

## The Good Deed Larry Starzec

On a Tuesday afternoon in early October I went down to the College cafeteria to buy a cup of coffee. I often times will fire myself up for my afternoon class with a bit of caffeine laced with a third of a cup of hot chocolate. For 59 cents, I call it "The Poor Man's Mocha." There was still an hour left before "Showtime," and I intended to spend the pre-class hour sipping my hot beverage, listening to classical music and checking e-mail. I made my purchase and started out of double doors that led to the wide hallway of the college basement that leads to the stairwell that would take me to the comfort of my office.

Partially blocking my path just outside the doors was a cart on which was piled garbage bags filled with the leavings and trash from the cafeteria bins. A white clad, white capped, worker heaved the last of the bags to the top of the pile. He would then, I supposed, pull the cart to the service entrance and throw the bags into the big dumpsters there. His dark and disheveled hair sprung out from the rim of his paper cap in a style reminiscent of the Scarecrow's locks in the Wizard of Oz. I'm talking the Ray Bolger version - stiff stringy clumps of hair slanting down from the crisp starched hat. The man wore thick glasses and had a flat face and widely spaced eyes. He moved with a slow and deliberate gait. He struggled with the weight of his last bag but finally in a hammer-throw move managed to fling the bag up to the top perch. The shifting weight, and the momentum of his heave had the oversized hefty heading nicely toward its goal. I stood off to the side, waiting for him to finish, a witness.

What happened next appears now in memory to have transpired in slow motion, though I know it is not how it unfolded at the time. Unfolded, is an appropriate word, for when the bag had reached the apex of its journey upward, the plastic tie that squeezed the top shut broke and the bag opened, spewing garbage

over the far side of the cart. The bag hung at the top of the pile, its mouth open like a dragon that had just puked its guts out, the oversized balloon now as flaccid. On the floor, paper plates still bleeding ketchup, chicken bones, paper cups, plastic bottles, crushed napkins, the guts of that Piñata of trash lay strewn over a good ten square feet of previously polished tile squares. And from my side of the cart, the worker's shoulders dropped in depressed resignation giving his body an even more doughy appearance, as he muttered, "shit."

I stepped around him and made my way to the stairwell.

I hadn't gotten very far when the thought occurred to me, or rather that gnawing question, "Why didn't you help?" There was still an hour to go before class. I could have set my coffee aside and picked up some of the less liquefied refuse. I could have helped the man push the cart aside or even kicked some of the trash in a pile while he went for a broom and a mop. But I didn't. And even as I walked to my office I knew I could have turned around and returned to him - a fellow human being in a time of need - and asked, "Is there anything I can do?" But I didn't do that either. I went on with my day and bore my guilt, that old Biblical quote bobbing to the surface of my conscious stricken mind, "That which you do for the least of your brethren, that you do unto me." As far as showing compassion and kindness, I had blown it. Not only blown it, but intentionally, consciously blown it.

Later that night I resolved not to do so again. That the next opportunity for doing unto my neighbor, etcetera, I would act on. That opportunity came the following Sunday.

First - some background information:

When the College of Lake County started in 1969 an outgrowth of the first creative writing class was a group of middle-aged students who started a Literary Arts Club, they named themselves in keeping with the late sixties psychedelic funk phraseology, The Glass Dictionary. When I say middle aged I mean anywhere from forties into middle fifties. There were about ten to a dozen original members. Over the years they sponsored readings, anthologies, book sales and every year a celebration of Shakespeare's Birthday. The officers and founders of the club kept getting older while the influx of new students kept getting younger. Over the years the club has sustained through the relatively good health of its membership, but has failed to gain new members. It seems that the young and the old just don't mix well. Today only four of the original members remain in what is the College's oldest continuous Student sponsored Club. It is the oldest both in its history that now spans some thirty-nine years, but also in the average age of its four remaining members which is somewhere in the early eighties, the youngest member having just past her seventy-fifth birthday, the oldest now past ninety. Imagine these four females dressed in their Elizabethan garb serving birthday cake and warbling out some of the great Bard's sonnets to a near empty room every April. Imagine them having their quarterly open-mike readings, those personal poems chronicling cataract surgery, hip replacement, the passing of original, secondary and in one case tertiary spouses. They are still an active bunch. There's Betty Sanduski, Ann Abrams, Susan Kline and Heddy Raflowitz. I know their names because for one year at the beginning of my full-time teaching I served as the club's faculty sponsor -- a responsibility that Heddy informed me would not be too intrusive. "We know how to run things, you just have sign off on our requisitions that go to Student Activities for flyers, room reservations for events, and funding for Shakespeare's Birthday cake" - a full-size sheet cake with butter cream frosting, decorated with a brown gel picture of the Globe Theater. That kind of involvement was right up my alley, the result being I could list it on my annual report of community service which all non-tenured faculty are required to submit. I learned that

even that minimalistic role was too much. For a year I was battered with invitations to attend their meetings, readings, sales, and celebrations. The few I went to were good natured and well intended interminable affairs. And when the College hired a new English instructor the next year I gladly handed over the reins so that he could enjoy all the rights, honors and benefits attached thereto. I should add that because all the members of the club were old enough to be my parent, if not a grandparent, they treated me (though I was forty-seven at the time) as if I were a child, and not a very bright one. I was constantly reprimanded for not submitting the right paperwork, to the right person, at the right time. When I judged the five essays for their scholarship competition they corrected my selections. I'd tried to judge them on the merits of the writing, when they informed me I should have been looking at the potential of the submissions as possible "new blood" for the club. Indeed one of the requirements of the scholarship recipients was that they attend at least 2 of the Club's meetings. A requirement I felt left the recipient reeling with "What did I get myself into? And "I've more than earned this money." Of the thirty or so recipients of the scholarship over the years not one attended more than the two required meetings.

The big fund raising event for the scholarship money is the Literary Arts Club's annual book sale. For that weeklong festival they take over the College's courtyard space in the B wing. They coerce and threaten building maintenance to set up tables and then they attempt to get volunteers to help with set-up the Sunday before the sale. Few people show up to help. Few volunteers want to hear, "You're not doing it right, non-fiction goes over on that table." Fewer people want to open up boxes of books that have been sitting in Betty's barn for the better part of a year. For those packages carry the possibility of mold, the kind you can see growing in green-black bruises, and bad smells - musty basement odors, bad apples, rotten celery. And some boxes bear the droppings of mice, those books turned to literary dust and packing-crate-shreds by the critters who'd chewed the pulp.

Back to my story.

I remembered on Sunday morning that I needed a handout for my Monday class, one that was some eleven pages long, -- an essay assignment with an attachment of two sample papers. I'd forgotten to send it to the copy center and so decided to go in late in the morning on the Lord's Day to run the copies myself. This, in itself, was a selfless gesture, for I would not be tying up one of the copiers on Monday, thus allowing other faculty and staff more convenience.

I parked in lot C and entered through the North entrance, walked briskly down the hall and turned right and then through the short angled halls to the Performing Arts Wing, where my office is located. A glance to the right as I hit full stride toward the back entrance gave me notice that the tables were there for the annual Literary Arts Club book sale and the geriatric officers just then arriving, thermoses of coffee, bags of donuts, purses the size of shopping bags being brought to the courtyard. I stealthily made it to my office, located the papers and my copy card and found a handy photocopier. The copying went without a hitch except that something began to gnaw at my conscience. I recalled the broken garbage bag, the promise to do the good deed the next time an opportunity arose. Added to the mix was that this was a "bye" week for the Chicago Bears, and so the team's need for the positive silent energy I transfer wasn't there. I had no particular place to be or to go, the afternoon, though delightfully sunny held no immediate responsibilities. I had let the dog out when I departed home. I could spare an hour. It was put up or shut up.

And so, having finished my mission I went down to the book sale area, found Betty, and said, "How can I help?"

"Oh my, are you sure can spare the time?"

I reluctantly nodded.

It seemed that their volunteer male worker had not shown up and I was directed to a truck out at the side entrance. From the truck I unloaded some sixty or seventy boxes of books, put them on a cart and wheeled them a half dozen at a time into the courtyard. I was stopped once by a security guard. It seems that the cart the "girls" had given me was one from the Social Science Division and was not to leave the interior premises of the College. I fumbled my apologies and explanation and directed the guard to the elderly ladies inside. He went into to confront them. I could see through the glass doors Betty and Ann speaking to him, I could see him shaking his head, I could see them shaking their fingers, and I knew he was getting more than he bargain for. A few minutes later he came back out and said, "Keep the frigid' cart as long as you want. You're a saint, buddy." Then he disappeared, no doubt to get as far away from the courtyard as possible.

My intention was to give the ladies an hour of my time but when I finally dropped the last load inside I learned that the rest of the help had not shown, so there was Heddy all ninety years of her barely able to sit without tilting to the side, thumbing through a travel book on Ireland trying to decide whether it should go on the "Special Interest" table, or "Nonfiction." The other "girls" were opening boxes and sorting through paperbacks in slow motion and the thought occurred to me that "This was going to take forever."

I volunteered to stay a bit longer, though I feared the 911 call when Heddy finally keeled over. My offer was greedily accepted, and I'd hoped that my next idea -- to just dump the boxes open and let the students cull through the piles, would be as enthusiastically accepted. It wasn't. That's not the way it had ever been done. "No, No, No." Each book has to be sorted and placed properly. The task loomed

before me as if they'd asked me to spin the room full of straw into gold. It was mythological in proportion and I calculated by our ages that I might be the only one to survive the time needed to finish the task, and by then I would be a crippled old man, my back already hurting from the weightlifting session at the truck.

I was humbled and humiliated. I moved as quickly as I could but was often caught and corrected, sent back to retrieve a volume that I had put on the wrong table. Logic told me that *To Kill A Mockingbird* was fiction, but Susan pointed out that there was a special table for classics. I breathed many a heavy sigh in the ensuing hours.

Well into the afternoon Ann came over to me. "Can you do me a favor?" she asked. It was the first pleasant request and I responded, "Sure, what do you need?"

With that Ann put her hands on the table, leaned forward, bent over and stuck her ample, polyester covered ass out and jabbed her thumb just over her right buttock. "Hit me here," she said.

"What? Excuse me, But."

"My husband used to do this when I'd get these cricks. But he's been gone now nine years."

She remained in the position of a patient waiting a prostate examine.

I hemmed and hawed, muttered something about it not being a good idea for a faculty member to be striking one of the general public.

"Hit me," she said.

I timidly brought my hand forward, made the knife edge for the karate chop blow I'd seen the masseuse use on television and delicately made a quick, soft blow. I felt like a character in a Woody Allen movie. No, that's not totally accurate. I felt like the

character Woody Allen plays in a Woody Allen movie, the schmuck who somehow finds himself in embarrassingly awkward situations and who ultimately has to accept the existential premise that life is indeed absurd, at least his life is, and there's not a damn thing he can do about it.

"No, No," Ann scolded. "Harder. Give me a good rap. With your fist."

I could picture myself breaking her vertebrae, her carted off to the hospital, the lawsuit to follow and my feeble testimony in court, "She asked me to do it."

I balled my fist up and hit her a solid blow. For an uncompressed planet of a woman she was pretty solid.

"Again," she said. "Harder! Harder!"

After four more blows she straightened up, claimed to be cured and resumed her sorting of romance novels. I ran to the bathroom and washed my hands in some sort of Pontius Pilate like gesture. I carefully avoided looking into the mirror. I did not want to see, face or observe myself, afraid that what I'd see there would be the crew cut nine year old who'd just broken one of the garage windows with an errant "air ball" jump shot.

When I returned to the book sale I tore through boxes with focused purpose. I wanted this project done and at 5 PM the last of the crates empty, the tables in order, and me saying goodbye as I raced to my car. My one hour volunteerism had become five. My own back ached but I would not ask to be struck, not there, not then. I wanted a hot shower, a soft chair and the comforting companionship of my dog.

And these gifts I received

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On Monday I ran into the Literary Arts Club advisor. I asked him why he hadn't come to help on Sunday. He said something about relatives from out of town and then asked me how I'd gotten roped into helping.

"Because a garbage bag broke open in the cafeteria," I said.