

Family Burdens

Bam! A hard bump from behind, and Red Heissman lunged forward, tipping his tray towards himself and spilling the prison slop all down the front of his orange jumpsuit. He wheeled around, lifted his metal tray high, and slammed it down on the head of the inmate behind him. Before he could raise it for a second blow, two oversized guards ran up behind him. They placed him in a physical restraint, pinning his arms behind his back, before his tray had stopped clanging on the cement floor. Shoulder to shoulder, they backed him out of the cafeteria, half-dragging him, writhing and kicking, to his cell, where they put him on twenty-four-hour confinement.

“Kind of overreacted there didn’t you?” Officer Goodman said when he came on duty for the two-to-ten shift at the State Juvenile Corrections Facility.

“I ain’t no punk.” Red’s gut was still churning with anger.

“From what I hear, Spike was looking the other way when he bumped into you. It was an accident.”

“No one messes with me.”

“You know, you might want to talk with the Preacher Man about that temper of yours.”

“The Preacher Man can go to hell.”

“Well, that’s not too likely. He sure has helped a lot of fellows like you, though. Just think about it.”

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Red would not have given it another thought, but his probation officer insisted on it. Two days later Red stepped into the Preacher Man’s office. Christ, he thought to himself, some old black guy’s gonna tell *me* what to do? Red stiffened, ready for another round of sermons, threats, and predictions of failure. Why did adults always make the same speech?

“You must be Red Heissman. Come in and have a seat.” A gold-capped front tooth gleamed as Rev. Prediger smiled big and gestured towards one of the two chairs in front of his desk.

“You really a preacher man?” Red was half-expecting him to wear ministerial robes and to keep a large bible, a crucifix, and candles in his office. Instead, he found a still-athletic middle-aged man in blue jeans and a crew-neck shirt.

Rev. Prediger stepped out from behind his desk and sat in the chair next to Red, facing him at a three-quarters angle. Once again he flashed his gold tooth in a warm smile.

“Well, I am an ordained Baptist minister, but I’m here as a counselor.”

“I don’t like counselors. I don’t want nobody in my business.” Red was baiting him.

“Red, I’m glad that you already feel comfortable enough here to tell me what you really think. I want you to keep doing that, and I promise to do the same for you. If we can talk honestly to one another, man to man, I think we can make some real progress.”

The Preacher Man didn't take the bait. Expecting but not getting a fight, Red didn't know what to say.

Rev. Prediger reached over to his desk, picked up a manila folder, and opened it.

"I've been looking over your file, Red, and see you got eighteen months on a possession charge when you were sixteen, but they added an extra month every time you got into a fight, and now you're up to two years. It must be very important to you to stand up for yourself."

"I don't take nothing from nobody," Red replied, putting the Preacher Man on notice.

"No, but you pay a high price for that. Tell me, how badly do you want to get out of this place and stay out of places like this in the future?"

"I'd like to see you live in this hellhole."

Rev. Prediger gave an understanding nod. "Life in prison isn't easy. What's going to happen if you keep getting into fights, Red, even after you get out?"

"What do you care?"

Rev. Prediger looked him in the eyes. "I don't like to see a good kid like you locked up."

Good kid? No one had ever called him that before.

"Red, you're a big, strong guy. I bet you're a hundred and seventy-five pounds of solid muscle. What if you end up seriously injuring or even killing someone?"

"I'll go away for a long time, maybe life, I guess."

"Or get a needle in your arm. Is playing the tough guy really worth that to you?"

"But what can I do? People just pick fights with me."

"How about if the next time someone provokes you, you don't react?"

"You mean just stand there and take it?" Fat chance.

“I mean don’t let the other guy push your buttons. Don’t let him be in control of your emotions. And if he starts getting to you, just turn around and walk away.”

He couldn’t be serious. “And let him punk me?”

“And regain your freedom. Instead of doing time you could be spending time with your family and friends.”

Red sat in silence, as though surveying unfamiliar territory.

“So, tell me a little about your family, Red. Do you have any brothers and sisters?”

The question jerked him back. “I’ve got a five-year-old cousin named Russell. He’s a great little kid. Lots of fun to play with.” For the first time, Red smiled, thinking of him.

“I bet you miss him.”

Red nodded his head in response.

“How about your parents?”

“Uh . . . I live with my grandparents.” Red shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“What are they like?”

“They’re pretty nice. My grandma, she cooks real good.”

“I bet you miss her cooking too, though you can’t get food like ours anywhere else, not even in the finest restaurants,” Rev. Prediger joked, showing his gold tooth again.

“Thank God for that.” Red enjoyed the irony and relaxed a little.

“I’d like to see you back playing with your cousin, Red, and eating your grandmother’s cooking as soon as possible. How does that sound?”

“Pretty good.”

“Well, let’s work together towards that goal, okay?”

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Red left Rev. Prediger's office confused. Not once had the Preacher Man preached to him. He didn't yell at him for fighting, threaten him with punishment, or say he would never amount to anything. Instead he just smiled with that gold tooth of his, asked questions out of interest, and made suggestions he thought might help. He even seemed to like Red and called him a "good kid." And yet, he wanted him to act like a sissy. Could he really trust the Preacher Man?

Suddenly Red remembered something Officer Goodman once told him: "If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got." He had to admit what he was doing wasn't working. Maybe he should follow the Preacher Man's advice. Against his better judgment he decided to try it, just once, to see how it worked. It might help him get out of here sooner. Before long he was thinking of playing ball with his cousin and eating his grandma's fried chicken.

Two days later Spike Agudo called him out in the rec yard.

"Hey, Heissman, we got a score to settle. You wanna piece of me? Come and get it when I'm looking instead of blindsiding me. You wanna fight, fight like a man."

In a flash Red felt his face getting hot and his fists balling up. He almost spun around and said, "Well, if it ain't Spike the spic," but remembered what the Preacher Man had told him. Instead he forced himself to keep walking to the other side of the rec yard, where he struck up a conversation with another inmate.

"I like the way you handled yourself today," Officer Goodman said after the rec hour. "That showed some self-control and some real maturity. I'm proud of you, son. Today you were the kind of man that little cousin of yours can look up to."

When was the last time Red had heard words like those? That recognition took some of the sting out of the shame he felt at backing down.

* * *

“Good job!” Rev. Prediger said, congratulating Red at their next session. His gold-toothed smile convinced Red that he really meant it. “You got angry but not aggressive.”

“Yeah, I could’ve rearranged his face.” Despite the congratulations Red felt he had to reaffirm his manhood.

“And spent another month here. Now tell me, when you control your anger, no one else gets hurt, but who suffers on the inside?”

“Man, it was like fire burning in my gut.” Red placed both hands on his stomach.

“So let’s turn down the heat. I want you to close your eyes . . . Now, breathe in through your nose for a count of four . . . Hold your breath for a count of seven . . . And breathe out slowly through your mouth for a count of eight . . . Again . . . And again.”

After several minutes of breathing, Rev. Prediger asked, “How are you feeling now?”

“Like a cool stream is putting out the flames.”

“Now, return to breathing normally, but keep your eyes closed. I want you to clench your fists as tight as you can . . . Hold . . . Release . . . And breathe. Feel the difference between tension and relaxation . . . Now tense your forearms as tight as you can . . . Hold . . . Release . . . And breathe.”

Rev. Prediger spoke in a slow, hypnotic voice as Red successively tensed and relaxed his upper arms, face, neck, chest, back, abdomen, thighs, calves, and feet.

“Now, open your eyes, and tell me how you feel.”

Red laughed. “Man, I didn’t know you could feel like this without drugs. This is great.”

“If you do the breathing exercise and progressive muscle relaxation every morning, it will help you get centered and calm for the day. Do it again at night, and it will help relieve the stress that’s built up during the day. The more relaxed you are, the less things will get to you.”

Red nearly floated back to his cell, his steps were so light. Let Spike say what he wants. What did he care? He wasn’t going to get another month added to his sentence. No way. He was getting out. Maybe that Preacher Man wasn’t such a bad guy after all. Red could almost taste his grandma’s cherry cobbler.

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The next afternoon Red and Spike happened to be on the same outdoor work detail.

“Looks like Little Red Riding Hood just met the Big Bad Wolf,” Spike taunted him.

The blood rushed to Red’s face, his temples throbbed, the veins in his neck stood out. Yet he bit his lip and said nothing.

“The little girl’s too afraid to talk?” Spike said and pushed him.

Instinctively Red shoved him back, and they both put up their fists. Officer Goodman quickly stepped between them. “Let’s stop this train before it wrecks. Red, you take the weed-eater over there by the fence. Spike, you start pushing the mower on the other side.”

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“I hope you thanked Officer Goodman,” Rev. Prediger said at the beginning of that week’s session. “When push literally came to shove, he saved you from spending another month here.”

“Man, this counseling crap don’t work.” Red sulked in his chair.

Rev. Prediger leaned forward slightly. “That’s right. You’re the one who has to do the work. Tell me, what were you thinking when Spike pushed you?”

“I’m gonna teach this little wetback beaner a lesson.”

“And did that thought help you calm down and control yourself?”

“It helped me get even.”

“And it almost helped get you another month, or maybe an assault charge.”

“What the hell did you expect me to do? He started it.”

“He started it, so I’ve gotta finish it. I gotta teach him a lesson, give him a taste of his own medicine, show him how it feels. No one does that to me and gets away with it. I had a right to be angry. He got what he deserved. I ain’t no punk. I ain’t afraid of nobody. I don’t back down for nothing. A real man has to fight. I gotta show him who’s boss.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Red responded, not grasping the obvious satire.

“All of those are hot thoughts, Red. They will only bring you more charges and longer sentences. Our prisons are full of men who think like that. If you want to change your angry feelings and your aggressive behavior, you have to change your thinking.”

“Well, I just get mad sometimes. I can’t help it.”

“Right. You can’t change your feelings directly, but you can change the thinking that causes your feelings. Try thinking, ‘I can handle this, I’m not going to let him get to me, this is not worth getting angry about. Losing my temper will only make things worse. As long as I stay cool, I’m in control. Violence won’t solve anything; it will just get me another charge.’ Then you might avoid a fight, a charge, and a sentence.”

“Hell, I might as well be a little girl.” For all his tough-guy act Red feared weakness more than anything.

“Look, who’s in charge here, you or your feelings? Are you going to let your anger punk you?”

Red didn't know what to say to that. Deep down he knew the Preacher Man was right. In fact, Red even liked his blunt straightforwardness. Man to man—that was the way men talked to each other.

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The next morning Red had just sat down with his tray at breakfast when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Spike advancing towards him, clutching a fork in his right hand. Intuitively he knew that Spike was going to try to stab him in the neck. When Spike was within two feet of him, Red threw his hot coffee in his face. He jumped up, grabbed him by the back of his hair, and slammed his head down against the table—once, twice, three times. Spike fell to the ground, half conscious. Within seconds the guards had Red in a physical restraint. Back to the cell. Another twenty-four-hour confinement. Red bloodied his knuckles on the wall. How else could he get his anger out?

* * *

“Well, you got another month added to your sentence,” Rev. Prediger began at the following session.

In those words Red heard accusation, judgment, condemnation. He felt like a failure, a disappointment. Covering his shame with anger, he nearly shouted, “It was self-defense. That little taco-eating greaser was gonna kill me.”

“So you beat him to the punch.”

“Damn straight.”

“Yet, you're the one whose sentence was increased.”

“Yeah, that's messed up. He tries to kill me, and I get punished.”

“Mhmm.” Rev. Prediger nodded.

Red took that close-lipped response as agreement with the punishment. Angered even more, he came out swinging.

“What was I supposed to do? Sit there and let him stab me? If I followed your advice, I’d be dead!”

“Well, let’s talk about what else you could have done. What other options did you have?”

“I’m done talking!” Red screamed, jumping to his feet. “Talking don’t get you nowhere. Screw this counseling crap, and screw you.”

Rev. Prediger remained seated and spoke a little more softly than he had. “You met a situation you didn’t know how to handle, and now you’re so frustrated you’re ready to give up.”

“You don’t know what it’s like. You haven’t been through what I have. You’ve never been on the streets. You sit in an office all day and just repeat what you’ve read in a book. You get to go home at night. You don’t know what it’s like to be locked up in a cell.” Red’s voice grew even louder with every sentence.

Looking up at his young client, Rev. Prediger said, “You don’t believe I can understand you.”

“You don’t care about me. You’re just here for the money. You want to see us locked up, or else you wouldn’t have a job.” Red’s voice nearly broke, and he felt a lump in his throat.

“You don’t feel that you can trust me.”

“You got that right! I’m out of here!” Red headed towards the door.

“Wait, Red,” Rev. Prediger called after him. “Let’s talk a little longer.”

“Go to hell!” With that, Red stormed out the door and slammed it behind him.

Red had thought the Preacher Man was on his side, but now he turned out to be just like everyone else. Blame him for something that wasn’t his fault and then punish him for it. The

story of his life. How would he ever get out of there when everyone was against him? Back in his cell, he felt more alone than he ever had. He had no one on his side.

* * *

If it had not been required, Red would never have gone back to counseling. By refusing, though, he would only get himself into more trouble. He returned the next week as angry as ever, expecting a lecture about his behavior during the last session.

“Good morning, Red,” Rev. Prediger said with his habitual gold-toothed smile. “Come in and have a seat.”

Without responding, Red sat in his usual chair, folded his arms across his chest, and stared at the floor.

“I’ve thought a lot since our last meeting, Red,” Rev. Prediger began. “Somehow I have the feeling Spike isn’t really the one you’re angry at. I’d like you to close your eyes again and ask yourself whom you’re really angry at, Red.”

Relieved to avoid eye contact, Red closed his eyes, though he had no intention of examining himself.

“Don’t strain for an answer. Just let it come. Keep your eyes closed. Breathe. And let the answer come to you.”

Suddenly, Red felt a sick feeling in his stomach, a pain in his chest, a dry tightness in his throat. He was choking down a sob. In an involuntary moment of clarity he saw what he had never seen before. He spoke in spite of himself, though in a barely audible voice.

“My grandparents.”

“Your grandparents?” Rev. Prediger raised his eyebrows. “But I thought you got along with them. You love your grandmother’s cooking.”

Red's eyes were moistening.

“My grandparents raised me till I was six. They told me they were my parents. Then, when I was six, I met my real father, and when I was eight, I met my mother. My grandparents then told me my parents were never there because they had to work, even on Christmas, but that was a lie. My dad was in prison for dealing. My mom was strung out on dope.”

“And you're angry because—” Rev. Prediger started.

“Because my grandparents lied to me,” Red interrupted, his voice betraying the hurt beneath his anger. “When they introduced me to my dad, he just said, ‘What’s up?’ and when they told my mom, ‘This is your son,’ she said, ‘So?’ They didn’t say they were glad to meet me. They didn’t ask anything about me. They didn’t say they were sorry for not being there. They didn’t hug me. Nothing. My mom never called me or came to visit me after that, and my dad didn’t either after he got out of prison.” Tears hovered on his eyelids.

“And that seemed grossly unfair to you. How did that make you feel about yourself?”

“They thought that I wasn’t even worth coming to see or talking to, that I was just no good.” The tears trickled down his cheeks.

“And every time someone else made you feel worthless, you lashed out at him because you couldn’t strike back at your parents. Maybe that’s what your violence is all about.”

Red bent over, put his face in his hands, and sobbed.

Rev. Prediger let him cry. When the tearful spasm had passed, the reverend changed his tack.

“You got pretty heavily into drugs yourself, didn’t you?”

Red raised his head and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. “Yeah, I started marijuana when I was just six or seven and moved to heroin by the time I was twelve.”

“And what effect did the drugs have on you?”

“Man, they totally took over. I mean I would break into people’s houses to steal and beat up complete strangers and rob them just to get money for drugs. And I would leave home for weeks at a time.”

“So the drugs were in control of you. You weren’t really in control of yourself. Do you think the same thing might have happened with your parents?”

“Yeah, maybe.” Red softened a bit on thinking that he and his parents were not so different.

“What about your grandparents? They had already raised their own children. They may have been caring for their elderly parents. And now, when they were no longer so young, they had to raise an infant, spending money on him they could have saved for their retirement. Why do you think they did that?”

“I dunno. Because they wanted to help me?” The thought of their sacrifice touched him.

“They had a difficult situation, and they probably didn’t know how else to handle it. They didn’t want to burden you with a truth too heavy for you to shoulder when you were just five or six years old, so they lied to you. Can you forgive them, and your parents too?”

“What, and just play like it never happened? Act as if it was all right?” Red’s temper was flaring up again.

“No, not at all. If nothing were wrong, there would be nothing to forgive. I mean understanding why they did what they did, letting go of your anger and the desire to get back at them, and moving on with your life. You don’t have to carry around this heavy burden of anger anymore.”

“Well, maybe I can forgive them. I don’t know.” First not fight back and now let go of his anger?

Rev. Prediger took an inch-thick plastic binder from his desk and put it in Red’s hands.

“Is that binder heavy?” he asked out of the blue.

“No, not really.”

“Hold it in your left hand, and stick your left arm straight out to the side. Is it heavy now?”

“A little.”

“Okay. Just keep holding it out to your side until I say you can let it down.” Rev. Prediger then continued talking about anger issues for a couple of minutes.”

“How’s your arm feeling now?”

“It’s starting to hurt.” Red began to lower his arm.

“Down let it down! You’ve just been holding that binder for a little while. How would it feel if you had to hold it out to your side for an hour?”

“Unbearable.”

“For twenty-four hours?”

“They’d have to take me to the hospital.”

“For years on end?”

“It would kill me.”

“Now let go of the binder. Just drop it on the floor.”

Thud.

“How does your arm feel now?”

“A hundred percent better.” Red rubbed his upper arm and smiled from relief.

“Red, imagine that binder is your anger and it contains everything you’re angry about. The longer you hold on to it the more it hurts you. You’ll feel so much better when you finally let it all go.”

Mow down a weed, and it grows back; pull it out by the roots, and it dies. The Preacher Man had just gotten to the root of Red’s anger. Maybe Officer Goodman was right about him after all. For the remainder of his sentence Red didn’t get into a single fight. He wanted to make the Preacher Man proud of him.

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A month before his release date Red had a twenty-four-hour furlough. It was a time to readjust to life in the community. When his uncle drove him up to his grandparents’ home, his aunt and five-year-old cousin, Russell, were waiting there for him also.

“Red!” Russell screamed, running and jumping into his arms when he walked through the door. “Did you graduate? Are you done with school yet?” Red knew that his cousin idolized him and that his aunt and uncle had told Russell he was away at school because the truth would have shattered him.

“Uh . . . yeah, almost. I still have to go back for a little bit, and then I’ll be home for good.”

“And then we can play catch every day! Do you want to play now? I brought my glove.”

“Maybe a little later. How about if you help me get my stuff out of the car?” Red asked and then greeted the other family members.

“Sure!”

Red opened the hatchback of the SUV, lifted out a large duffel bag with all the things he had stored at his uncle’s, and set it on the ground. Russell tried to lift it but couldn’t.

“Here, you take this backpack, and let me get that,” Red said.

He understood now. Maybe some burdens were just too heavy for a boy Russell’s age to carry.

Glossary of Names

Red: is meant to suggest a fiery temperament.

Heissman: in addition to recalling the athlete and suggesting size and strength, the name literally means “hot (*heiss*) man” in German, not in a sexual sense, of course, but in an emotional one. He has a quick temper.

Spike: a nickname, given without further explanation.

Agudo: sharp (Spanish). He is a “sharp spike,” apt for his aggressive provocations.

Prediger: preacher (German)

Goodman: = good man

Russell = little red one (French). He looks up to Red.