

A GOOD FAMILY

By

Seth M. Baker

Raymond Walter Walker made one final, precise snip then stepped back to admire his creation: a summer-green elephant topiary. Nodding to himself, he tossed the metal shears to the ground and stood with his rough, sun-spotted hands on his trim hips. The ink from his left-handed prison tattoo had finally started to fade.

Satisfied, he surveyed the grounds of the estate, searching for his next task, from the fountain he skimmed to the matching stone angels he painted every spring. Two other topiaries quivered in the wind, a bear and a lion. Raymond had created these as well, shaping them with patience, a keen eye for balance, and extra-sharp garden shears. He knew they needed to look good; every visitor to the Greythorpe estate commented on them. Not on the federal mansion. Not on the honeysuckle around Kingsley's coach house. And definitely not on the stupid, stinking ostriches lurking behind their split-rail fence. The visitors loved his topiaries and Raymond did, too. He knew he had to love something.

He pulled a crumpled pack of Lucky Strikes from his pocket. At the same moment he flicked flint and made flame, a scream like rock-concert feedback came from the coach house. He swiveled towards the sound. His keen green eyes saw a woman in a pink bandana clawing against the glass. Something golden swept through the air and the woman dropped out of sight. In the window Raymond could see Kingsley Alexander Greythorpe, son of Gregory Greythorpe, the owner of this estate, grandson of Archibald Greythorpe, and heir to the largest manufactured home empire in the world.

Kingsley looked down, presumably at the woman on the floor, then out toward Raymond. Raymond picked up the shears and made little nips at the topiary, pretending to have seen nothing but a crepe myrtle elephant. He glanced towards the coach house with his peripheral vision and saw Kingsley staring at him. This, Raymond knew for certain; God hadn't blessed him with much, but he had bestowed upon him excellent vision; the optometrist called him 'one in a million.' Sometimes turned this quote over in his head, savoring it like a piece of chocolate; he liked to think he was one in a million.

Raymond decided to leave for the day. He shoveled myrtle clippings into black plastic leaf bags. Whatever had happened, he would look the other way. The voice of his mother whispered in his ear: hear no evil, see no evil. After bagging the clippings, he carried them, along with the shears, rake, and his leather gloves, to the outbuilding where he kept the gardening tools. He thought about the coming day, an inside day, with dread. Tomorrow he had to beat the carpets, dust the glass and porcelain, and mop the upper chambers. He'd much rather work outside, in the garden or the field, riding the lawnmower or tractor. The smell of grass reminded him of the time before life had grown so ugly.

He locked the outbuilding and started slinking towards to his old truck, taking the long way around the mansion to avoid the seeing windows of the coach house. Only yards away from his truck he heard the electric motor of Kingsley's golf cart whining towards him. Kingsley stepped out and walked toward Raymond. He stood taller than Raymond, but only because of their difference in posture: Kingsley's straight and cultivated, Raymond's slouched and beat.

"Hey, Raymond, buddy, hold on a minute," Kingsley said, his smile showing a complete set of piano-key-white teeth.

"I'm gettin ready to leave, Mr. Kingsley," Raymond said.

"Look, what you saw, that was nothing. Me and the girl, we were just having some fun, dancing. You know," Kingsley said, his voice warm and conspiratorial.

"Yeah," Raymond said, but he didn't know how getting hit on the noggin could be fun. "But I didn't see nothin. I was just workin on my animals. Had to trim the elephant back a little, his tusk was getting out of hand."

"I know, and you do such a lovely job. Those are just the finest topiaries I have ever seen. You could win awards, you know that? Our award-winning gardener."

"I dunno Mr. Kingsley, I never won no awards," Raymond said, looking down and kicking the gravel. "Just trying to do my best."

“Ray, buddy, I’m serious. You could.” Kingsley jiggled the car keys in his pocket. “Okay, I guess I’ll let you get out of here. Good work today, as usual, but, look at me Raymond,” Kingsley said. Raymond looked up at him. “You saw nothing. I’m taking that girl home right now. She’s lying down in the coach house. Okay, Raymond?” Raymond nodded and narrowed his eyes. “If I hear of you saying anything different I’ll feed you to the ostriches.”

“Sure, boss,” Raymond said.

“I know you won’t. And I’m just kidding about the ostriches. I wouldn’t do that to you. You know that, right, buddy?”

“Yep, I know, you’re a real kidder,” Raymond said, forcing a laugh. “You’re a kidder.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, buddy,” Kingsley said, hitting the heel of his hand on his forehead. “Oh no, I just remembered, I’ve got to go to Dartmouth for a couple days. Yeah, I know what you’re thinking, it’s summer break, why’s he going back there? I’ll tell you why: I’m gonna meet up with this really lascivious lady. You ought to see her, you’d like her. Love her, even.” He winked at Raymond. Raymond nodded, unsure whether he could leave yet. Social protocol sometimes escaped him. Kingsley continued to hold Raymond’s gaze. Raymond resumed looking at the ground.

“Okay , I’ve kept you long enough,” Kingsley said. “Get outta here.”

Raymond climbed into his truck and turned the key. After five tries the old motor finally puked to life. Down the driveway, past the plastic rocks that flanked the gate, and onto the road he drove, turning onto County Road 24. When he reached highway speed, the wheel began to shake. An ahduhduh noise filled the cab. At first he ignored the sound, for his truck sometimes made such noises, but when the truck jerked and he saw sparks, he pulled off onto the dusty median and jumped out. Under his right rear wheel, the fat bulge of a flat tire.

When he had loosened the last lug of his seventeen inch wheel, he heard a familiar car; Kingsley’s widow-grey Corvette, roaring from a quarter-mile away. Raymond stood up, still holding the tire iron in his hand, and intended to wave. It’d be awful rude, Raymond thought, not to wave at your employer, especially *his* employer, for who else would employ Raymond Walter Walker?

When the Corvette passed him, Raymond, still clutching the tire iron, saw Kingsley looking down, maybe sending a text message, his eyes definitely not on the road. What he did not see was the girl. Raymond realized Kingsley had lied to him. This was unsurprising. But where was the girl? Thinking about this, he finished

changing his tire, drove to his little Greythorpe Horizon 6300 trailer, called his parole officer, drank a six-pack in front of the television and passed out well before ten.

He dreamed of riding a giant flying squirrel.

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The next morning, after his usual stop at the methadone clinic, he arrived at the Greythorpe estate with his thermos of coffee and packed lunch of tuna and crackers. Mist hung over the green earth. Yesterday's fresh-cut grass smell lingered. Kingsley's Corvette was gone, as he said it would be. In its place sat Mr. Greythorpe's executive-black Lexus. Raymond parked beside Lexus, grabbed his lunch pail, and started walking towards the house when Mr. Greythorpe hailed him.

"Good morning, Raymond. I want to talk to you before you get started," Mr. Greythorpe said. Raymond looked down and noticed a black smudge on Mr. Greythorpe's chestnut brown alligator shoes. When he looked back up, Mr. Greythorpe's Roman face still gazed at Raymond, expectant. This smelled like trouble. Normally, Raymond came in, did his work, then left, invisible, no different than a fence post or an tiger topiary. Everyone liked it things better way.

"You know we've been good to you, Raymond. Helped you out when you got in trouble. Gave you a decent job when nobody else would. And it's not just because of your grandfather. I really believe that people can change, and you," he paused for a moment, "you affirm my beliefs. I like that about you. Now we need your help. Easy work, nothing difficult, even for you."

"What is it, sir?"

"Yesterday afternoon, you and Kingsley were the only ones here, right?"

"Uh, no, well, there was..."

"You two were the only ones here, right?" Mr. Greythorpe said, clearing his thought. Raymond understood.

"Yeah, maybe we were, I must've been thinking about something else," Raymond said. "I was out giving the animals a haircut..."

"You clipped my ostriches?" Mr. Greythorpe said.

"No, no, I mean the topes. They got overgrown so I had to trim them up."

"Ah, the topiaries.. So you were outside all day, just doing your work, and you talked to Kingsley in the morning, right before he left for Dartmouth."

"Actually he left in the aft--" Mr. Greythorpe shook his head. "In the

morning,” Raymond said. “Yeah, I remember, I was just getting here, about the same time as today.”

“That’s excellent, Raymond. Kingsley’s a good kid, a real bright future ahead of him, politics you know, really bright.” He paused, then as an afterthought added. “We’re a good family. Been down here for almost a hundred and fifty years now. The Greythorpes have given to thousands and affordable housing to millions, yourself included. We make a people’s lives better. We just...want what’s best for everyone. You understand me, Raymond?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll say you have made my life better,” Raymond said, but Mr. Greythorpe had already turned away.

Raymond spent the rest of the day on the second floor, airing the linens, mopping the floors, and scrubbing the edges of swirling Turkish carpets with a toothbrush. Mr. Greythorpe left at lunch and didn’t come back. Days passed and Raymond had the estate all to himself. The voice in his head told him to run, to get away, but he ignored that voice by singing old gospel songs as he worked, his baritone voice resonating through the hardwood hallways of the Greythorpe mansion.

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On mowing day, Monday, five police cruisers sirened their way down the driveway and into the yard. One of them ran over the lion. Raymond was scared of police but he jumped off the lawnmower and ran towards them with his fists in the air anyway.

“Hey, what are you doing? You killed it,” Raymond yelled to the cruisers, now stopped.

“Stay right where you are,” a voice said through one of the cruiser’s PAs. “Hands on your head.” Two officers jumped out of their cruiser and pointed their pistols at him.

When he heard the voice, that voice, Raymond thought someone had flipped a switch inside of him as years of conditioning took over. He dropped to his knees and put his hands on his head. A mustached man in a neat grey suit stepped out. In his left hand, a piece of paper and a badge.

“My name’s Detective Huffman. Are you a Greythorpe?” he said.

“N-no, I’m the groundskeeper, Raymond Walter Walker.”

“You have any ID, Raymond Walter Walker?” Detective Huffman asked, polite as a waiter. Raymond nodded, said it was in his back pocket, that he had to reach back and pull it out. Detective Huffman smiled as he took the wallet.

“Run this,” Detective Huffman said, handing the license to one of the uniformed officers, never taking his eyes from Raymond. “A girl named Vanessa Hall was last seen with Kingsley Greythorpe. Her roommate said she came here with him but never came back.”

“I haven’t seen any girls here,” Raymond said. A sound like a hundred maracas filled the air and the sprinklers began to sprinkle.

“And you work here full-time?”

“Yep. Monday through Saturday, some Sundays when they have garden parties,” Raymond said. Detective Huffman nodded as a uniformed officer returned from the vehicle with Raymond’s license. She murmured something in Detective Huffman’s ear. They stepped away from Raymond and spoke in low voices. Raymond knew what they were talking about. Detective Huffman came back.

“Looks like you have something of a history, Raymond Walter Walker,” Detective Huffman said.

“Sir, I have changed. Got a good job, go to the clinic, check in with my parole officer, and I never ever see my old...friends,” Raymond said.

“I’m not saying you haven’t changed. I’m just saying that it’d be real unfortunate for you in your current situation if we found out you had lied to us. Okay, we’ll let you get back to work, but first we’re going to look around for a little bit, then we’ll be out of your hair.”

“No, please,” Raymond said. “Mr. Greythorpe will murder me.” The detective laughed.

“Mister Greythorpe won’t murder you. We’ll look around, do what we need to do, and everything will be just fine. But if you have any problems, you have him come see me and I’ll show him the same warrant I’m showing you right now.” Detective Huffman waved the piece of paper in Raymond’s sun-baked face. “Don’t worry. We won’t leave too much of a mess.”

“But you’ve already killed the lion,” Raymond said, pointing to the mangled remains of the topiary peeking out from under the cruiser.

“I’ll get somebody out to fix it. Promise,” Detective Huffman said.

“Okay, fine,” Raymond said. “But please don’t drive on the lawn anymore.”

“Thank you, Raymond. Okay folks,” he said to the officers, “get to work.” Without a moment’s hesitation, the officers fanned across the grounds. A pair of beagles led one of the officers towards the coach house.

Raymond tried to continue working, but he couldn’t drive the lawnmower in a straight line. So he switched off the engine and watched the officers as they tromped and shuffled over the lush green grass of the estate. At that moment he hated them more than he’d ever hated anyone, more than his ex-wife, more than that snitch--

A frenzy of barking startled him. He fired up the lawnmower and pattered off towards the sound. At the lake, he saw the dogs and three officers wading through the cattails on the shore. Two stood with their hands on their hips staring down at something. The other officer pulled against the dog’s leashes, trying to keep them from going further into the water. Raymond saw it, then: a pink bandana.

His throat felt dry with guilt so Raymond decided to slip into the kitchen for water. Inside, all the kitchen drawers hung open, brushes, basters, knives, and graters spread around the floor like ancient weapons, the aftermath of some medieval battle. The Greythorpes usually ate at steakhouses. Many of these items were unknown to Raymond and he didn’t know what went where; was a meat thermometer a gadget or a utensil?

A moan escaped his mouth and he dropped to his knees. They’re going to kill me, he thought. Mr. Greythorpe and Kingsley are going to murder me and throw me in the pond with that poor girl...unless I can clean it all up before they get home.

With that realization, he went into a frenzy, putting gadgets in the utensil drawers, utensils in the gadget drawers, sweeping up the grass clippings the cops left like fairy tale characters leaving themselves a path back out of the woods.

Some time passed. Raymond was in the upstairs bathroom, fighting temptation as he put the prescription bills back in their orange bottles, when he heard Detective Huffman calling his name. Raymond walked out and looked over the balcony and down at Detective Huffman standing in the foyer. The detective held a clear plastic bag. Inside, the pink bandanna.

“We’ve got all we need here,” Detective Huffman said. “Thanks for your help. I mean it. If you see Kingsley before I do...tell him not to leave town.”

“What about this mess!” Raymond said.

“Call it job security. Somebody’s got to clean it up,” Detective Huffman said, laughing to himself as he walked out the door. After a few moments, the sound of cars starting and driving away. Raymond spent the rest of the day and late into the night cleaning, arranging, organizing and scrubbing. Around two in the morning, he sat down on the couch and passed out from exhaustion. The next thing Raymond knew, a hand on his shoulder shook him out of sleep.

“Raymond,” a familiar voice said. “What are you doing here? Why did you sleep here?”

Raymond opened his eyes and saw Kingsley standing over him. Kingsley usually neat hair was mussed.

“Mr. Kingsley, I’m sorry, I just, uh, I worked really late. I sat down to rest for a minute and I guess I just fell asleep,” Raymond said, unsure whether he should mention the cops. He decided not to, thinking he’d done a good enough job cleaning up after them.

“You really are a hard worker, buddy,” Kingsley said, sounding as relaxed as the tweakers Raymond used to know. “But I was wondering, what happened to the lion?”

“What lion. Oh, that, yes. I, uh, hit it with the lawnmower. I wasn’t payin no attention. I’m sorry. I’ll fix it tomorrow.”

“Okay, you do that. That one was my favorite,” Kingsley said. “I’m making coffee. You want some?” Kingsley went to the kitchen. Raymond said he would like same. He took a few deep breaths, got up from the couch and stretched his sore muscles.

“Raymond,” Kingsley yelled from the kitchen, “why are the coffee filters in the knife drawer? And why can’t I find the coffee?”

“Dunno, Mister Kingsley,” Raymond said, wondering how good of a job he’d really done getting things back to normal. By the time he fell asleep, he had re-mowed the lawn, swept all four thousand square feet of the mansion, and put everything in the house where he thought it belonged...but he felt like he forgot something. Then he remembered: the coach house, he had completely forgotten about it. Surely they ransacked it as they did the house. Kingsley would figure it out.

Raymond couldn’t lie anymore.

“Mister Kingsley,” Raymond said. “I got something to tell you.”

“What is it, Raymond?” Kingsley said, still looking through the cabinets for the coffee. “Why is the milk in the cupboard?”

“The police--“ he started. Kingsley cut him off.

“What. About. The. Police?” Kingsley said, slamming a cabinet door and staring directly into Raymond’s eyes. Raymond looked to the ground.

“They came yesterday and looked around the estate. That’s what happened to the lion, I told them to fix and they said they would..” Raymond said.

“Forget the fucking lion! Moron. And you let them in?” Kingsley asked.

“He had a warrant, he showed it to me.”

“You moron! You twit! A piece of crap detective shows up you just roll out the red carpet? Why didn’t you call me? Or the lawyers? You should have called the lawyers. I should...I should...” Veins bulged on either side of Kingsley’s temples and his face grew red. But instead of coming for Raymond, Kingsley search through the drawers. He smacked his hand on the kitchen island, making the glass vase in the center wobble.

“Raymond, where’s the rolling pin?” Wide-eyed, Raymond pointed toward the drawer beside the stainless steel refrigerator. Kingsley opened the drawer and pulled out a wooden rolling pin. Kingsley held it in one hand, slapping it in the open palm of his other.

“I’m sorry I have to do this. You’ve always been a wonderful employee,” Kingsley said. He took a step towards Raymond, raised the rolling pin high, and swung it at Raymond’s head. Raymond threw up his hands just in time.

Don’t fight back, he thought. Don’t fight back. Remember what happened last time. *Thwap*. Can’t violate parole. You would kill him. Prove them all wrong. *Fwonek*. Ouch, that one really hurt. He’s angry. He’s probably right. *Hawap*. You’re an idiot. An idiot. *Flwop*. You deserve it. You should know better. *Bonk*. You know cops lie. *Craack*

White pain, then nothing. Poor, bloody Raymond collapsed to the floor.

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Raymond awoke, buried under a mountain of agony. A pungent, creeping smell filled his nose. His vision, blurry. His hands, bound with duct tape. Around his neck, what felt like a collar. He ran his bound hands through the dirt then grabbed something soft, light. A feather.

Understanding hit him like a rolling pin. Kingsley had thrown him in the

ostrich pen. Through blurred vision he saw their long legs like so many trees waving in the wind. They kept their distance, teetering and floating around in the pen. What, he wondered, did Mr. Kingsley want to do to him? What did I do wrong? I didn't kill the girl. Kingsley did. I didn't tell the police anything. This isn't fair, not at all. But it's your fault, Raymond. You let this happen. You should've ran, ran while you could. I warned you. You should've listened. You should never have trusted a cop. Or a Greythorpe.

He struggled with his bonds for a few minutes. The ostriches, all six of them, kept their distance, but their movements were choppy, agitated. One padded over towards him, its head bobbing back and forth, its feathery blob of a body ruffling and puffing up. Raymond finally got to his feet, difficult with his hands tied, and staggered to the fence. The ostrich followed him. He turned to at it. The ostrich stopped, quizzically cocking its head to the side. When he started walking again, it followed him. When Raymond put his leg through the spit rail fence, the ostrich bit his leg, right behind the knee.

Raymond yelled in surprise and decided to hurry up. As he stuck his head through the split-rail fence, a sensation like a million little vibrators made his back arch and his limbs seize up. He fell to the ground, he realized the thing around his neck was shock collar and he was inside the invisible fence he had installed last year. As he lay on his back, trying to recover, an ostrich nipped at his crotch, catching only the bottom of his baggy work pants. He felt a bite on his shoulder, then his arms. He tried to kick them, but there were too many beaks and not enough legs.

Screaming and swinging at the four ostriches surrounding him, he pulled himself up and staggered to the edge of the fence. He reasoned that if he could jump through fast enough, the shock wouldn't be too bad. If only he could get to his truck he could get out of here, he could cut himself free and drive far, far away to a place without Greythorpes or ostriches. Alaska. He would drive to Alaska.

At that moment, just before he threw himself through the invisible fence, he heard sirens. Relief! Somebody was finally coming to take Kingsley to jail and, hopefully, get him out of this horrible cage.

As Raymond kept the ostriches at bay, three cruisers and one black SUV stopped in front of the mansion. The SUV ran over the remains of the lion topiary. Detective Huffman stepped out of the driver's side of the SUV and, bafflingly, Kingsley and Mr. Greythorpe stepped out of the back seat. Kingsley pointed towards the ostrich pen. They all walked towards Raymond. Raymond's heart sank as they stood with their arms crossed looking down at Raymond.

“Raymond Walter Walker,” Detective Huffman said, “you’re under arrest for suspicion of murder. Kingsley tells us he left you alone with Miss Hall, asked you to give her a ride home when he had to rush to Dartmouth. But you had other plans.”

“It was Kingsley! I saw it,” Raymond said, his eyes wide. “He hit her on the noggin!”

“Why lie, Raymond? You’re making things worse for yourself. We thought we could trust you,” Mr. Greythorpe said, shaking his head like a disappointed parent. “We gave you a chance, but a man with your past...we should’ve known better.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Raymond said, shouting, as if that would convince them. “We’ll see about that,” Detective Huffman said. “When we were here before you just lied through your missing teeth. You lied to me, Raymond, and I don’t like liars.” To Kingsley, he said, “at least I don’t have to cuff him. Good thinking about tying him up. But a shock collar?”

“He’s very dangerous,” Kingsley said. “As I told you, he threatened me, threatened me with castration.”

Raymond hung his head, trying to hide his anger. You screwed this one up, he thought. You should’ve spoke up for yourself. I did speak up. But too late, you just went right along with them, thought they’d look out for you, same as last time. Now all you’ll get is a public defender on the take. Three strikes. You’re out.

Detective Huffman stepped through the fence. With surprising gentleness he removed the collar from Raymond’s neck, put his hand on Raymond’s shoulder, and led him from the pen to the SUV. While they walked, Raymond looked back at Mr. Greythorpe and Kingsley, still standing by the pen. Their faces were blank, impassive like the stone angels Raymond would never paint again. As they drove away, as Raymond took one last look at the estate, at the fountain he cleaned and house and the topiaries he’d loved so much, the elephant and the bear and the poor, mangled lion, Detective Huffman spoke.

“I’m sorry this had to happen, Raymond. But the Greythorpes are a good family. A real good family.”

I hope you’ve enjoyed reading this story. For more works like this, as well as general buffoonery, please visit <http://www.sethmbaker.com>