspace, and decided it was probably time to have that concrete slab laid.

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