

Patron Saint

“He’s the patron saint of working men, you know,” said Wendell, as he shifted his large frame and got comfortable in the porch rocking chair. Two old geezers, one of us somewhat sane, were going to have another one of Wendell’s goofy conversations.

“You mean St. Joseph?” I asked
“Oh, sure,” he said. “That’s why he traveled around looking for work all over the place.”

“With Mary on a donkey?” I asked?
“Well, sure.” said Wendell, “on that night, anyway. He probably heard there was work in Jerusalem.”
“You mean Bethlehem.”
“Right. He was a carpenter, don’t cha know. Might have heard the news about a palace or a sindagog going up somewhere. So he pops Mary up on old Donner and off they go again.”

“You mean Blitzen,” I said.
“Right.” says Wendell. “There wasn’t any Union Hall to go to. No bulletin board with job postings back then. You had to keep your ears open and hang around down by the station for the camel drivers to come through and ask if they heard of any construction starting up.”
“And drink beer,” I interjected.
“Don’t be a smart ass,” said Wendell, “they drank wine.”

You could feel sorry for my dopey friend Wendell, but if you had spent any time watching him cross the road without looking, or riding his lawn mower to the store when no one could run fast enough to stop him, you’d realize he must have the hardest working Guardian Angel this side of the Pearly Gates. They say God protects

drunks and fools. Ordinarily Wendell was neither, until the night thirty years ago when he went out drinking after his freshman biology exam. He lost control of the Chevy convertible as it spun wildly off the road and crashed into a sleepy fleabag hotel in the Catskills. Without a seatbelt, it’s a wonder Wendell stayed in the saddle, so to speak. The Chevy bashed and bounced off 6 parked cars and a US Mail truck, before plowing into Units Number 3 and 4. The latter was occupied by a young lady and an older man who would have a lot of explaining to do when he got out of the hospital.

Wendell’s head must have hit every two-by-four as he went flying through the wreckage of the High Peak Motel. He hasn’t been the same since. He lives up the road with a sister, and each day walks down to my place, oblivious to the cars that zoom by him on the busy road. When he gets to my house, after wandering on and off the pavement inspecting anything along the side of the road that catches his interest, Wendell stops and waits for me to come out and invite him up on the porch. He loves to sit for a while in the wooden rocking chairs and explain everything in the universe to me. Some days I stay inside and feel like I’m hiding. This goes on all summer and fall, until Wendell flies off to spend the winter with his younger brother in Florida.

“So, “ I asked Wendell, “Saint Joseph traveled all over 48 states looking for work?”
“Don’t be silly,” he said, “ there’s 50 states now.”
“Oh, I forgot,” I said, “we bought Mexico.”

“No-o-o! Alaska and Puerto Rica. You don’t know your geology. Hahahaha!”

Wendell loves it when I play the fool, though I’m pretty sure he suspects the ruse. His sister and her family have grown tired of his banter and his needs ... unfortunate, but understandable ... and he seldom has the opportunity to feel important, or even superior. So, I often ask his advice on little things.

“It’s clouding up, Wendell. Do you think rain is coming?” I asked that afternoon.

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“Rain? Coming? Only one way to tell,” he said. And with that, he got up from the rocker, stepped off the porch and walked toward the road. Proudly making a production of the joke he’d just thought up, he shuffled up to the macadam, puts his toes on the edge of the grass as if it was the end of a diving board, and then bowed way out over the road’s surface. I cringed, thinking he might lose his balance and fall into the path of an oncoming car. Leaning even further out, Wendell put his hand to his forehead, shading his eyes like some long ago Hiawatha. He looked north, then swooped the upper half of his body around and stared off to the south. Then he turned and ambled back to the porch.

“Any rain coming?” I asked as Wendell plopped himself back down in the rocker. I’m a good straight man.

“Huh?” He looked truly confused.

I knew he’d forgotten what he had been about. His eyes screwed up in thought. In a moment he would realize he’d lost a conversational thread again and begin to feel bad.

“Did you see any rain coming up the road?” I reminded him. “Or anyone on a donkey?”

“No,” he said, now deflated. “This isn’t the road to Jerusalem.” He was silent for a few moments, while for the first time I wondered if this might be my Road to Emmaus. If you weren’t listening in Sunday School, that’s where Christ disguised himself as a mere mortal after his resurrection to show people truth is often hidden.

“You want some coffee, Wendell?”
“I’ve had my two cups today,” he said.
I knew he wanted a cup. He always wants a cup. He was afraid to break one of the many rules his sister has made for him, this one to keep him from getting too jittery.

“You won’t tell anyone I had coffee, will you?” he asked.

“Your caffeine secrets are safe with me,” I said with a chuckle. I stood up to go in and get two mugs.

He looked up suddenly and said, “Who is your patron saint?”

“Saint George,” I said, without a thought.

“You mean the guy with the dragons and the roundtable and all?” he asked.

“No, the guy with the piano, George Gershwin.”

“But he’s Jewish,” said Wendell.

“So is God,” I replied.

Well, you’d think I’d just made the funniest joke this side of Paradise. Wendell laughed and laughed, and was still giggling when I brought the mugs of coffee out from the kitchen. I always wrap his in a dish towel, because his hands shake a bit.

Quiet for a moment, we sipped our coffee. While Wendell was thinking about God-knows-what, I sat and thought of all the things inside the house I needed to do ... a package to wrap, the refrigerator ice maker to fix, the ...

“I have a patron saint,” said Wendell.

“Who’s that,” I asked.

“You,” he replied, without looking at me.

Ah, me. What could I say to that? It’s a heavy responsibility to be someone’s patron saint, I was thinking. Still, I’ve never received a nicer compliment.

“You could find a better one, Wendell,” I said.

He looked off the porch to the road.

“Maybe,” he said. “But this one comes with a free cup of coffee.”

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