

Baker's Man

by
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This story was originally written in October, 2005 with the assistance of Bill Cusano of Rye, NY. I served with Bill on a Tres Dias Men's Weekend team.

It was inspired (in the truest sense of the word) by a brief meditation that I presented related to the following scriptural verse: Philippians 4:8 "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things." The single word "admirable" was the focus of my meditation as I spoke of how I admired John and the love and devotion that he showed to his wife.

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Excitement filled the air throughout Taft Grammar School. It was the last day of school before summer break. I really enjoyed going to school, even looked forward to every day, but what twelve year old kid wouldn't be excited about summer. When I returned in September it would be my final year at Taft Grammar. I would be entering the eighth grade! But now I had an entire summer to look forward to. What could I do for the next two months?

Suddenly, I remembered the previous summer. That was the year my friend Jim was hit by a car. I heard the screech of tires and saw Jim rolling on the ground in front of the car. Jim broke his leg; fortunately that was all he broke. But it meant no wiffle ball games for him all summer. It slowed us down a bit, but we still found ways to have fun together.

And of course summer meant family vacations. After all, isn't that what summer is for? But our family never took a vacation together. I just thought we were too poor. There were four kids living at home at this time. Our oldest sister, Pat, had just been married. But even with the smaller family size we just didn't seem to have enough to get by. We never went on a family vacation.

Then I remembered what happened last year when Dad had his vacation from work. My brother and I learned that we were expected to work around the house, washing windows and washing walls. I wasn't going to let that happen again. My brother and I figured out last year that if we woke up early enough and got out of the house before Dad woke up,

we wouldn't get any assignments. We conveniently made it home just in time for dinner.

So what did this summer have in store for me?

I found myself hanging out at the corner grocery store. Bob, the owner, would let me bag the groceries, help carry the bags for customers, and sweep the store. But he couldn't give me a real job - I was too young. Bob told me I'd have to wait until I was older and, true to his word, as soon as I turned sixteen I had a real job at Bob's Market.

One day, while I was hanging around the store, Bob asked me if I would be interested in helping out one of his friends. John, the bread man who delivered Italian bread to the store, had hurt his back. He told Bob that climbing in and out of the truck all day was really painful and he wondered if there was someone who could help for a few weeks, maybe until the end of summer.

I was thrilled! I would have a real job every day. I rushed home to tell my mom the good news, and of course to ask permission. She said, "I suppose that's all right. It sounds like a good job."

The next day I met John and he explained the job and the hours. He would pick me up at my house at 3:00 a.m. each day except Wednesday and Sunday. Three o'clock in the morning! But of course; when did I think bakers worked. Everyone wanted their fresh baked bread early in the morning, so of course we had to be off to work at that time. When I got home that day I told Mom and Dad that I had to be up at 3:00 a.m. "And how do you expect to do that, young man?" my father bellowed. "You ain't setting

no alarm for three a.m. in this house!”

I probably didn't sleep at all that night; for fear that I would miss my appointment with John. But somehow, at 3:00 a.m., I was awake and ready to go. I was about to start my summer job with John.

As I climbed into the passenger seat of the panel truck I was surrounded by the sweet aroma of fresh baked bread that just filled the truck. Even today, some forty years later, the smell of fresh baked bread brings me back to the days on the truck with John. He stretched out his hand and slapped mine as I hopped aboard, grinning with a broad smile without saying a word, until we were well on our way down the road. I still couldn't believe he picked me to help him. I was always the last one picked for anything in school, and here I was working a real job.

Even though times were good, according to Uncle Harry and Aunt Sarah who lived down in New York, I knew we needed money. I was too young to have to know so much about money. Mom knew I liked math, so she always asked me to help with the adding machine Aunt Sarah loaned her for her part-time work as a bookkeeper for a local restaurant. She knew I enjoyed working with the adding machine. She used to tell me I was smart enough to be Secretary of the Treasury, though she didn't like President Kennedy. She had been for Ike while he was president. She didn't trust Joe's boy, as she called him. I didn't really care for such things, though I thought everyone liked John Fitzgerald Kennedy. He made my name important. But here I was with a job; my first real job at twelve years old and I was earning twenty-five cents per hour. Having my own money, even after contributing to Mom's cookie jar each week, made me feel rich. Just the thought of all the things I could buy made me really happy. There was a telescope at Sam's Hardware store on East Main Street that I had my eye on. I was already dreaming that someday that would be mine.

“So, Sport, what do you say we get the show on the road?” John leaned into the large steering wheel as if it was too big for him to handle and pushed his foot down on one of the pedals before pulling the stick that bent down into the floor. The truck moaned and something ground a bit before we leaped

forward.

“This job is all I need, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Stop with the formalities, or we'll never get along. You need to call me John, like a real partner would.”

“Partner?” I watched him as the amber glow from the truck's instrument panel bathed his blond beard. He looked younger than my father, but I knew he was already in his thirties, maybe almost forty, an old man in comparison. He didn't seem as old as Dad, and he smelled like flour and the bread in the back of the truck, a strange combination, not like beer and motor oil. His was a deep, raspy voice, like an old radio.

“Well, you are my partner, now. We will do all right together. You wait and see. You're gonna be a big help to me.”

Instantly, I knew this was a good man whom I could trust. I told him of my father's reaction to my wanting to set the alarm to be sure to get up.

“Johnny, tomorrow I'll drive through the complex and tap the horn once. That way you won't have to worry about your alarm. I'll make a few deliveries and come back for you after fifteen minutes. What do you say to that?”

“Gee, that would be great!” My biggest fear ended in a flash. I could sleep without worrying about it. “You really are so...”

I caught myself and dropped my head.

“So, what, Johnny?”

“I don't know. Just so, that's all.”

“Well, you're just so, yourself.”

The headlights shone on Gemma's Market, a few blocks east of our apartment building. In all of Bridgeport, this was the place to get the best ice cream on a summer day, but not today, not at this time of the morning, when even the sun was still asleep. “Now, I need you to take two large bags of hard rolls and I'll take the boxes of mixed loaves to the back door. Daniel will meet us there. He's always the first one in.”

John stepped down to the street, leaving his door

open and I met him at the back of the truck. He took two of the boxes on his shoulders and left the bags for me. They were so big; I must have looked like a pair of baked potatoes with feet. At the back, a short boy older than I, but with hair all flat and cut around the sides like a bowl was used as a guide, opened the door for us. His arms were long and thin, but his jeans were baggy and too long for his legs. He had an apron on and a name badge that said Danny Frees, as if it was a sentence all its own. "Hi," I said.

"You took on a helper?" He spoke to John as though I wasn't there. I almost thought he was disappointed that he wasn't doing my job. "Danny."

"Johnny." I extended my hand, but he reached for the bag of rolls instead.

"You don't want to get them wet. Never put the bag down. We can't sell what gets wet. John, where did you get this kid?"

I didn't like him.

"Now, Danny. Take it easy. He was just being friendly." John brushed past with the boxes stacked on his shoulder. I followed him inside and we placed our delivery on the counter. "That's it. See you tomorrow."

It was a little different each day, depending on the ratio of hard rolls, Italian bread, grinder rolls and the occasional cinnamon buns, rye bread, wheat and pumpernickel loaves. And there was a different route to take each day of the week. Before long, John started quizzing me as to what the next customer would be getting for a delivery. I would reach into the back of the truck and grab one large round and one long Italian bread. It became a game for me as John tested me. If I was wrong, he was never angry; he'd just correct me and I'd go on to the next customer. I think he enjoyed the game as much as I did. Pretty soon he started asking me which way to turn and onto what street to get to the next customer. I thought that maybe someday he'd let me drive the truck! I had lived on the East side of Bridgeport and had walked many of the streets, so they were pretty familiar. But when we drove up to the North end and the Hollow section, these were all new to me. I felt like an explorer finding new territories. Even today I can recall many of the

streets, houses and businesses that we served.

One day, about five weeks after I began working with John, I could sense that something about this day was different. After each stop, I noticed that John checked his watch. His face curled upon itself with each hour's passing. At seven-thirty we pulled up to the curb of a little green house with white shutters not too far from The Post Road. The sun had started to warm the air and birds were gathered on the lawn pecking at the damp ground for their breakfast of earth worms. I could tell this wasn't a delivery stop by the brightness in John's eyes and the smile on his face. This was something special.

"Come. I'll make you some breakfast. There's someone I want you to meet." He trudged on ahead, his hips swaying slightly as he walked, as though an injury of some kind caused him constant pain. He reminded me of my grandpa. Grandpa had suffered from polio as a boy and walked like that. He died when I was little, but I still remembered his walk.

We had never been to this house before; this was not one of our regular customers. Without him telling me, I knew this was John's house, and I knew that I was about to meet his wife. I didn't know much about her, but I knew from the way John talked of her, right from the first day that he and I met, that she was very special and that he loved her very much.

John held the door and waved me through. A dark-skinned woman with black eyes greeted us.

"She's been waitin' for you. I brought her out to the kitchen and set her in a chair. The pain's been mighty fierce today. Who's your friend?"

"Lucy, this is my partner, Johnny T. He's a hard worker."

"Johnny T, the Baker's Man. Can you bake me a cake as fast as you can?" She laughed and her belly jiggled beneath her wide skirt. "I'll be going, now."

She grabbed a large canvas bag from its spot near the door and headed out into the sunlight. "See you on Thursday." I learned later that Lucy was a companion for Rose while John worked. On this day she was leaving for a few days to attend a wedding for her niece in New York City.

I didn't know what to expect as I followed John through the living room into the kitchen at the back of the house. The rooms seemed so big to me back then. Over time they would become more confining, but that first day, it was as if the sun found its way onto each piece of furniture and made it sparkle. This was a real home, with a fireplace, a piano along one wall, a long comfortable sofa with cotton slip covers that touched the floor, and a big window that framed a back yard of flowers and trees, and something else I had not felt before. There, with a wrinkled smile and orange-red hair sat the love of John's life, a skinny, frail woman with shaky hands and bony legs that could no longer carry her weight, but a full, beautiful face that could have been added to the wrong body. She touched my hand and pulled it gently to her lap as I approached.

"God Bless you."

A tear popped out of one eye and she fumbled with a napkin to catch it. I gave her a kiss on her cheek, not knowing what else to do, and sat across from her on the built-in bench beside the window. A squirrel was munching on something on the brick patio and I remember watching him as the smell of pancakes filled the room. My stomach growled and John's wife giggled like a girl. Her name was Rose, a name I had never heard before, and she spoke with a slight dip at the end of each sentence, as though her words were preparing to take a short nap. Some letters rolled around in her mouth before coming out, like 'r' and 'a'. Her eyes gave just a hint of blue and she had three freckles on her forehead that looked like the stars of the big dipper.

"Thank you for visiting me, Johnny. That's a nice name." She giggled and looked over at John making the pancakes. He was whistling a tune I didn't know. Much later I would learn that it was a hymn. Whenever I heard it, I would think of him. But back then, I didn't pay much attention to the hymns we sang in church, not having been one to want to sing in public. I never wanted anyone to hear me. Dad used to say I sounded like a cat in heat when I opened my mouth. As John hummed, Rose rocked in her chair. She occasionally made a sound or two, as if she was holding the song by its tail preventing it from flying out of her mouth. I felt the sun warm the side of my face and I knew it was

going to be a hot one.

As the days passed, our daily routine rarely wavered. But on very special occasions we would have either breakfast or lunch with Rose, and John never faltered in his duties to her and to his job. He seemed to do everything with a song in his head and would often just burst into song. "You should sing," he said to me as he took hold of the wheel. "It's good for your soul."

"I don't have a good singing voice."

"Nonsense. God gave everyone a voice and the need to carry a tune. It don't matter to him how it sounds."

He had a way about him that made you think twice about what he was thinking. I never thought about what goes on inside other people's heads before, but John was special. He had a glow in his eyes that seemed to come from someplace deep inside, like he was always smiling in there, regardless of the number of times we had to stop back at his house to drop off medicine, or fix lunch, or meet the doctor. And Rose adored him. I realize now that I grew jealous of the way she looked at him, as foolish as that sounds. I was only twelve and thirsty for every morsel of attention and interest he would throw my way. When he was around her, though, I was a guest, an observer, not the partner on the truck, or the buddy sitting beside him on the park bench sucking the last of my black and white through the straw. While we were in his home, she was his whole world. It was so different from my home. Dad and Mom were like the tigers in the zoo, circling the cage from opposite ends, eyeing each other with contempt, waiting for the other to make the first move. On those days when the route was particularly long and the load was heavy, I would look forward to the park bench, where John and I would feed the pigeons a leftover roll and relax before heading home. It was at those times that he told me things.

"We met in school. I was no older than you, and she was the brilliant red sun in the front of the room. I let my book strap fall loose once, sending my books and papers flowing to her feet. She bent down to help and we hit heads so hard I fell down. The whole class roared. From that moment on I was teased like it was nobody's business. She never laughed though.

I guess it must have hurt, but she just smiled and helped me gather my things. Her eyes were like blue ice, the kind you see in Alaska. Have you ever been to Alaska, Johnny? Merchant Marines. After Korea. That's where the hip failed me. Couldn't make a career out of it, but I manage. Lord knows it all comes out in the end."

He sipped his iced coffee with orange juice and looked toward the sun. The day ended for us just after three, usually this way, with him staring at the sun and me slurping my black and white. It didn't seem like a long day, but when I got home Dad was already home from work.

He grumbled, newspaper in hand and made his way to the tattered chair by the window. The ball game could be heard from the transistor radio propped up on the sill, its antenna bent, pointing upward against the screen. Sounds of children playing in the playground across the courtyard could be heard over the announcer and the organist at Yankee Stadium. Once fixed on the game, Dad was in another world. With bottle sweat pooling on the sill as he gulped his Rheingold, he unfolded the newspaper in his lap and prepared to leave us behind.

"Don't bother your father, John. He's had a hard day." Without so much as a glance at him or me, Mom went about her business of preparing dinner. Despite the heat, I shut the door to my room and sat cross-legged on the bed with my Batman double issue. Soon, I thought, I'd be able to buy all sorts of comics and maybe even that telescope. From my window I could see the curved path where John drove the truck each morning. That spot between the treetops was where he would toot the horn twice at three-thirty. It was just like the batcave. I would wait for the call and then hurry down to my waiting batmobile, the white panel truck.

John and I both developed very dark tans that summer, and I swear the muscles in my arms grew stronger, even though the boxes and bags weren't very heavy and the work wasn't too hard. I knew I was growing in other ways, too.

"John?" I interrupted his humming one morning as we climbed back in the truck after the Gemma delivery. "Are you happy?"

He placed the key in the ignition, but didn't turn it. With a scrunched up mouth and a tug on his beard, he turned toward me in his seat. "Hmmm! That's an interesting question from you, young man. I think maybe you wouldn't ask it unless you feel some weight upon you. Look." He pointed with slightly crooked fingers at the sky. A violet-orange glow caught the edges of a swirl of thin clouds in the eastern sky, forming one thick and one thin stripe above the trees and buildings. The sky above was still black, though not as black as it had been just a few minutes earlier. For several minutes I waited while John nodded his head.

"That is pure joy. Every morning, I get to see the rising of the sun, with its endless palate of color breaking through the darkness. Each time it is different from the time before. When there are no clouds, the light fills up the horizon like water in a bowl and then spills over into the sky, seemingly all at once. On days like today, with a few strands of angel hair clouds draped here and there, the colors are deep and rich, like honey. I could honestly say, Johnny, that nothing makes me happier than being here with you right now."

I expected to hear him tell me something about his wife. Perhaps, he would explain how difficult it was to take care of her and how he wished they had children. Maybe he would say that his dream in life was to sail the ocean and too many disappointments had piled up along the way. I really didn't know what he would say, but I expected it to be sad and woeful, something that would take the sting out of going home and sitting on my bed staring out the window, with silence growing thick like moss between my parents. His answer, though, was nothing like that. When he finished, I felt like someone had sucked the breath out of my lungs and left me empty, only to refill my skin with a strange new joy. His eyes twinkled and he started humming that tune again as he grabbed the wheel.

"You should sing, Johnny Boy. I'd bet you'd make a good singer. You go to church, don't you? What do they sing in your church?"

"I don't sing."

"Nonsense. You have a solid chest and you can be quite loud when you want to be. I know you can

carry a tune. It's in your blood. The Irish are singers. You are Irish like my Rose, aren't you?"

"My Mom is. She sings in church. Dad doesn't go anymore." I felt strange, as though his prying was going to uncover something that he wouldn't like and he would cancel our partnership. It was the first and only time I had the feeling he would do something like that. It was a moment of insecurity that came from somewhere dark and scary. "I never want to sing."

"Oh, don't say that. Singing is the way we praise God. He likes to hear us sing, and laugh. Do you know that God laughs? I've heard him laughing."

"You have?"

"Yup. He loves a good story and a good joke. Sometimes, when I have done something I shouldn't have, I think, 'What would God say about that?' And then I realize, he would laugh. It wouldn't be all that important to him that I made a mistake, only that I was worried about how it would hurt him."

"You think that's true?" He reached to stroke his beard and the truck bounced suddenly, causing him to slap his cheek. For an instant, he looked startled, and then he let out a loud roar that caught me by surprise. His mouth hung open as he caught his breath and I joined him in a giggle that burst into a belly-aching whelp. As we bounced along the route, we must have looked totally mad as our faces blossomed in red and tears streamed down our faces. God must have truly been laughing right along with us.

By the time we arrived at his home for breakfast, John's arm was on my shoulder and we both beamed with smiles. Lucy met us at the door with wrung hands and worry in her eyes.

"What is it?" John pushed the door open and took her by the shoulders leaving me between them staring up at grim faces.

"She had a spell. She's on the sofa. Doc Adams is on his way." Lucy's hands were damp and her hips seemed to sway beneath her big skirt.

"Johnny, could you wait outside and let me know when you see the doctor coming?"

I wasn't about to argue. The all-too-familiar

smell of sickness choked me and told me not to enter. I stepped back so I could see through to the sofa in the living room. It was best that I didn't go in there. The room was dark, reminding me of all the times I had come home to find Mom cleaning up and Dad taken to his bed. I sat on the stoop and let the sun wry the pale dampness from my face. After a while a strangely small silver car pulled up in front of the house. It was one of those foreign ones Dad swore he would never work on. When he got enough money, he was going to buy a brand new Chevy and get rid of the Rambler he kept barely alive with constant repair work. He had told me that he would teach me to drive when I got old enough, but I knew that was a lie.

I pushed the screen open and shouted for John. Doc Adams was a small dark skinned man with a round face and very little hair. He wore a blue striped suit like a minister, but carried a leather satchel as if it was a bowling bag, swinging it front and back. Its sheer momentum could have propelled him forward with each step. He approached wiping his brow of sweat and then offered his hand to me as I held the door. "Hello there, Young Lad. Who might you be?"

I rejected his handshake and stepped aside. "I'm Johnny T."

"Hmmm." He sized me up as though I was one of the hooky-playing high-schoolers Mom always warned me about. I watched him walk in and let the screen door slam behind him. I sat on the stoop and waited.

After a while, I heard noises, like someone heavy walking across the floor and realized Lucy was getting ready to leave. I assumed that meant everything was going to be all right. She patted me on the head and stepped down before me so she could turn and look me in the eyes. "I'll take you home. We can walk to the bus."

"No." I turned hoping to see John standing there, but the doorway was empty. "I'll wait here until John comes out. We have deliveries to make."

She smiled and patted my head. "You're a good boy. It will be easier if you go home. John can come by later on and pick you up."

“But we always have breakfast and then finish our runs. Who will deliver the bread?” I made my way to the door and pulled open the screen. “I’ll ask John.”

The floorboards creaked loud enough for me to hear them over the thumping of my heart. The sunlight painted patterns across them and up onto the flower print walls as I made my way through the kitchen to the back hall. John’s back filled the doorway and I could hear him humming. I tugged at his shirt and he stopped. As he turned toward me, I could see Doc Adams’ suit jacket draped over a chair. I wanted to say something, but no words made their way up from my throat. John winked at me and put his hand on my shoulder. I could see her lying in the bed with her hair draped across the pillow. Her face was like paper, matching the white shirt of Doc Adams’ back as he listened to her chest through his stethoscope. Her eyes were fixed on John, and they moved just ever so slightly to let me know she was still alive. It was then that I heard John choke. His hand shook on my shoulder and I could tell he was scared. Her eyes waited while he struggled to form the sounds that always soothed her. I felt his grip tighten on my neck and without warning or intent I began to hum the song I had learned from John’s daily routine. I could hear nothing else but my own muffled voice growing louder and louder until Rose’s eyes shifted toward me and glistened with fresh dew. With a gentle tug on my collar, followed by a pat on my head, John cleared his throat and joined in.

We never did finish our deliveries that day. John finally called the bakery and they sent someone for the truck. I stayed with him until dinner time when

he put me on the bus and waved good-bye. We had breakfast there each morning in Rose’s room, with her sitting up in bed like a princess. John brushed her hair and hummed her special hymn each morning and again each day at lunchtime. During the school year I only saw them on weekends when John and I would make what we called the church runs, delivering rolls and cakes for coffee hour. We never did say good-bye. Instead, the visits just started thinning out, until I wouldn’t see him for weeks at a time. Then, as the years passed and I went off to college, I would forget to write or stop by when I came home. After Dad passed, Mom went to live with Aunt Sarah and Uncle Harry and by then I was on my own. Several times over the years I drove out to Bridgeport and took a detour to the west side where the old house used to stand. It’s no more than an empty lot now, forgotten by all but me. I don’t know what happened to John and Rose. I had heard from one of my high school teachers that John had taught music and led the school band before his wife got sick. The job at the bakery had given him the freedom to spend his time with her, and I believe that it was what made him happy, that and the sunrise streaking a palette of color across the sky. I’ve joined the choir in my church and my wife Susan and I spend our weekday evenings practicing hymns. I’m particularly fond of one, though I never did learn the words to it. Many people tell me they think they’ve heard it before, but they just can’t place it. I just smile and think of John. He probably hummed it to them at some point during his deliveries and they didn’t even realize it had burrowed its way into their hearts. Well, I’ve got to go. I’m teaching my granddaughter how to bake bread. She has a lovely voice, too.