

The Bakery.

The baker, sweat dripping from his eyebrows and down off the end of his nose, stomped impatiently to answer the pounding on his back door.

“What do you want?” he thundered, glaring at the thin, rain-soaked man who stood in the open doorway.

“Could you spare a loaf of bread?” Pale blue eyes, gleaming in their sockets and surrounded by long, straggly blond hair and a full, unkempt red beard, peered at the baker. They were kind yet timid eyes, like a kitten wanting affection yet wary of more abuse.

“What are you, a tramp? A bum? Who do you think you are, begging from me?” The baker’s apron was cinched tight at the waist, forcing pounds of limp fat to hang over his broad, leather belt and pressing the apron’s cloth to a wrinkle-free tautness. He glared, eyes wide and nostrils flared, at the man.

A cheering optimism tuning his words, the beggar answered: “No. I’m none of those things. I’m a nobody and not having any luck; just getting by. I write stories, however. You can have one...in exchange.”

“I don’t have time for reading. Here, have these crumbs. It’s all I got to give you. Now go.”

The beggar wanted to scream out loud. He wanted the baker to hear him say: *Get screwed!* *Crumbs mean nothing to a starving man!* His hunger triumphed, though, and he kept his thoughts to himself.

He watched as the baker filled his outstretched cupped hands with crumbs, and bits of bread also fell out of the bag.

“Thanks. You ever have any loaves left over?” he asked politely while studying the baker with a sideways glance. The sweat-stained armpits, massive, fat-soft arms with streaking-purple veins, hands the size of fry pans, and tree-stump-like legs all registered with the beggar. He saw that the baker’s hair was shorn close to the scalp, and his round-red face was shaved smooth. Double-chinned and with the back of his immense neck perched on his shirt collar, the baker stood glaring back impatiently.

“Aye, but I give them to my pigs. I have to feed them first. Now go!” He watched the rain-soaked man walk away, sucking crumbs from his cupped hands. His jeans were held with orange, plastic, baler-twine and hung heavily from his thin, soaking hips. As he walked, his stick-like legs hardly moved the wet denim. His unkempt hair dripped into his open, faded denim jacket and disappeared down his soaked T-shirt. The baker shook his head and slammed the door. The following morning, and the many days that soon stretched into weeks, all started with the same routine: the angry baker and the submissive beggar would meet, words would be exchanged, the door would slam, and crumbs would be devoured.

Seemingly permanent, steel grey clouds and non-stop rain had settled over the small, remote North Atlantic Island.

“Where the hell do you live anyway?” roared the baker one morning.

“Anywhere dry,” answered Paul, moving suddenly and involuntarily backward, startled by the loudness of the baker’s voice.

“Why’ve you picked on me for your handouts? I’m tryin’ to make my living here. I cannot give you your meals. For Christ’s sake! Don’t you have any family? Anyone that cares?”

“Nope. I did once. I had it all. But it went. I don’t know.... I tried to make my life fit back together...but the pieces were all wrong...and wouldn’t fit anymore. I don’t know why it’s you

except that you got more than me.” His voice was so kind and sincere that the baker, though usually too impatient and busy with his daily routine to make time for anyone, made time to listen.

“Come in for a minute and get warm. Don’t think you can stay ‘cause you can’t. What would folks think seeing a tramp back here, huh? They’d think I’d gone flipping nuts, that’s what! ‘Here, eat this pasty. You want some tea?’”

The beggar nodded. He couldn’t talk because he’d stuffed so much of the still-warm, savory meat and potato pie into his mouth while his eyes surveyed the large, rectangular room. Concrete blocks, four high, formed the bottom of the crude yet strongly built extension, with rough-cut wooden struts and corrugated tin sheets nailed together to form the three walls and sloped roof. A diesel generator stuck halfway through the wall farthest from the house, vibrating and roaring as it provided electricity and heat for the bakery. A layer of floury dust covered the tops of the seldom used shelves, and the hand-hewed beams dated the building’s time as a bakery. The once shiny, steel oven doors were baked-brown, as were the baking tins and racks. The wooden and steel countertops were covered in fine white flour from the day’s baking. The concrete floor had a thin coating also and was scuffed only where the baker moved. The whole room was well organized and exuded a maturity that only decade-in, decade-out use can impart.

“Ummm,” was all Paul could manage for some time, but he kept grinning. The baker shook his head and sighed aloud. “Madge, here!” He bellowed over the roaring generator and the whirring din of electric ovens and ceiling fans. “Here’s this writer fellow I’ve been telling you about. This is my wife. No swearing now, you hear?”

Wiping his mouth with his hand and then wiping his hand on his dirty, soaking jeans, the stranger offered it to her.

“Pleased to meet you, Madge. My name’s Paul, Paul Kitchin.”

Madge looked at the offered hand, shook it, and then wiped her hand on her apron.

Nervousness overtook the woman and made her momentarily speechless. Paul looked at the baker’s wife and guessed her age to be the mid to late sixties. Her hair was neat and short, and her pudgy face had grown into the same shape as the round buns her husband baked. She was a replica of one of the cottage loaves displayed in their front window from the neck down.

“Are you a Christian man?” she finally managed to ask.

“Sure. I believe in God. But isn’t that the same as pretending you’re famous, rich, and happy when you’re not? Just that, pretending? Am I an advertisement for God’s fairness? For God’s goodness and charity?” Paul’s voice stabbed the air with sarcasm.

“Now look, you rascal! If you’re going to insult our religion, you can go. Hear me?”

“It’s all right, Bill.” Looking at Paul, the lady smiled and quickly ran her eyes over him. “My, my, you’re in some state. And so near Christmas. Come with me, young man.” Her long, exhaled sigh reminded Paul of his mother’s attitude just before she had to do a necessary yet disagreeable job like cleaning the toilet bowl.

“What are you doing’ Madge? You cannot treat him like some lost puppy, you know?”

“We’ve more than him, Bill, and I’m going to give what I can. You’ve too many old things you cannot fit into anymore, and a hot bath won’t harm him either.”

“Off with you then. Go on, go! I’m too busy to be hanging around.”

Madge and Paul left the stifling-hot, noise-filled bakery, walked through the shop, and up dimly lit stairs to a bathroom. She ran a hot, steaming bath, handed him a clean towel, and left without speaking. Soon, he was soaking and thawing his still-cold, rain-soaked limbs and body. The door opened, and Madge walked in.

“Don’t worry; you’ve got naught I haven’t seen before. Here are some of Bill’s clothes and socks. If you give me your things, I’ll wash them, and you can fetch them tomorrow. Just come down when you’re done.”

“Thanks. Thank you so much.” Tears filled his eyes. Madge watched him briefly and then chuckled softly, tilting her round head to one side.

“It’s alright, young man. I can see you’re honest. But how’d you get in such a state? You seem smart and bright. You’re skinny, all right, but you look healthy enough and look like a whippet. Bill says you’re a writer. You mustn’t be any good, though.” Madge smiled kindly. “Finish your bath and come downstairs when you’re done.”

Paul lay back, sighing deeply. *I’m good*, he thought. *I’m good. I need a break, that is all. There’s an ass for every seat and a pair of eyes for every book. I’m good; I need a break, is all.*

He sat up and scrubbed himself. The soap smelled good, and when he finally stepped from the emptying bath, he noticed the thick, grey-black ring of grime he’d left, so using his hands, he tried as best he could to clean the tub, too. The underwear and trousers were far too big, and so was the heavy, quilted plaid shirt. The socks, though, were a good fit. He walked downstairs with the trouser waist folded over six inches and held firmly up with one hand. Madge gave him a comb and bade him sit at the table, now covered in pies, biscuits, cakes, jams, and a pot of freshly made tea.

His eyes studied the room. A polished brass barometer hung on a white plastered wall, and little hand-painted ceramic figurines and old horse-brasses decorated what would be otherwise empty spaces. A mahogany sideboard and roll-top desk, an oak rocker, and an over-stuffed, Victorian three-piece suite filled half of the large room. A rosewood dining table with leather-backed chairs, an easy chair covered with a beautifully colored hand-made quilt, and a floor-to-

ceiling bookcase jammed with paperbacks took up the half he was seated in. A miner's carbide lamp, old copper jam pans with brass handles, copper kettles with brass bottoms, various clocks, family pictures, and paintings of nature scenes decorated the painted white walls and end tables. The room was extremely dark because of the small, curtained windows, and the floor was covered with a somber, dark brown, yellow-specked carpet. Two antique Tilley lamps hung from the chocolate-brown ceiling beams.

"Eat all you want. I'll make you more tea when you're ready." Madge sat at the far end of the room in the old, wooden rocking chair fitted with thin, faded, pale green cushions tied at the seat and top. The chair squeaked and groaned from her familiar weight. At the same time, the coal fire, with spluttering, leaping flames, heated the room, and occasionally, the wavering firelight, ignited by some hidden pocket of coal gas, would burn bright, filling the centuries-old darkness with brightness just for an instant.

"You and your husband are the first to be kind to me in years. I'm normally treated like scum. And, well, I want to thank you again."

"You're not from these parts, for sure. Where's your home, and how'd you get here?" Madge asked.

"I've been all over the world and back- twenty countries, I think, plus a lot of America. It's a long story, Madge. But I tell you this; the folks back home wouldn't believe people still live like this."

"What do you mean, 'like this'?" she asked, looking affectionately around her home.

"Well, America, and California in particular, is so, well, modern. I mean, your home is an antique- a living antique. If you lived in California, people would pay to visit you just to see your beautiful home and bakery."

“That’s as maybe. But tell me about yourself, if you have time. How’d you come to end up here?”

“Seems like all I got nowadays is time.” He had to keep stopping his story because his mouth was never empty. “I can tell you that I’m well-educated, college even in America. I’ve owned a business; I was married too. I was upwardly mobile, and then my life fell apart. I lost interest, you see? No one I knew meant anything to me anymore. Nothing I did seemed important. I seemed to do so damn well. I was doing damn well, and then, something inside me broke. So, one day, I just walked away from it all: my home, my wife, a thriving business, and a bulging bank account. I walked away, looking for something meaningful, and I wanted to write. I wanted to create something real in my life. And I did. I experienced new things, and I wrote all the time. Short stories, letters, novels, poetry, even a play...it was great. It made me feel good inside. I got good feedback from people I knew and publishers, but nothing much was published. I kept hoping and waiting for my break. I finally had to sell my typewriter; now, I don’t even have the money to send my manuscripts anywhere. But I’m good; I know I am. I need that one break.”

“Aye, we all need a break, I guess. But what about working? You cannot just beg off working folk. It doesn’t seem right, somehow.”

“It isn’t Madge, right I mean, but when a person gets this far down, it’s nearly impossible to get back up again. Would you hire me? Look at me. I’m forty and a bum. I don’t drink or smoke though, for over ten years now. And while I’m a failure in normal terms, I’m not to myself. I’m lonely, all right. I hate many things and people, but that’s just because those at the top don’t give to the bottom dwellers like me, and I think that’s wrong. Well, you and Bill have certainly restored my faith in people.” He poured a third cup of tea and burped loudly.

“Better out than in,” said Madge, a soft smile lighting her face. “What are you going to do? It’ll be snowing soon, you know. You’re lucky. It’s late this year already. What are you going to do?” Her face was drawn into deep worry lines, and she stared at him, demanding a satisfactory answer.

“I don’t know, Madge. I don’t know. I’ve no future to think about. When you’re nothing, and you got nothing, there’s nothing to think about. I’ve got my stories. Some are written and hidden in a barn outside the village, and others are in my head, but other than that, I’ve only my dreams of one day getting a break.”

“I never talked with one like you before, but it makes me glad for what I got. Bill and I had a son once, but he was killed in a road accident on the mainland eight years ago. Bill has to do all the work now... baking and delivering. I cannot drive without something bad happening,” said Madge, laughing. “Tommy was a good one. Hard-working and a happy enough lad. Can you drive? We couldn’t pay too much- meals and maybe a roof over your head. Let me ask Bill. Would you think about it?” Madge watched Paul and smiled, satisfied that all would be well with this plan. “Come back tomorrow and get your things. I’ll have them all clean, and we’ll know what the boss has to say. Okay?”

Paul stood, quickly grabbing the top of his new trousers and catching them before they slipped off.

“Thank you, kind lady. Tommy must be a terrible miss. I’m sorry you lost him, and I thank you for your kind offer.”

“Aye, if I cannot help you, I’m no Christian. Besides, I feel you’re a canny lad. Just down on your luck, is all.” Madge felt a strange urge to hug this sad stranger. She resisted the impulse and peered into his blue, resigned eyes.

He shook the kind lady's hand, then walked through the shop and into the bakery. The heat blasted his face, and the roaring generator hurt his eardrums. Bill whisked back and forth, opening and closing oven doors while occasionally taking out hot, perfectly browned loaves and buns, then placing white, doughy ones back in the hot ovens. Racks of cooling loaves and buns, plus pies, pasties, pastries, and tarts, stood near the door, ready for loading into the van to be delivered.

“Aye, you off then, lad? Take this for later, then. I cannot stop to talk with you. Folks'll be waiting for me coming.” Bill smiled a big, warm, genuine, ear-to-ear smile for the first time.

“I just wanted to say thanks, Bill. I know it wasn't easy for you to open your door and heart to someone like me, but God, I really appreciate that you did. Thanks.” Paul looked Bill in the eyes while shaking his hand, and then, taking the hot loaf, Paul left.

Paul's clean clothes were left in a neat, folded pile beside the back door later that evening to await his now fully-expected morning return. The clothes sat all day, and the next and the next. Bill looked forward to hearing Paul's knock on the back door, but it didn't come. Once or twice, he even opened the door in anticipation, and Bill scanned the countryside, hoping for a glimpse of Paul. Madge asked the locals who came into her shop if they'd seen a thin man with clothes that didn't fit him, and she even laughed out loud as she recalled how silly he looked walking away holding the trousers up, but no one had seen him. Christmas came and went without a word or sign, and finally, reluctantly, Madge placed his clothes in a box, tied it with string, and, standing on a chair, placed the parcel high up on a flour-covered shelf in the bakery.

“It's funny, that lad coming round and all. No way did I want to get to know him, and yet, he just got to me...you know?” said Bill, forgetting his hurried routine for a few moments.

“Aye, you’re a good one, Father. You’ve always had a soft spot for them that’s not so well off. I know we’ve talked before about Paul, and I want you to know that I respect you for caring for him. Takes a big man to do that.” Madge beamed as she looked at her husband, whose size seemed to grow even bigger now that he had shown that he cared about anyone for the first time since Tommy died.

Now snow fell, covering the hills and valleys in a continuous soft, yet thick, white blanket. Soon, bitter, freezing winds hurtled down from the nearby Polar Region, gripping the island in iron-hard ice. Icicles grew from the bakery’s tin sheets, finally reaching the banks of snow that had drifted against the walls. Days of almost total darkness and bitter cold, when no bird or animal dared to move outside, except the occasional human making their way to the bakery during a moment of relative calm.

Eventually, yet suddenly, spring burst on the scene. Behind the bakery, the frozen slash of lifeless river thundered into action, sweeping snow and ice to the ocean. Seabirds, by the thousands, appeared, wheeling, courting, nesting, shrieking, and calling in their high-rise nests in the cliffs. Calves blared, dogs barked, leaves filled even the ash trees where myriad land-birds nested, while lambs leaped and skipped in abandoned delight. Grasses and wild, blood-red poppies grew tall in the soon-to-be-scythed hay fields where the cut grasses would be hung on wooden field racks to dry. Wildflowers and berries, dog roses, and blackthorn hedges bloomed. June burst in with vivid brilliance of color, and a familiar warm buzzing and humming of life rested over the island.

Towards the end of June, during one very still but hot late afternoon, a police car pulled into the baker’s yard. Madge saw him coming and fetched Bill. The couple waited inside to greet him. The sergeant, from the mainland but working out of a village nearby, stepped from the car

and placed his hat on his head. He carried a worn cardboard folder under his arm, and, with each heavy step producing an ankle-high dust cloud, he walked to the bakery.

“I’m Sergeant Bill Downes, from Targen, working out of Clulow today,” he said while slapping his dusty trouser cuffs. Bill and Bill shook hands, and Madge nodded to him. “I’ve got something here addressed to Bill and Madge at The Bakery, and we managed to trace it as maybe belonging to you.” His voice was nearer a question than a statement.

Bill stood with his monster arm drooped over Madge’s ample shoulders.

“What do you have? What are you on about?” Bill asked impatiently.

“Bill. Let the sergeant have his say,” admonished Madge.

“Did you know a man, a tramp really, named Paul Kitchin?”

“Aye, we did,” answered Bill. He and Madge smiled brightly. “We’ve still got his things waiting for him inside.”

“Aye, a nice young man. We’ve still got his clothes all washed for him. Where is he? He’s alright, isn’t he?” Her voice trailed off and told of her dawning realization that maybe everything wasn’t all right.

“No, he’s not all right, Ma’am. I’m sorry to tell you this...seems he killed himself.” The policeman shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and finally stared down at his dusty shoes.

‘Oh, no!’ Madge exclaimed. Her head drooped to her chest, and Bill’s arm tightened around her shoulders, seeming to hold her upright. “Oh no,” Madge repeated.

“When was this like?” Bill questioned.

“We’re not too sure yet. This stuff was found in a shed on Murph’s farm after some hikers found him lying in the woods by yon glen.” The policeman’s voice changed to a respectful, near whisper. “Been there some months, I’d say... pretty badly decomposed like.”

Madge twisted from Bill’s arm and sat in her rocker: squeak, groan, squeak, groan, squeak, groan.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” she sighed, over and over, in time with her rocking.

“Murph found these writings, really, in his barn, addressed to you two.”

Bill took, then glanced at the dust-smearred, faded-yellow cardboard folder Paul had written on: “To Bill and Madge at The Bakery. I appreciate your kindness to a nothing like me, but I couldn’t take a chance of failing. Not again. Goodbye. Paul.”

“What is this?” asked the baker, one hand upturned in the air, looking confused and deeply saddened. His back sagged as if he were beginning to collapse.

“Seems to be stories and poems like. Guess he was a writer of sorts,” answered the policeman.

“Well, I’ll be... Damn!” the baker said sadly. The baker now stood silent for a while, flicking through the pages. “What are you going to do with him? With his body, I mean?” asked Bill.

The policeman shook his head. “Sad, you know. No one seems to want to know him. Guess the welfare will have to bury him as even his family doesn’t want to take him. It’s sad, all right, Bill.”

“Oh my, oh my.” Squeak, groan, squeak, groan. The sounds came as regularly as if timed by a metronome. Madge hung her head, occasionally sniffing in the ever-darkening room.

“No,” Bill exclaimed. He had decided how to deal with this grief and stood upright. “We’ll put him to rest. Give us a little while, and…” Bill swallowed hard, “I’ll be in to see you when I do my rounds this evening.” Bill wiped one eye with the back of his hand, then wiped under his nose with his index finger. “You can give me the other details then. Let me get to my missus.”

The two men shook hands seriously. The policeman left the bakery, Bill closed the door softly, turned the OPEN sign to CLOSED, and, moments later, the generator sputtered to a shocking, routine-shattering silence that was heard throughout the village.

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © in 1989 and edited in 2022. The original version is available upon request