

# FAT FREDDY

By  
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My Dad left the summer I turned seven. The summer Fat Freddy came. First time I saw Fat Freddy he was thinner than the hair on Dad's head. He leaned up against our garbage can, the old banged up silvery one that Dad had moved with our furniture all the way from Georgia to Iowa. Ma told Dad he was nuts dragging that old thing a thousand miles, but Dad was attached to things like garbage cans and old rubber car mats. He just couldn't bear the thought of anyone else ever having his stuff.

Anyway, there was Fat Freddy, his long gray hair pulled back into a braid, singing to himself about Jeez US, as if all of us was right in there, right inside Jesus. Then he saw me and smiled. He was missing a couple of teeth. We had that in common.

Fat Freddy wasn't even fat. But he used to be. Funny how a name sticks. Mrs. Wiley, who lived down by the tracks, said before the Lord got hold of him he couldn't even fit through the church doors, he had to sit out on the steps and just feel the sermon. But that was before the Lord reached down lifted him up by the suspenders and turned him upside down. That was long before we got to town.

"Hey you, boy." I turned around to see who he was pointing at cause his eyes looked way beyond me. "Yeah, you. Come here." It was me he wanted. "This your can?"

I nodded, but didn't move. He reached in and pulled out a handful of stuff, mostly soggy cardboard covered with last night's mashed potatoes. "It's a good can," he said. "One of the best." His voice got low and he motioned me to move closer so I could hear him. The potatoes were dripping through the cracks between his fingers. "There's angels

in this here alley," he said. My heart stopped dead for a minute. But I didn't hear nothing except his wheezy breath and the buzzing alley flies. "Say, would you care to join me?" he asked. Then he took the mashed potatoes and stuffed them into his mouth.

As I ran home crying, I could hear him shouting after me, "You, boy," he yelled. "Just remember the oysters and what the Lord can do with a few grains of sand." When I told my Dad, he got real quiet and red. Ma tried to stick a thermometer in his mouth, but he pushed her away and said he wasn't sick. "Lyle," she said, "you've got the spirit of a walnut." And then she gave him a couple of aspirin.

That night, Dad put a sign on the old can that said. "Private. Do Not Disturb." Even I could've told him that wouldn't work so I took to hiding behind the can and watching for Fat Freddy with my new Flash Gordon Super Galactic Ray Gun that could put out a candle at 20 feet.

Fat Freddy was always singing with a voice that carried like church bells. As far as I could tell, the world was divided into singers and non-singers. There wasn't much singing at our house. He comes on down the road, singing as usual when he sees the sign in front of the can, stops, and grins real big. "Hey, you boy. Those your signs?"

"No sir," I said. "Them's my Dad's."

"Well, son." He squatted down on the ground, picked up a stone and traced circles in the dirt, around and around and around. "You go and tell your dad that ole Fred here can't read." He stretched himself up high enough so I could see the hairs on his belly, then he lifted the lid off the garbage can and looked inside. He pulled out a turkey drumstick that had some tangled up string hanging from it like cobwebs. He winked at me. "And don't forget to thank your dad for me."

When I got back to the house and told Ma that Fat Freddy was back, she held me real tight. "Sammy, don't worry about it. Freddy won't hurt you. Just forget about it."

It's funny, I never even thought about him hurting me. She scraped the leavings off the dinner dishes into the trashcan. I imagined Fat Freddy picking through them, his tongue licking around the corners of his mouth as he found the strands of spaghetti covered with dried up tomato sauce. It made me feel good that he'd get the mushrooms. I always left the mushrooms.

Ma was still talking. "You know, Sammy, your dad doesn't need to know about this. It'll just upset him."

I've never been much good with secrets. When I was six my Ma was planning a surprise party for her sister and I accidentally let the cat out of the bag and ruined the whole thing. "Sammy," Dad had said. "You're a fool with a tongue looser than most women's. I'll teach you to watch what comes out of that mouth." He brought me into the bathroom and unwrapped a brand new bar of soap and sudsed it up real good. Ma cried the whole time he cleaned my mouth, muttering, "It's not important, leave him alone, it's not important," but there was no stopping my dad when he got his mind set on something. I figured I must have deserved it. I stayed in my room for two days since I thought it might be better to stay out of his way for a while. Ma brought me bread and jam-filled cookies and told Dad I had the flu. He never came near sick people.

I was afraid I wouldn't be able to keep the secret about Fat Freddy, so I went and hid in the basement underneath dad's tool bench. I heard 'em calling, but didn't come out. The wood air soaked into my lungs and I started wheezing, but they didn't hear me. When I woke up the sun was pointing one of its long dusty fingers down at me. I went

upstairs and sat at the kitchen table. Ma didn't look at me. She just sat there staring at the telephone. Torn pieces of napkin covered the table.

"Where were you?" she asked

"By the tools. In the basement."

"We didn't think of looking there." She got up and made me some toast.

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Somehow Dad still managed to find out about Fat Freddy's hanging around. One day he came home from work and took me into the good room with the plastic covered furniture and gold framed photographs. He told me to sit down. The plastic creaked and dug into the back of my leg. "Sam, I got you something special. See this?" He sat down real close to me and pulled a green leprechaun key chain from his pocket. He smelled like hard-boiled eggs. "Each one of these keys is a different color. That's so you'll be able to figure out which one goes in which lock." I took the key chain.

He stood up and his head brushed away a cobweb hanging from the ceiling. "Come on, Sam. You follow me." We went into the bathroom. "See what I mean?" he said. Attached to the cabinet where we kept our toothbrushes and stuff was a silver padlock with a green dot on it. "You use the green key to open this lock."

Ma came in. "Lyle." She didn't even look at me but just stood there with her hands on her hips and her nose quivering just like the time I caught a frog and left it in her makeup drawer. "There's a goddamn lock on my refrigerator, Lyle. How am I supposed to cook dinner?"

Ma went on a kind of strike. After two days of eating cold cereal for dinner, Dad got rid of the locks and took to patrolling. Control of the garbage had become a matter of

honor for him, a contest. Ma and I would sit in the living room and watch him. He marched around and around the house dressed in his army camouflage, with my Flash Gordon Super Galactic Ray gun on his shoulder 'cause Ma wouldn't let him carry his real gun, said he wasn't safe. The night shadows deepened around him until he was like a marching tree come to life and I would lay my head on Ma's lap. She smelled like honeysuckle, and it was a kind of lullaby that marching. In the morning I found myself in my own bed with the sun up and Dad gone to work.

That's when I'd go out in the alley and sit around by the can, trying to see what Fat Freddy saw, looking for the angels, seeing nothing but flies.

Those were quiet days. Ma didn't talk much. I'd watch her as she moved around the house with a rag and furniture polish, bringing back the shine. But, every now and then she'd stop with her hand in mid-air, waiting, listening like a wild rabbit, and then she'd turn to me and ask "Do you hear it Sammy?" But she wasn't really asking me 'cause when I didn't answer right away, she'd just go back to her polishing. I guess she was waiting for Fat Freddy, just like I was.

Then one day he came. I ran to tell her.

"He's back, Ma. Fat Freddy's come back." I don't know why, but I whispered it. She took a breath that seemed to suck all the air out of me "Where's your dad, Sammy?"

"Don't know."

I ran back outside and heard Fat Freddy singing, a quiet hymn. I closed my eyes and tried to see the angels. Ma came out of the house. She had on an old football jersey and a pair of jeans worn thin at the knees. "You there, Mr. Freddy, sir." She stood by the

door with her hands folded in front of her white as an apron. "If you're hungry, I got some food in the house. You don't need to eat the garbage."

"Ah, it's funny ma'am," "he said as he scratched a bite that had swollen up his nose, "but, to me this ain't garbage."

"You may be right, sir." She stopped a few steps in front of him as if he was a stray dog. "You're more than welcome to help yourself to what's left out here, but you're also welcome to come in and eat at the table."

"If you don't mind my asking, ma'am, why don't you bring your lunch outside and join us." He put his arm on my shoulder.

She stared right at me. "Alright."

She went back into the house and after a few minutes came out with her blue log cabin quilt and the wicker hamper. She spread out the blanket. "Come on Sam, help me unpack." It was a miracle what she stuffed into that basket. Cold chicken and corn bread, butter on a silver dish, cut up watermelon, raspberries fresh picked that morning by me, mustard, ketchup, sweet baby pickles and beer, cold beer. She popped back the tab on a can. "Here you go Mr. Fred."

We heard the car pull up, heard the door slam, heard Dad swear when he tripped over my bike on the front sidewalk. Heard him call our names, heard the screen door squeak as he opened it. Heard him swear again when he saw all three of us sitting there on the log cabin quilt. "What the hell is going on here? Are you insane? Shit, you're worse than he is. You're all trash, fucking trash."

Next thing I knew he kicked over the hamper and watermelon splattered his boots as he wrapped his arms around the old silver can, picked it up, and left us, for good.

Ma's hands shook but she went on ahead and gathered the raspberries that had rolled off the blanket. They were juicy ripe and dirty. She picked one up, looked at it, wiped it off on her jeans, put it in her mouth, chewed a bit and swallowed. Soon there wasn't nothing left of those raspberries except for the red stains on her teeth.

Ma didn't say anything. Freddy and I went ahead and ate. It was good food, even if my Dad had smashed it with his foot. "Well, Mr. Fred and Sam," she folded her hands in her lap. "That was a real nice picnic." Just then a breeze kicked in. The paper napkins took off and Ma's hair seemed to want to join them, it was so full of its own will. She tucked it back behind her ears. "Here, help me pack this stuff up." Me and Freddy chased down the napkins while Ma loaded the basket.

As we walked back to the house Ma took my hand and we sang, "row, row, row you're boat...." I turned around but Fat Freddy was gone; all I could see were the alley flies shimmering emerald and gold.

