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The Genius and I

Abstract

Jimmy Finger lived in the apartment directly above. It was 1973, and I was seven. Jimmy was two years older and attended what his mother called the “special school,” suggesting that Jimmy went there because he was a genius. And he looked like a genius to me: plastic-framed glasses, uncombed hair, filthy clothes. In the only photo that I have of him, he looks like he’s trapped inside of an invisible jail cell. He’s screaming, his arms are raised over his head as though he’s pounding at bars no one can see, and his glasses are crooked. He looks like an insane genius. Or maybe he just looks insane.

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The Genius and I

Nonfiction by John McNally

Jimmy Finger lived in the apartment directly above. It was 1973, and I was seven. Jimmy was two years older and attended what his mother called the “special school,” suggesting that Jimmy went there because he was a genius. And he looked like a genius to me: plastic-framed glasses, uncombed hair, filthy clothes. In the only photo that I have of him, he looks like he’s trapped inside of an invisible jail cell. He’s screaming, his arms are raised over his head as though he’s pounding at bars no one can see, and his glasses are crooked. He looks like an insane genius. Or maybe he just looks insane.

That summer I spent my days listening to Chicago radio stations on a transistor radio and messing around with my portable cassette player, which was about the size of a shoebox. Sometimes I would plug in the cassette player’s microphone, hold it close to my transistor radio’s speaker, and record songs onto a blank cassette – top 40 hits like “Bad, Bad Leroy Brown” and “The Morning After.” When I played the tape back later, I could sometimes hear my mother taking in the background or a neighbor’s dog barking.

That was also the summer when I realized that I could use my cassette player to record my own improvisational comedy shows, so I invited Jimmy Finger down, and together we did our best impersonations of *The Honeymooner*’s characters Ralph Kramden and Ed Norton. I was Norton, probably because I liked saying, in that goofy

Art Carney voice, “Hey, Ralphie boy!” Or maybe I was Norton because Jimmy Finger liked screaming, “Bang! Zoom! To the moon!” I had a package of three blank sixty minute cassette tapes, the cheap kind from Kmart with orange labels, and we filled up all three hours in one sitting.

Our Ralph and Norton personas carried over into our regular friendship so that I might be at the kitchen table eating a bowl of cereal when I would hear Jimmy scream, “Norton!” I would run to a window, open it wide, poke my head out, look up, and there he would be: Jimmy Finger in character, peering down at me. He would say something else in his exasperated Jackie Gleason voice, like, “Get. Down. Stairs. NOW!” and I would reply, “Right away, Ralphie boy!”

We always met on the sidewalk behind the apartment, sometimes as Ralph and Norton but more often as ourselves, and then we rode our bikes around the neighborhood in search of Dumpsters. I wasn’t afraid of bugs back then or green flies or disease or other people’s garbage bags or crud. Starting with the Dumpster that belonged to our apartment building, we’d lift its lid with the hope that riches awaited us. Sometimes, we’d find an old radio. Other times, a stack of albums. It was stunning, really, how much worthwhile stuff people threw out.

Jimmy Finger collected old doorknobs. He liked to tinker with them, taking them apart and putting them back together again, figuring out how they worked. He also collected anything that had a cord. It didn’t matter if it worked or not, if the plastic shell of the appliance was broken, if it looked as though it had caught fire. If it had a cord, he wanted it. He stowed all of his electrical items in his family’s storage unit in the laundry room, and that’s where he spent most of his time – in the basement. There were long stretches when the storage locker was the first place I’d go to look for Jimmy.

My mother, convinced that he was actually living down there, said, “He’s going to burn this place down.”

I shrugged. Probably, I thought. But since I would have been partly responsible as his co-conspirator, helping him carry the electronics home and down into the basement, I said nothing one way or the other. Better to let him burn down the apartment, I figured, than to admit my guilt.

*

By the time I was thirteen, my family had moved us to nine different places, mostly apartment buildings. My friends during these years tended to be friends not because

we were the same age or had common interests but rather because we lived near each other. This was especially true in apartment buildings, where many of the tenants were childless. You ended up friends with another boy or girl because they were the only other boy or girl remotely near your age. And if you weren't friends, you were enemies. There was little in-between.

Jimmy liked me, I'm sure, because I was younger and didn't pick on him. Furthermore, I believed his mother's story that he was a genius, I enjoyed looking in Dumpsters, and I never tried to take over the role of Ralph Kramden. In fact, I *liked* being Norton. It was, in this regard, a mutually beneficial friendship.

But Jimmy had friends I didn't care for, like Dale, who also attended the special school but who was older than both of us, and taller by about a foot. And Dale didn't look like a genius. He looked like a child version of a patient in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. One day, while Jimmy and I were using long sticks to move bags of garbage around inside a Dumpster as though the bags were corpses we didn't want to touch, Dale showed up with a can of orange spray-paint. The whole time he stood there, he shook the can. I could hear the ball inside clicking with each shake. When I asked Dale what he was going to do with the spray-paint, he raised the can and sprayed my face with it.

I dropped my stick and ran back to my apartment. My mother cleaned my face, but my father raged on about how he was going to kill the kid who'd done this to me.

"Who is he?" he asked.

"Dale."

"Who's Dale?"

"Friend of Jimmy's."

"Why the hell are you hanging out with someone like him?" my father asked.

"I *wasn't* hanging around with him!" I yelled.

"Hey!" my father said, his voice sharp. "Don't take that tone with me!"

"*Bob*," my mother said, trying to let him know that he was heading down the wrong path and should ease back, but my father wouldn't have any of it.

“Don’t *Bob* me, goddamn it,” he said. To me, he said, “Come on. I want you to point him out to me.”

I didn’t want to – I feared Dale doing something worse the next time, like lighting the paint on fire as he sprayed it at me – but I always felt helpless when my father got it in his head that there was retribution to be paid and that he was going to dole out the punishment.

In the end, my father was unable to get any satisfaction. Dale had denied it, and Dale’s father had claimed that I was the boy who was stirring up trouble. My father took me to the police station to file a complaint, but no one at the police station was all that interested, either.

“Son of a *bitch*,” my father said when we got back into his truck. “You let me know next time that asshole comes around, you hear me?” But I never did, and my father eventually let it go.

*

One afternoon, Jimmy showed up at my door looking more disheveled than usual. I started talking to him in my Art Carney voice, but Jimmy didn’t offer up Jackie Gleason in return. He motioned with his head for me to follow him, so I did – down the stairs, out the back door, and onto the shady sidewalk. He looked up – the windows to both of our apartments were above us – so he motioned with his head again, and I followed him to the Dumpster, out of our parents’ earshot.

“I found an abandoned house,” he said. “They left everything inside it, too.”

“*What?*”

I stared at Jimmy. I heard what he was saying, but the words weren’t making logical sense.

“We can take whatever we want,” Jimmy said.

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah. But we got to hurry.”

The house was located outside my legal perimeter, but I took the risk. I followed Jimmy, who rode a three-speed bike with a sissy bar. Attached to the sissy bar by a

rope was a Radio Flyer wagon. My bike, a hand-me-down, was as old as me and had been stolen once, but then I found it a year later chained to a fence. It had been spray-painted black, and the original handlebars had been replaced by the kind that curled at either end. It looked like a bicycle you'd see someone riding around in a Third World country, or a vehicle that had barely survived the apocalypse. Naturally, I loved it.

The genius and I parked our bikes in the backyard and entered through the rear door. Jimmy was right: everything was in place, as though the family had simply run away in the middle of the night. My parents sometimes moved from our apartments in the middle of the night, but we always took everything with us. Not so here. This house was everything Jimmy had promised. Even the clock on the wall still ticked, as though to say, "Hell. Lo. Hell. Lo. Hell. Lo. Take. This. Take. That. It's. Yours. It's. Yours. All. Yours."

"Help me carry the TV," Jimmy said, and I obeyed.

Next, Jimmy needed a hand with a heavy antique radio. My job, I was coming to realize, was to take orders from Jimmy Finger about which items to place in his wagon, and I played along, hoping that he would share his riches with me.

"Careful," Jimmy said. "Don't drop it."

"Okie doke, Ralphie boy!" I said, doing a limp-legged Art Carney impression, but Jimmy Finger cut me short with a look. It was a look unlike any he'd given me before. *This is serious*, the look said

We made several trips from the house to our apartment, loading the goods inside Jimmy's parents' storage locker. A blender. Lamps. CorningWare. You name it. We worked through dinner, until it was dark out. Crickets stopped chirping each time we'd walk outside to load more onto the wagon. I had a feeling that other people, hearing news of an abandoned house, would descend on us at any moment, but no one did. I was happy for that. What we were doing was addictive. The more things we took away, the more things I *wanted* to take away.

On our final trip of the night, as we headed home in the dark with the last load of abandoned treasures, a familiar car pulled up beside me. I was sweaty and overheated. Exhausted, I thought, *I think I know that car*. The window rolled down. The man driving the car was my father, and the car was ours. The green dashboard lights lit up his face, giving him a particularly sinister look. He glanced at Jimmy and then at Jimmy's wagon, which was overflowing with things a boy Jimmy's age would not have had any use for, but then my father directed his green-hued attention at me again.

“Get your ass home. *Now!*” he ordered.

Back in our apartment, I was told that I was grounded for an indeterminate period of time and that I would only be able to leave my bedroom for meals. My father didn’t know where I had been that night or what I had been doing, and for years neither did I. I had believed what I wanted to believe – that the house was abandoned and that I had done nothing wrong. But one night twenty years later I woke up in a sweat, wondering what the family thought when they returned from vacation to find that their house had been raided by two criminal masterminds they could never have imagined, one of whom, at fifty years old, would still be living with his parents, the other of whom would become a professor and a writer but who, on the night of the robbery, clutched a stuffed bear and cried himself to sleep, worried that he would be condemned to his bedroom forever, never to see the light of day again.

John McNally is the author of three novels, two short story collections, and two books on writing. His first YA novel, *Lord of the Ralphs*, a portion of which appeared in *Booth*, will be published in September 2015. His recent stories have appeared in *One Teen Story*, *The Sun*, and *Beloit Fiction Journal*. He has a new novel, a collection of personal essays, and a memoir about failure coming out over the next three years. John is a writer-in-residence and professor of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, where he teaches graduate-level fiction workshops.