

The Pirate: A Christmas Eve Story

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It was Christmas Eve and James was home from college. He had just finished helping his mother clear the supper table and was talking about his plans for the coming summer after he graduated. His fourteen year old sister entered the kitchen, "Are you guys ready? Dad wants to read the story." Mom smiled, "Okay give us another minute or two." James couldn't remember how old he was the first time that he had heard his Dad read the story. The story had been written by his great-grandfather and the reading of it was part of the family's annual Christmas Eve.

This year just as they did every year James, his sister, and his parents would gather in the living room. Dad sat with the small leather bound book in one hand and the pocket watch in the other just as he did every year. James sat there looking at his Dad as he opened the watch. "Still works after all these years." Mom entered the living room and placed a tray of cookies and hot cocoa on the coffee table. His sister picked up a cookie and said, "Okay we're all ready Dad." Dad opened the book and looked at the hand written words that had been put there many years before and began to read.

The year was 1931, and work was hard to come by. I was twenty years old and counted myself fortunate to have found work in the small factory where I met the Pirate. That is what he called himself and he looked and acted the part. He wore a black patch that covered his right eye. There were about thirty of us who worked there, and we were all subjected to the Pirate's meanness six days a week. The Pirate had a name for everyone. The names were all derogatory and based on what the Pirate saw as a defect. There was one man who had been born with one leg shorter than the other. The Pirate called him Limp. Another whom he called Four Eyes. One he simply called Ugly. The Pirate never used anyone's real name. Part of working at the factory was being nick named by the Pirate within the first week or two of employment..

The name that he gave me was Worm. It had started out as Book Worm when he saw me reading in the warehouse during my half hour lunch. It wasn't long before he shortened it to Worm. I had discovered Kierkegaard quite by accident while browsing in a used book store. After reading his *Works of Love* I wanted to read everything that he had written. The Pirate taunted me on a daily basis, often making derogatory remarks about what I was reading. These remarks were usually based on a twisting of the words in the title. *Sickness Unto Death* became *Sickness in the Head*. His comments wore at me. One day he came up to me as I was moving some boxes and said, "You are one very sick in the head person you garbage Worm. Go crawl in the dirt." He walked away laughing. It was his Pirate laugh. It was usually heard after a comment that the Pirate found extra amusing.

We tolerated this stuff from the Pirate because we needed work. When the Pirate was out of hearing range there was plenty that was said about him. The few who did tell him off directly were fired on the spot. The Pirate called it 'walking the plank'. On one occasion a worker named Fred who the Pirate called Screwball was out for two days. When he returned the Pirate asked him where he had been. When Fred told him that he had been out because his brother had died the Pirate looked at him and bellowed, "Your brother, not you so you should have been here!"

Fred said nothing. I was standing nearby and said, "Come on Pirate lighten up." The Pirate glared at me. "Shut your trap Worm or you walk the plank. Don't mouth off to me. Didn't your mamma teach you to respect your elders. Maybe you didn't have a mamma. Maybe someone just cut a worm in half and you are one part." I was quiet. I needed work.

I continued my readings of Kierkegaard. I had been fed up with institutionalized religion and its hypocrisy. Kierkegaard resonated with me. He wrote of the power of love and how being a Christian was more than adopting the label or attending a church. Through his writings he became my teacher. There was a dilemma about this because my feelings for the Pirate were anything but love. In fact there were times when I hated the Pirate. There were times when I wanted to pummel him. I controlled myself but this hatred was growing inside me and it contradicted what I had been learning from my teacher.

I had been working at the factory for about eight months. One day after several gruesome encounters with the Pirate I sat in my small room weeping. I had had enough. I couldn't take it anymore. I needed to do something. I had searched for work elsewhere with no luck. If I left it would likely mean living on the street. I had no one. Both of my parents had died years before and I had been fending for myself for the last four years. In my despair I sought solace in the New Testament. I opened it at random and as my eyes fell upon the page I read the words that were to guide me on my course of action. It was Matthew 5:44, "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you."

The following day during lunch I sat in the warehouse reading Kierkegaard's, *Either / Or*. The Pirate passed by and bellowed, "What are you reading Worm?" When I showed him the title he laughed. "Either or what? Either you respect the Pirate or you walk the plank" He walked off laughing to himself. I wondered what could turn a person into a man like the Pirate and returned to my reading. Once again words jumped out at me, "perhaps he sighs at the thought that he is loved by nobody and does not reflect that he is loved by God." That night when I prayed I prayed for the Pirate. The idea of what I was to do germinated in my sleep. I woke in the middle of the night and there it was in my head.

Four weeks later on Christmas Eve the factory shut down an hour early. The factory owner who I had never seen before showed up and passed a turkey out to every worker. After he had left most of the workers sat around two tables drinking punch that was heavily spiked with rum. The Pirate was far off from everyone else counting stacked boxes. I decided that it was a good opportunity to do what I had planned.

I walked towards where he was and he stopped and turned to look at me. "What is it, don't worms like punch?" I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out the small box. It was wrapped in plain brown paper. I handed it to him. "Merry Christmas Pirate". He took it in his hand stood there silent for a moment as if puzzled. "Whats this?" He said it loudly. Loud enough so that the men sitting drinking punch quieted their conversations and looked towards us. I spoke softly. "Its a gift." The Pirate got louder. "A gift, what is this some kind of joke. It won't be funny when you walk the plank!" I turned to walk away and he shouted at me. "Halt Worm." I turned back to look at him. He tore off the paper and looked at the box. "Some kind of joke worm?" I

said nothing. He opened the box slowly and took out the pocket watch. It had cost me more than a weeks pay and I wondered if he would fling it or toss it on the floor and step on it but he didn't. Instead he raised his voice. "What is this, a broken watch?" I continued to speak softly. "No, open it." The Pirate pressed at the pin on top of the watch and it sprung open. His eye drifted towards the inscription that I had the jeweler inscribe, "The Pirate 12/24/31 God Loves You". I turned and started to walk away. The Pirate began to let loose a stream of profanities that ended with, "What are you crazy?" I was about eight feet away and turned to face him. "No, I'm a Christian."

We both stood silent for a moment. Then I noticed it. It started as a tiny tear dripping from his left eye. It quickly grew into a stream. I stepped towards him and reached out my hand to shake his but he was dazed and just stood there. I stepped closer and he murmured, "I'm sorry." I reached out and hugged him. At first he just stood there limp as his tears flowed onto my shoulder. Then he lifted his arms and wrapped them around me and cried like a baby. I held him as he whispered through his tears. "I'm really sorry." I held him tighter and whispered. "Its okay. God loves you." When I stepped back he stood there silent, then turned and walked away.

On the next work day the Pirate was somewhat quiet. He remained that way throughout the week. Mid way through the following week he started to yell at Fred. "Hey Screwball..." Fred cut him short. "Hey Pirate what time is it?" The Pirate reached in his pocket, pulled out the watch, told Fred the time, and walked away. Fred's method was used from time to time by others who would ask the Pirate what time it was just as he was launching into a tirade. As the weeks passed the Pirate became gentler. Once when a worker returned after being out for a day the Pirate asked where he had been. When he said he had been throwing up and had been really sick the Pirate said, "Okay, I hope you feel better."

It was a Sunday in early March of 1932, I was walking through the park when I noticed the Pirate sitting on a bench. He was breaking off pieces from a loaf of bread and feeding them to the pigeons. He had not noticed me. He sat there talking to the pigeons. "Its okay there's plenty more, share." When he did notice me a look of embarrassment came over his face as if he had been caught picking his nose. I sat down next to him. "It's okay Pirate. Saint Francis talked to birds too." He continued to feed the birds as he spoke. "I'm far from a saint. I don't even go to church." He handed me a chunk of bread. " Pirate, you are in church. God's house does not have walls. Going to a church does not make a person a Christian anymore than sitting in a tree makes a person a bird. Kierkegaard said that man in all his cunning knew that the only way to try to destroy Christianity was to declare, we are all Christians." I started to bite into the bread when he stopped me with, "Not for you for the birds." I joked with him. "You know they might eat me. Birds eat worms." He giggled. "You know Worm, you think a lot."

I returned to the park the same time the following Sunday. There he was sitting on the same bench feeding the pigeons. It was on this day that he told me how he had become the Pirate. His mother had died when he was 10. His father who had a taste for liquor and a mean streak had taken to drinking heavier after his mother had died. The Pirate had a sister who was 4 years older than him. When she was 15 she received a severe beating from their father. She left home and took to selling her body on the street. The Pirate loved animals. When he was 14 years old he found a stray puppy on the street and fed it half of his sandwich. It was a few days before

Christmas. The puppy followed him home and he pleaded with his father to let him keep the puppy. His father reluctantly agreed. On Christmas Eve his father drank himself into a stupor. When the puppy wet on the floor his father got up and kicked at it repeatedly. The Pirate tried to get between his father and the puppy. His father picked up a whiskey bottle and smashed it across the Pirate's face. That was how he lost his right eye. When he left the hospital he was put in a children's home. He ran away after two days. The factory owner found him sleeping in the back doorway of the factory and took the Pirate under his wing. That had been 26 years before, and the Pirate had worked there since then.

I continued to meet the Pirate in the park every Sunday for the next six months. We talked. We became friends. In September 1932 I left for the west coast. There was promise of work in Oregon as part of President Roosevelt's Work Projects Administration. During our last Sunday in the park the Pirate handed me what looked to be a book wrapped in plain brown paper. I looked at the package and was about to open it when he said, "Save it for the train ride." I thanked him. As we shook hands he put his other hand on my shoulder. "You know Worm, I don't really know who I am anymore." There were tears in his eye. I put my hand on his shoulder and said, "I think you'll figure it out."

While on the train the next day I removed the wrapping from the gift that he had given me. It was a leather bound copy of Kierkegaard's, *The Concept of Dread*. There was a handwritten inscription inside the front cover. It read: *Thank You, from the Pirate?* About six months later I received a post card from him. It said, *"I'm not much of a writer. Hope all is well."* I wrote him once but we lost touch with each other.

I returned to the east coast during the holiday season of 1942. By that time I was married with one child. My wife's mother lived back east and she had wanted to see her grandchild. The day before Christmas I decided to pay a surprise visit to the old factory to see the Pirate. When I arrived I was greeted by Fred. When I asked where the Pirate was he said, "Jim passed away three months ago. He spent most of his free time with his kids until he took ill a few months before he died." I asked if Fred had gotten married and Fred said, "No, but he called them his kids. They were the kids at the children's home. Jim's children's home. Jim had some money you know. He lived pretty frugal and worked many years. He had a home built just for those kids. Imagine that, the Pirate a philanthropist. You should stop by and see it, nice place, not far from here."

I did go to the home. It was a large house standing where I remembered an empty lot had been. The sign outside read: *Jim Muldoon's Home for Children*. I stood there for a few minutes marveling. It was the nicest building in the area. I must have been noticed. A man opened the front door and walked down the steps towards me. *"Can I help you?"* I told him that I had been a friend of Jim's and he invited me in and showed me to the living room. I noticed a large portrait of the Pirate hanging on the wall. The man introduced himself as the manager of the home and began to talk about Jim and all he had done for the kids that he called his children. As we spoke a boy who looked to be about 14 years old entered the room. He had a long scar that stretched across the left side of his face. The manager introduced me as a friend of Jim's. The boy stepped forward and shook my hand. "Mr. Jim, he saved my life. A good man, best person I ever

met." The manager told me that Jim was survived by a sister who helped out at the home at times. "She lives two blocks down, number 42, first floor."

I went to see the Pirate's sister. She asked who I was before opening the door. When I said, "Jim's friend." She asked which one. I stated my name and she opened the door. "Come in, come in. Jim told me about you." We sat at the kitchen table drinking tea as she talked proudly of her brother. Mid way through a sentence she stopped and said, "Wait." She got up and walked into another room returning a minute later with the pocket watch in her hand. "Jim would have wanted you to have this. He used to say that he had been frozen in time until you gave him this watch." She placed it in my hand, and I opened it and looked at the inscription. She told me how Jim had helped her turn her own life around. "He wanted nothing in return. Towards the end when he got sick he even made his own burial arrangements, picked out his own headstone. A finer brother no one could ask for."

She told me what cemetery Jim had been buried in and gave directions to his grave site. I planned to visit it sometime before I went back out west, but as I stepped out into the brisk air, I felt a compulsion to visit it right then. Perhaps because it was Christmas Eve and the anniversary of that day eleven years before when I had given him the watch that I now held in my pocket. I took a bus to where the cemetery was. As I walked the three blocks from the bus stop to the cemetery it began to snow. There was about a half hour left before dark when I arrived at the cemetery. The wind had picked up and snow was sticking to the headstones. I wondered if I would find his name. I did manage to find it and knelt beside it to pray as the snow continued to fall. The lower part of his headstone was covered with snow. I brushed the snow off with my glove. The epitaph was a quote from Kierkegaard:

"I am as it were, an agent in the service of the Highest."

Tears streamed down my cheeks and mixed with snow as I felt about the grace bestowing power of Love.

Dad closed the book. There were a few moments of silence as there were every year after Dad read the Christmas Eve story. Dad looked at James, "Next year you can read the story." He placed the small book in the palm of his hand, put the watch on top, and held it out to James. "Its yours now. Pass it on."

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