

Slice of Pie

by **Bill Cameron, 1963-**

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Blue ceramic fish on the wall, three on a diagonal, with gold bubbles. Blub blub blub. They used to be in the bathroom off the rec room in the basement. She moved them upstairs after Dad died. Said they felt homey, and it was her house now, for golly's sake. The other thing she moved up was the framed sampler, hung above the toilet. Its colors had faded over the years, but its message was still clear.

If you sprinkle
When you tinkle,
Be a sweetie
And wipe the seatie.

Goddamn thing never ceased to piss me off. Ever since I was a kid. Bugged Dad, too, which was why it had been consigned to the dungeon. I guess the sampler's what had me in such a foul mood. I was staring at it—captive audience, if you

follow my stream of self-consciousness—when the doorbell rang. The sound jolted me out of my irritable reverie and I sprinkled on the seatie.

I heard the tump of Ma's Keds across the living room. The front door opened as I zipped up. Muffled voices. I swiped toilet paper across the seat and flushed, washed my hands. By the time I got to the living room, she was already handing him the twenty dollar bill.

"What's going on, Ma?"

The disheveled fellow at the door—dark brown jacket missing half the buttons, greased-back hair—tossed me a look when I came in, a fuck you glint in his eyes. He exuded a funk laced with tobacco and sweat. Ma squeezed the bill against his palm with one hand, patted his arm with the other. I thought it was awfully hot out to be wearing a coat.

"This is Mr. Franklin. He lives in the apartments up the block. He locked his keys in his car and I'm loaning him some money for a locksmith." She looked at him and smiled. He tried smiling back. I doubt he'd brushed his teeth this century.

"You ever seen him before, Ma?"

She looked at him and opened her mouth, but he horned in. "I live up the street," he said. "In the apartments." He gestured vaguely with the twenty dollar bill. "In 3257. Up the street."

"Good for you. Why don't you go bum your dope money off someone who isn't on a fixed income?"

"Raymond!"

"This guy is running a scam on you, Ma."

She sucked air and drew herself up to her full five feet, four inches. Her capri pants and sunny, open-collared shirt belied her attempt at fearsomeness, but the crisp edge to her voice was clear enough. "Raymond, I will not have you speaking to a guest this way—a guest in need, no less. You will apologize to him immediately."

"Ma! He's conning you. Probably doesn't even have a car."

"Listen," Franklin muttered, easing back into the doorway, "I'll get the money somewhere else."

Great idea, but Ma was having none of that. "Don't be ridiculous," she said. "Take the money. Pay no attention to my son. He learned his bad manners from his father, bless his soul."

"What a bunch of crap." I turned on my heel and stalked away, headed to the dining room, the kitchen, anywhere. Ma jawed some more with Franklin, the sound chasing me through the house. More apologies and whatever. Him wheedling. Then the front door closed. The bells she'd hung from the doorknob jingled.

She found me in the kitchen, bemused by doilies and trivets. Everything had changed since Dad died. The sampler in the bathroom, the goddamn bells on the door. "Raymond, your behavior out there was appalling. I won't tolerate it. Mr. Franklin was my guest."

"Your guest scammed you. It ain't the good ol' days anymore, Ma. People are scumbags." I nosed around on the countertop, looking for something to distract me from her indignant glare. I didn't really want to get into it with her, but I

couldn't help but bristle at her ongoing foolishness. I lifted the stainless steel cover off a dessert plate on the windowsill, discovered an apple pie underneath, neatly cut into eighths. Two eighths already gone. I got a plate out of the cupboard, then started to open the silverware drawer for a fork. Ma pushed the drawer shut, almost catching my hand.

"What do you think you're doing?" she said.

"What do you mean? I'm getting a slice of pie."

"No, you're not. Your behavior has been reprehensible."

"Don't be ridiculous, Ma."

"Perhaps next time you think you're going to throw your weight around in my house, you'll think again."

"Ma—!"

"Mr. Franklin was my guest. You shall have no pie."

She locked her eyes on mine and set her jaw. I threw up my hands. "Fine. Whatever. When you never see Mr. Franklin again, don't whine to me about it."

I left her frowning among the trivets. Rather than go straight to my car, I walked up toward the apartments where Franklin claimed to live. Three boxy quad-plexes called the Linda Loo, probably after some shoddy developer's daughter. Warped green aluminum siding, circa 1963, and torpid arborvitae formed the unifying design theme. One of the buildings was numbered 3257, so give Franklin credit for doing a little research before running his scam. I didn't see him or his mythical locksmith anywhere.

I went back to my car, drove home. Tried not to think about it.

Since Dad died, I didn't come around Ma's much. All the knickknacks and tchotchkes that materialized out of nowhere had turned the house into a granny museum. Ma moved the TV out of the living room and hid it under a blanket in the basement. She converted my old bedroom into her sewing room, and covered the pool table with a sheet of plywood so she could spread out her quilting projects.

My sister, Kathy, says I have no business being upset. It's not like I live there anymore. Ma had to live in a man's house until my father died, a house ruled by power tools and televised sports. She's just now finding her own way, Kathy tells me. A sixty-five-year-old woman finding her own way? What the hell was that supposed to mean? I'd have been content to go my whole life without ever learning what an antimacassar was.

But the next day I drove by after work. Didn't stop. I looked up at the house, then drove past the Linda Loo, rolled through the neighborhood. I was searching for Franklin, I realized. No idea what I would do if I found him. Demand Ma's twenty back, I suppose.

But I didn't see him that day, or the next.

Kathy called me the following afternoon at work. "Mom says she's seen you driving past the house."

"That's ridiculous," I muttered.

"Ray," she said, "I know Dad is gone, but Mom doesn't need you to look after her. She can take care of herself."

"She handled that scammer real well the other day."

"That's none of your business." Her voice was sharp, but then she continued more softly, "You've got to let go, Ray. I loved Dad, too, and I miss him, but in a lot

of ways he could be a real prick.” I had no response to that, so she added, “Come over today. You and Mom can talk, clear things up. I’ll be there to help.”

I rolled my eyes, but agreed to stop by when I got off work.

Ma and Kathy were scrapbooking when I arrived. The coffee table was covered with colored paper, bottles of glue, three or four pairs of scissors, and a scattering of old photos. I recognized some shots of Kathy and her husband with her kids, a few of Kathy as a child herself. Kathy was five years older than me, and by the time I arrived on the scene the camera had lost its allure. There wouldn’t be any pics of me in the mix.

“What’s going on?” I said, as if it weren’t obvious.

Ma looked up at me, her lips a tight line. Since I was last over, she’d gotten her hair cut into a bob better suited to a woman half her age. “I hope your attitude has improved today, Raymond,” she sniffed.

“Mom,” Kathy said, “you promised you wouldn’t do this.”

I waved Kathy off. “Gotta use the bathroom,” I muttered. I didn’t, but after that welcome I figured any excuse to get away. In the bathroom, I closed my eyes, refused to look at the goddamn sampler. Why I gave a shit about Ma and her twenty dollar bill I had no idea. To hell with her, I thought. I’d go out and make some small talk, glance at some pictures, then get the hell out of there. Let Kathy deal with it when Franklin or someone else ripped Ma off for serious green.

I flushed the toilet like I’d gone in there for a reason, then rinsed my hands and drew a breath.

“Raymond,” Ma said when I returned to the living room, “I didn’t hear your water go into the toilet. If you piddled on the seat, you better have cleaned up after yourself.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Ma—!”

Her eyes flared. “Don’t use that tone with me, young man! And don’t you ever take the Lord’s name in vain in my presence.”

My hands clenched at my sides. “What, I’m supposed—”

“I think you need some quiet time alone to think about your attitude.” She folded her hands across her chest.

I opened my mouth, a retort on my lips, but instead turned and plunged out the front door and down the front steps. I heard my sister follow after me. “Ray? I’m sorry! Ray?” I didn’t see any point in answering. I’d been grounded, no longer allowed to watch TV or play with my little friends.

“Ray!”

I stopped and shook my head, turned without looking. “I’m gonna take a walk. I’ll be back in a little while.” I could see her feet on the top step of the porch.

“You’re embarrassed,” she said. “And I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that. It’s not fair, I know, but she’s just trying to tell you she doesn’t need looking after anymore.”

“Yeah? Well next time it might not be twenty bucks,” I said. I turned and headed up the street. The air was so dry it crackled. The goddamn sampler was stuck in my head—If you sprinkle when you tinkle, be a sweetie and wipe the seatie. Like a tune, it ran over and over again. I shook my head, tried to think of something else. Tried to look at the sun-browned lawns I passed, the drought-hammered flower beds.

If you sprinkle
When you tinkle

She should have left the damned thing in the basement.

I turned the corner near the market a couple blocks up from Ma's house, head down, and bumped into a figure coming the other way. Smelled old cigarettes and pomade.

"Excuse me," a voice said. I looked up and the first thing I noticed was the dark brown jacket missing half its buttons. Then I looked into his face, into his eyes. He recognized me, started to smile, but that same fuck you glint was there.

"Hey, man—"

I punched him, that quick. Didn't even think about it, just pop, and a thin line of blood appeared on his lip. His eyes got wide, but the fuck you didn't go away. I hit him again, in the chest this time.

"Jesus—!" He turned and started to run, but I grabbed him by his piece-of-shit coat and spun him down onto the sidewalk. He started to curl up, but then tried to get tricky and launched a foot at me. I caught it with one hand, tossed it off to the side. Kicked him in the ass. His eyes bulged as I popped him in the soft spot between his cheekbone and lower jaw. A sharp spear of pain shot from my knuckle to my elbow. I didn't care. He groaned, tried to crawl away. I grabbed his jacket, pulled him to his feet.

"How's that for wiping the goddamn seatie, asshole?"

He cringed in response, one hand raised in defense. I pushed him back down, hard. His head bounced off the sidewalk, made a sound like a melon struck by a baseball bat. His eyes rolled back and tears welled and he pulled his hands up in front of his bleeding face.

"Jesus, man—what's yer problem?" he whined.

"You know what my problem is, you fuck." I heard a sound like an insect in one ear. "Scamming an idiot old woman. It's only because it was just twenty bucks you're still breathing." I kicked him once more and left him to ruminate on that thought.

It was a couple blocks back to Ma's house, far enough to give me a chance to calm down a bit and rub the blood off my knuckles before going inside. Kathy was still there, sitting with Ma on the sofa, the two of them looking through the scrapbook. Kathy gave me a tight little smile, then turned her attention back to the pictures. Ma just looked at me and said, "I hope your attitude improved during your walk. You're too old to not know your place."

"Yeah, well, I ran into your friend Franklin." No reason to get into the details, but I was feeling proud of myself, inspired by the raw, rubbery feeling in my bruised hands. "You won't have to worry about him scamming you ever again." I thought that would shut her the hell up.

But she only pursed her lips. "Raymond, you're no better a judge of character than your father was," she said, her voice tinged with a mix of disappointment and satisfaction. "Mr. Franklin paid me back this morning, plus five dollars extra for my trouble. I gave him the last slice of pie."

