

Sweatshirt for Christmas

Tommy hit Joey as hard as he could. For no good reason. To get him to stop talking—which was no good reason, Tommy knew, but still necessary.

Joey had been arguing with another kid over whether it was better to get an X-Box or an iPad for Christmas. Tommy was hoping—hoping—to get a pocketknife.

“They’re both junk,” Tommy had said.

Joey, and the other kids like him—which meant just about everyone at the school—pissed him off. They were here because their parents paid for it; he was here on a scholarship. And while he wasn’t quite sure everything that meant, it did mean they were all rich, and he wasn’t.

He could take the loneliness. It was only six hours. Well, eight if you counted the bus. The simmering anger, though, that burned within him all day long, was killing him. Now Christmas was coming, and the anger boiled to the surface as the divide grew between gift expectations for them, and gift expectations for Tommy.

Joey and the other two kids had been mostly ignoring him, but now they turned and stared. Joey looked him up and down, and said, “I guess you’re hoping to get some decent clothes, and ain’t got a chance in hell for an iPad.”

That was the moment it became necessary.

The punch landed square on Joey’s nose. Blood gushed out, covering his lips and chin. He swiped his nose with the back of his hand, looked at the blood, and started hollering. Tommy saw red stain spread over Joey’s white sweater and he felt good for the first time since September. He wanted to hit him again. And again. He drew back his fist.

Suddenly, Tommy's collar tightened, and he felt himself jerked back, his feet barely touching the ground. Someone big had grabbed him.

The fight was over before it had begun. Tommy's anger morphed quickly through disappointment that he couldn't get in another punch to a growing anxiety about consequences. Because, when you let out the anger, there were always consequences. Especially if you were the scholarship kid. He twisted to see who had him.

It was Mr. Lee.

Mr. Lee was the track coach for the upper school, and did other things when he wasn't coaching, like supervise the third graders playing outside on their lunch break. Tommy and his friends didn't know him like they knew their teacher, but he was the law on the playground. If he intervened, it meant a note home and detention, minimum.

"You two boys take Joey to the nurse's office right now," Mr. Lee said to Joey's buddies, pausing to turn around. Tommy stumbled with the sudden turn in direction. "You," he said, looking down at Tommy, "are coming with me."

Mr. Lee let Tommy's feet reach the ground now but kept his hand on his collar. Instead of going directly to his classroom where the teacher would punish him, he took him to a stone bench now separated from the playground by the "Holiday Tree."

"Stand here," he said, then sat down in front of him so that they were now both at eye level.

"Don't you know who you are?"

Sure, Tommy thought while looking down at Mr. Lee's worn athletic shoes. I'm the kid with the sweatshirt while the other kids have sweaters. I'm the kid with the peanut butter

sandwich and plastic bag of raisins while the other kids have yogurt and granola bars. I'm the kid hoping to get a pocketknife for Christmas because no way would I ever get an iPad.

He kept silent.

"I mean, don't you know who your father is?" Mr. Lee continued.

Tommy tilted his head up to see if Mr. Lee's face gave away any hint as to what he was getting at. He saw him looking back intently, puzzled, as if he actually expected an answer.

"I guess."

"You don't need to be guessing, boy. You need to know."

Tommy shuffled his feet and shifted his gaze, no longer able to deal with Mr. Lee's intensity. His father was nothing special. His father wrote a musical play that everybody liked but nobody bought, then wrote a book that everybody liked and nobody bought, and now he was writing and drawing the sketches for a graphic novel, some kind of giant comic book. Tommy was sure that next year, when it was finished, everybody would like it and nobody would buy it. His mother worked as a nurse, sometimes nights and weekends, and his father stayed home. The only reason he went to this private school was that his grandfather paid the expenses his scholarship didn't cover.

"Am I getting punished?"

"Right now you're getting educated."

Tommy was puzzled and impatient. He didn't understand why Mr. Lee didn't just give him detention and turn him over to his teacher. "About what?" he mumbled in the direction of his shoes.

"About your dad," Mr. Lee said. "And about me. You need to hear a story."

Tommy lifted his head enough to see Mr. Lee's face. Enough to see he was more sad than mad.

“About ten years ago, I was friendless, homeless, and hopeless. I loved only one thing, and that was whiskey. My family gave up on me. My only friends were other alcoholics. I lived downtown, worked at the labor pool until I had enough money to buy some whiskey, then drank it all. On a good day, I'd wake up in a park.”

Tommy opened his eyes wider and listened carefully. He had never heard a grownup talk about being a drunk. He knew Mr. Lee wasn't like the other teachers. His car was the oldest one in the parking lot, and his clothes were not only cheaper than what the students wore, they were also cheaper than what the teachers wore. But he still didn't see the connection with his dad, and certainly not with Joey's bloody nose.

“On a Sunday afternoon, your dad showed up at the park. He brought a couple of sub sandwiches, some chips and a couple of sodas, and sat down on a bench next to me. I was starving. I thought about trying to mug him just to get the food, but I didn't have to. He gave one sandwich to me, kept the other for himself, and he ate with me.”

Tommy nodded, not surprised. His dad stopped to talk with panhandlers like they were real people, then gave them money, sometimes a ride, and, even a couple times, took them home. It was just part of his weirdness. Plenty of money for drunks, nothing for iPads.

“Lots of folks donate food to homeless people and it gets distributed through some mission or agency. Believe me, I knew them all, and there were lots of times I was grateful. But nobody sat down and had lunch with me. Your dad, he'd listen to anything I wanted to tell him, never tried to preach to me or get me to change, and he came every week. One week I had an

infection in my leg, couldn't walk to the hospital, and couldn't afford a cab. When your dad showed up, he drove me to the ER.

“After he got engaged to your mom, both of them would come. I could see she was real nervous at first, but your dad was easy-going and friendly like he always was, so she calmed down. Once, when it got real cold, he gave me his sweatshirt. Said he had another one at home and not to worry about it.”

Tommy was getting nervous. Lunch hour was almost over, and he was going to have to face his teacher. “I'm glad my dad was nice, Mr. Lee.”

“Nice? Did I say nice? Even once? The world's full of ‘nice’ people. Your dad wasn't *nice* to me. He *loved* me when I was a worthless bum. Loved me when nobody else did. Prayed for me when nobody else did. And because your dad cared about me, I started believing that God cared about me. Then I started caring about myself.”

Tommy looked toward his classroom on the other side of the bushes, anxious that he would be late, get in more trouble, or the other kids would be looking to ambush him.

“Look at me, Tommy. Your dad saved my life. I'd have been dead years ago, and nobody would have cared.

“Now, I know you didn't hit Joey because of something he said. You hit Joey because of something inside you, something that had to get out. Like that anger I had when I wanted to drink. You've got some of that. Everyone does.”

Mr. Lee paused and looked away for a moment before turning his gaze back to Tommy. “What I'm telling you, is that you also got inside you the same thing your dad has. Maybe that

love is all mixed up with anger and hurt, but it's there. Your dad gave it to you just like he gave it to me. You gotta find it and let it out.”

“Am I getting detention, Mr. Lee?”

Mr. Lee sighed. “Not this time. I'll talk to your teacher, and to Joey, and Joey's parents. Because this time I think that you didn't know who you were. Next time, you'll know.” Mr. Lee stood. “Go on, get back to class.”

Tommy circled the “Holiday Tree,” shuffling toward his classroom module. He felt the December chill now that he was alone. The morning frost had melted, but the north wind cut through his hoodie. No one had lingered on the playing field until the last recess bell. It looked as if everybody had cut it short and gotten back in the nice warm classroom.

That was a lucky break that Mr. Lee and his dad had been old friends. Why hadn't his dad told him? Maybe he didn't want to let anybody know Mr. Lee had been a drunk. But Mr. Lee didn't seem to care. Grownups were hard to figure.

So maybe he wouldn't get suspension, but that didn't mean there wouldn't be trouble. His folks had to find out. And he'd felt lonely before, but the future looked like he'd be like the last guy on Mars.

Tommy saw Joey headed out from the main campus building where the nurse kept her office. He had some white gauze sticking out of his nose, and his mouth hung open to breathe. His ruined sweater was rolled under his arm.

They were the only two on the playground, and they both needed to get to the same place at the same time. Joey walked straight toward him.

Tommy thought about turning away and making it to the classroom ahead of him. But he couldn't do it. It seemed too much like running away. And now that he wasn't angry, he wanted

to say something to Joey—something his father might say if his father were a kid who had just smacked another kid in the face. But, try as he might, he couldn't imagine his dad as a kid in trouble.

“Get the hell away from me,” Joey growled.

Glad to, you little, rich snot, Tommy thought. But he didn't say anything.

“You wrecked my sweater, and when my folks hear about it they're gonna make sure you get sent back to the 'hood where you belong.”

They were face to face now on the narrow sidewalk. Tommy knew he should step aside and let him pass, but he could feel the anger rising. His fist closed as he thought about hitting him again.

Joey could walk around him, too. But he wasn't going to. His sweater fell from under his arm as Joey's fists also clenched and he stood his ground.

Tommy made a quick sideways glance to where Mr. Lee monitored the playground. His back was turned. They could only expel him once after all. And going to school someplace else sounded really good right now.

Don't you know who you are?

Mr. Lee's voice echoed in his head. *My father's son*—that was the answer. But the fury was building. Maybe even his dad lost it sometimes. Everybody did. Isn't that something else Mr. Lee had said? Everybody's got that anger inside?

They squared off, an arm's length away, fist still at their sides, each waiting for the other to make his move. Then Tommy saw that Joey's lips were blue, he was starting to shiver. He remembered something Mr. Lee had said about being cold.

“I’m sorry about your sweater,” Tommy said. He thought that maybe he was sorry he hit him, too, but wasn’t quite sure about that yet.

“Nurse says I can’t go into class wearing something bloody.”

Tommy saw the gooseflesh on Joey’s arms. His fists were white with cold. Tommy felt the anger inside mix with something else. He let his own fists open.

“Take my sweatshirt,” he said, stripping off his outer garment. “I’ve got another one at home. Don’t worry about it.”

Joey looked at the sweatshirt held out at arm’s length, and Tommy wondered if he’d take it, insult him again, or just hit him and get it on with the fight that was going to happen sometime anyway. Then their eyes met, and their gazes softened.

“Yeah. Okay,” Joey said. He put on the sweatshirt, leaned over, and picked up his ruined sweater. “You’re still gonna get in trouble, you know.”

They walked together the last hundred feet to their classroom. “I know,” Tommy said. But he didn’t care, not really. He was shivering by the time they got to the door, but the cold was only on the outside. He was warm enough.