

Cherry Pie

Wendell Mayo

The cashier at Winky's Cafe set my slice of cherry pie on the green tray of two boys in line behind me. I didn't say anything about the mistake. One boy was around twelve, the other six or so. Brothers, I guessed. I'd seen them counting nickels, dimes, pennies before getting in line, to see if they had enough to pay, and when they paid, the red mound of crust and glittering sugar crystals mysteriously appeared on their tray. My slice of pie. Expensive pie. Pie for which I'd waited all day. The boys' eyes went wide. The little one nudged the big one with his forearm.

"Look at that," I heard him whisper.

"Shut up," the big one said.

The little one's mouth turned down, then his eyes, first to the time-worn image of a trombone on his tee shirt and words, "Glenn Miller Orchestra," then his pair of ratty gray Nikes. The big one had identically ravaged Nikes, jeans so taut and short they fully exposed his gray soiled socks. A large Salem Cigarettes tee hung to his knees. He kept taking a bolt of the Salem tee and nervously stuffing it in then pulling it out the waistband of his jeans. I recalled his tee had come free with a carton of Salems over twenty years before, times you could wear a shirt like that and not look ridiculous. Both tees made the boys look older.

Part of me hoped the two boys would get away with that illicit piece of pie, I suppose the same part of me that wanted to get away with being at Winky's in the first place. My wife had forbidden me to patronize the parlor of bad-for-you, steeping-in-a-filthy-metal-pan-for-hours food.

The cashier set my Philadelphia steak sandwich on my tray. She turned a little back to the kitchen, swung forward to face me again, then lifted the cherry pie off the boys' tray, their eyes all the while following the pie's trajectory, and expertly landed it on my tray.

I went to the self-service soda fountain, dropped a few machine cubes into my cup, pressed the cup against the fountain switch, and waited while the gush of dark liquid filled it, blinking from the glare of overhead fluorescents off the white tiles of Winky's. I closed my eyes and the

gushing sound of soda gave over to a kind of ringing in my ears. When I opened my eyes, light seemed even stronger than before, so I focused on watching the two boys back in line, two miniscule, unadorned pale-gray burgers on their green tray. When the fountain gushing ended, just as the boys were turning away from the line to find a table, I went up to them. I say I went up to them not because I'd thought about it first; I swear I went mesmerized by the flow of dark liquid, the bright light, the ringing, the horrific sight of their blanched burgers.

"That piece of pie," I said to the big one and reached for my wallet; his eyes shot wide, something at the moment I took for surprise. "I'll buy you one."

When the little one smiled, eager-eyed, I felt justified in breaking my promise to my wife about not going to Winky's. I was meant to go to Winky's, meant to meet these boys and offer them a piece of pie. One generation in communion with another. A helping hand. All that. Winky's had the best cherry pie in town.

But the big one's mouth trembled, eyes narrowed.

"No, mister," he said, turned, and hustled the little one to a table the far side of the restaurant.

My wallet went back into my pants, a first reaction to the big one's display of primal fear.

I sat, my side of Winky's, and ate quickly, wounded by a rushing realization. The big one thought I was the stranger kids were not supposed to talk to, let alone accept a piece of cherry pie from. I was the lurking despicable thing that spirited children away from worlds of safety to those of unmentionable horrors. When I was a kid, there were mornings when you could hit your back door running and not be expected to return until dusk, times a kid didn't have to worry so much, times when I'd have accepted a stranger's offer for such a glorious slice of cherry pie. But now, even poverty, desire, the sweetest, tallest, most enticing hunk of pie could not overcome such dread.

When I got up to leave fear still lingered in the big one's face like a reflection of me, the monster in the

mirror. I dropped my trash into the chute, got in my car, and powered on my cell. I had to talk to someone about that slice of pie, even if it meant I'd be busted. I called my wife.

"A funny thing happened at Winky's," I said.

"What were you doing at Winky's!"

"I know. I'm weak. Pathetic," I confessed. "But there was this funny thing—I tried to buy a couple poor kids a piece of cherry pie. But one of them got scared, like I was the boogeyman or something."

"It's not funny. Suppose he tells someone."

"Never mind," I said. "I'm on my way home."

I pulled out of Winky's, onto Liberty Hi, and watched the countryside go by. Here and there a lonely farmhouse stood, sharply outlined against the afternoon light. Long rows of mid-summer cornstalks stabbed at the skyline, soil at their root ends hot, red. Shadows of dense cornrows cut the road. I was grateful for the drive home, the way you drive, try to take in other things, try to put things like the big one's frightened look out of your mind, think if you don't you'll crash your car into those rows of corn.

I caught the steering wheel and held it fast at ten and two. I thought back to Winky's. What if my wife was right? What if the big one said something to his parents? What if he told them this old guy wanted to buy them a piece of cherry pie? Even if the big one meant it differently, not sinisterly, like he thought I may have been a good man, his parents may take his telling them about me as a slight on their parenting, like they were no good because it took a stranger to buy their boys a piece of cherry pie. Then the parents would start thinking the worst of me—me!—a stranger they could not possibly know, my only crime an odd concoction of condescension and empathy for their boys. I would be falsely accused, hounded by police, questioned, held to ridicule, photographed, good name spread ignominiously across the Internet. More distressing was the outside chance that the two boys might actually be abducted by a genuine bad man. Witnesses would come forward, say I offered to buy the two victims a piece of cherry pie. Witnesses. The cashier! What had possessed me to be so stupid, so unthinking?

I reached for my cell, figured if I called my wife I could establish I was on the phone with her at a certain time and location, and not up to no good. I'd seen

on television that they can triangulate your location by pinging off cell towers. Something like that. I punched in her number, then realized it would not be enough to merely call her. She might suspect I called only to cover up something else. Besides, I'd just called her a few minutes before. I started to power off my cell.

But she picked up.

"I'll see you soon," I muttered. "I'm about eight miles out on Liberty Hi. Just passed Poe Road. I left Winky's about eleven minutes ago."

"Whatever," she said and hung up.

I breathed a couple times, the way you make yourself breathe when you think something awful might happen, the sort of thought that'll run you clean off the road if you're not careful. I caught myself drifting to the berm, gripped the wheel tighter. I had to stop thinking and do something, and so turned into a short road accessing a cornfield, stopped near the darker reaches of the stalks. From my car I looked into the shadows of the corn row. Part of me wanted to get out of my car, press on through the stalks, come out the other side of the field, a place where Winky's, the boys, that piece of cherry pie never existed, where I'd be headed home into a big red sunset.

I'd only called my wife a second time to establish where I was and when. Dumb. Who was to say I hadn't snatched the two boys and had them in the car with me when I called her? I reasoned my innocence may depend on whether the cashier—mind, the cashier!—could remember me and the two boys together, and my offering to buy the piece of pie, so I backed out the access road, and headed off to Winky's again.

I was worried about what the cashier would remember, but it felt good to be back on the road. Dusk was coming on. Sounds of the countryside blubbered faintly at my car window, my cheek. For a few minutes I thought nothing of where I was headed, or why, just the direction, a peaceful momentum. When I pulled into the parking lot of Winky's the sun was getting low and the whole place flooded with a pale white light. Overhead, two purplish streetlamps buzzed. I entered the restaurant and spotted the woman who'd cashed me and the two boys out. She looked tired and I thought that's all the better since tired people probably didn't give a shit and told the truth, like when you're drunk or high. I studied her—

young, thin, even bony, with sandy hair that ran out her

cramped hairnet in misty strands, like split waterfalls you see in exotic places on *National Geographic*.

I waited in line a long time while the cashier shuttled food from kitchen to counter and ran the register. When I reached her, I asked only for a cup of black coffee. She seemed relieved for the easy ring-up.

“Do you remember me?” I said.

She looked me over while lowering the coffee cup to my tray.

“Should I?”

“I was in here about a half hour ago. I had the Philadelphia steak sandwich and a piece of cherry pie.”

“No, don’t recall,” she said and dropped change into my palm.

“Are you sure? There were a couple boys behind me in line. You put my pie on their tray by mistake.”

“No, mister,” she muttered and glanced at the considerable line forming behind me.

I sat to drink my coffee and watched her carefully. When the line ended I watched her a little more, expecting her to come to my table and say she remembered me, the two boys, the cherry pie. But she put her backside to the counter, knobby spine to me. I heard her cough, exhausted.

I left Winky’s relieved that the cashier had not remembered me. I got back onto Liberty Hi, realized I’d be home even later than I promised my wife, reached for my cell to seek forgiveness. But what would I tell her I’d been doing? Interrogating the cashier at Winky’s? How could I possibly explain? So I left the restaurant and headed for the old 1970s strip shopping mall nearby, parked, and went into Odd Lots. I’d no plan going in there, and for a while became one of the wandering people who snags this or that from a shelf, smiles or jeers at the exotically eccentric, out-of-production oddity, and sets the thing back. Once I found a large rubber eyeball; you squeeze it in your fist and the red iris swells and shrinks in unimaginable ways, ways that make you wonder what it might be like to have such an eye, the way things might look, changing and misshapen, one moment to the next.

I phoned my wife.

“I’m at Odd Lots,” I said, “somewhere between resin garden fountains with expressionless cherubs and Chinese imported adult diapers called ‘Heavenly Absorbance.’”

“So?”

“I’m going to be a little later than I thought, that’s all.”

“Just come home, mister.”

“Oh, wait, here’s rainbow-colored duct tape from the Ukraine. Each strip is red, yellow, and blue. Didn’t you want duct tape to patch up the cold air return for the furnace?”

After some silence, my wife said, “Okay,” made a nasal sound, hissing, like air going out of a tire, and added, “just get it and get home.”

What a deal. A nice fat roll of rainbow duct tape. A dollar—cheap, considering it had also furnished me with an excuse for my lateness. Night had come full-on when I again passed Winky’s, a little island of light in the darkness, dead inside, except for the cashier, hands and elbows resting behind her on the cash register, as though someone had propped her there and forgotten her. I felt bad for her, but glad she’d been so busy she couldn’t remember me and the boys. But surely she’d go home eventually, rest up, and I had to think that people, just so refreshed, might remember things they had forgotten while tired. The cashier might recall me and the two boys, after all. Perhaps! How could she not eventually recall a big kid with a Salem tee, a little one sporting a trombone, and, especially, me, foolishly showing up to ask if she remembered the three of us and my offering that piece of pie? I slowed the car, found myself once again pulling onto an access road concealed between cornstalks, now dark, greenish walls of dread. The cornstalks stood against the moonlit sky, witchy and waiting—always waiting, perhaps concealing corn witches themselves concocting the most miasmic stew imaginable, forever murmuring their endless list of ingredients as they tossed them into their hot, bubbling cauldron of worry. But what was I really afraid of? The important thing was to assure myself that the two boys were alright. Even if they mentioned to their parents how I’d tried to buy them that piece of pie, it could not be worse than, say, that one chance in millions some authentic psycho actually abducted the two boys, or that, when they’d come into Winky’s, they were running away from home. Either way, I could wind up getting blamed!

The boys had obviously walked to Winky’s and so had to live in the vicinity, likely the rather old and shabby Gypsy Lane Trailer Park near Winky’s. I backed out the access road and headed for Gypsy Lane, reasoning there

was still enough light that I may spot the two boys walking around. But before I got to Gypsy Lane, I had one of my most brilliant ideas ever. Wasn't human communication the key to solving the world's problems? Wouldn't our strange race be better off if we were just frank and upfront about things? So I pulled into Winky's once more. My plan was to buy another piece of cherry pie, this time to-go, and if, just if, I were lucky enough to spot the boys playing around their trailer, I'd go straight up to their front door, pie in hand in its little Styrofoam wedge, knock, and ask to speak to their parents about the piece of pie, how I meant no harm, how I just really, really wanted them to have that piece of pie.

It seemed like a great thing to do. Who isn't more at ease when things thought of in the dark are brought out and seen face-to-face in the light of day? Only my newest dilemma had to do with the cashier. Again! If she did not recall my interaction with the boys before, when I went inside to order a second slice of pie, she may then. And if I could not find the boys or their parents, I was back to the beginning of my maze of worries. I reached into the backseat of my car, found a sweatshirt, and pulled it over my tee. Then, with my fingers, I combed my hair forward, partially covering my eyes. Satisfied with my disguise, I went in and purchased the slice of pie, the whole while the cashier watching the clock above the counter, counting minutes to closing, so intently I was sure to get away with my ruse, but when I headed out with my pie, she called after me.

"Sorry, mister," she laughed a little. "I still don't remember you and those two boys."

I was stunned by her brazen innuendo, so much so that I felt an even greater urgency that I find the boys' parents and get that piece of pie to them.

When I reached Gypsy Lane, I slowly, methodically drove the streets, passed poles with power meters nailed to them willy-nilly like strange totems, old silvery streamlined trailers with red fluted skirts, and one job with an odd slanting snout and windows mere slits above a longer picture window, the whole of which seemed the eyes, mouth, and countenance of the noseless Sphinx. I slowed, hoping for the Sphinx's riddle, for I knew the answer—me, a man, in all aching stages of life!—but she was silent.

When I found no sign of the boys, I parked a little

while. It was a longshot, but maybe, just maybe I would catch a glimpse of one of the boys through a window. Or spot one chasing fireflies, which were by that time luminous, winking soft yellow in the night, so many, on and off, I started thinking that each wink of light was only one of a million bad things that can happen to a kid, and a million more that can happen to anyone. And it all starts when a cashier at Winky's sets a piece of cherry pie on a couple kids' green tray. A piece meant for you. You get scared, scared all the time, not of what you know might happen, but of what you can't know that will happen, until it happens, and the thought chokes the breath from you, until you lose your voice and there's nothing left but other people's questions and suspicions. I had to set this right. I had to!

Then, there he was, the little one who'd wanted that pie so badly, running out of his trailer. He cast his arm in the air with the sweep of a great net, caught a firefly in his fist, then went to his knees and smeared the efflorescent bug's thorax on the pavement, where it left a little glowing smudge. I heard his mom call him inside. He leapt up and dashed inside the trailer.

I took up the piece of pie, went straight to the door, and knocked.

A woman, the mother I assumed, came to the door. She looked a lot like the cashier at Winky's, tired, but older. Her teeth were edged brown. Coffee, cigarettes, or both. I could see the big one standing a few feet behind her, watching me, still in his Salem tee.

"Excuse me," I said to the woman, "but earlier today I offered to buy your boys a piece of pie over at Winky's. I'm afraid I may have frightened the big one. But I really meant no harm. They seem like good boys. They know to not speak with strangers. That's great. But I wanted them to have this pie, so would you take it and give it to them? Honest, Winky's makes the best cherry pie in town."

The big one pulled the door open a little more, until he and the woman were both backlit by a television program that had some amateur singer belting out a song derived from a familiar oldie, scripted just for the show. It sounded like Sinatra, *I've Got You Under my Skin*.

Then I heard the same slow expulsion of air I was used to getting from my wife.

"Look, mister," the woman said, glancing back

into the trailer, then intensely at me. “You get off my fucking doorstep *now* or I’m calling the cops.”

I trotted away, got back into my car, and set the pie next to the Odd Lots bag containing the roll of rainbow duct tape. I tried to assure myself I’d tried my best to clarify the matter of the pie. Perhaps it was enough. But the mother’s remark only confirmed my misgivings—offering that piece of pie to those boys was monumentally dunderheaded! I’d had it. I was finished. I called my wife to check in.

“Sorry, I’m running a little behind,” I said. “I just went back to Winky’s to get another piece of that cherry pie. I mean, for you.”

“For me, my ass!” she said. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing,” I said, then could not help but add, “do you think I’m scary?”

“What?”

“I mean you probably didn’t think I was scary when we were married. I’m talking about now. Is there some change in me that makes me scary? Grotesque gray hair? My frightful paunch? That spine-tingling sour look you say I sometimes have when really I’m not thinking one sour thing, when, in fact, I’m not thinking anything at all.”

“Mister,” she replied, “the day I’m afraid of you is the day you bury me.”

I had to think about what my wife said. She liked to zing me with such mind benders. But before I could reply she clicked off, and I sensed flashing lights behind me, something I first thought were some emotional exaggeration of firefly light.

But it was a police officer. He tapped my window. I ran it down and he leaned in. I saw his gaze fall on the Styrofoam pie container on the passenger’s seat, then to the Odd Lots bag containing my rainbow duct tape. Too dumb for words! What if he discovered I’d been talking to the two boys and had rainbow duct tape in my car?

“I have a report that you’ve been driving this neighborhood awhile,” the officer said. “What’s up?”

“Fireflies,” I said and watched his eyebrows arch. “I mean I was slowing up to admire them.”

The officer bent back a little to see the fireflies, then leaned in my window again.

“License and registration,” he insisted, then took both back to his cruiser.

I was sure he was running my numbers, to see if

I was in the system, see if I was a good man or bad man. I thought, what if there were some kind of bug in the system, like a typo, and you flash onto his cruiser screen like some psycho predator they’re after, so they arrest you, then they trace you back, back to Winky’s and that moment you reached for your wallet and offered to buy the boys a piece of cherry pie, and after that tried to get their mom to take another hapless slice, and they go back even farther, how far you can’t know, and find something else, some awful thing in your past, especially since they think you’re a psycho predator, and you’re tried, convicted, moved secretly to a special prison, all alone, since you are so psycho and despicable that other prisoners will kill you, then, then, maybe after twenty years of this they catch their mistake and let you go, made into a doddering old psycho all because they thought you were a psycho.

The officer handed my license and registration back to me.

“Go home to Janie,” he said.

“You know my wife?”

“We know everything, pal. She’s in the system. You’re in the system. Everyone’s in the system. Just go home, okay?”

“Alright,” I said, immeasurably relieved, so much so I blundered into saying, “would you like a piece of cherry pie, officer? I got it from Winky’s but my wife doesn’t want it. Best pie around.”

“No, mister,” he mumbled, turned briefly to regard the fireflies winking on and off, and shook his head.

The officer followed me until I pulled onto Liberty Hi, heading home. A short while later, I again thrust my car into the cornfield and stopped. But this time I was no longer afraid of corn witches. Or police. Or the rustling rumors of cornstalks in the late night wind. The boys were alright. It wasn’t any of that. I swear it was a firefly that sent me back into the dark field, one of the damnable creatures glowing my side of the windshield, defying my attempts to swish it out my car window. What good is light when it flashes on and off like that? What good other than to warn against something unimaginable, unspeakable? After a while, I gave up trying to expel the firefly. I set the second piece of cherry pie in my lap. I opened the lid. I ate the pie in my car, firefly light flashing on and off. I ate, red-handed, red-mouthed. I ate because awful things that might have happened never did. I ate because things that

never happened still might. I ate mechanically, like a man
undertakes a useless occupation. I ate until I was sugar-
headed, tired, and ready to try for home again.

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