



Penance at Midnight

The clock struck nine. At seventy-five, Betty Perkins began to gather her knitting back into her bag while she very nonchalantly called out to her husband in the rocker across her, “Jim, it’s nine.” Jim sat still. He didn’t even rock his chair. Except for his eyes scrolling through the paper he remained motionless. Betty just sighed as she pulled her knitting back out. Jim’s silence aggravated her until she spoke out, “Jim, how long are you going to keep on doing it?” Jim’s eyes stopped on the sentence they were on. Since she knew she had his attention, Betty continued, “I’m sorry, but I consider it ridiculous: staying up until midnight—all to usher in the new year!” The last was said with obvious disdain. “You don’t live in the South anymore; it’s cold up here. You’ll catch your death running outside like a kid.”

This was a continual cycle year after year. Betty would announce bedtime; Jim would ignore it. Betty would continue to chide; Jim would continue to ignore her until midnight when he darted through the door.

Betty sighed once more and resumed her knitting until again the clock struck. “Jim, ten o’clock.” With no answer she sighed and waited for twelve to come. Eleven came, and once again, she tried to no avail. Giving up in despair, Betty went to bed. After her exit, Jim laid his paper down and just sat thinking. Finally, the clock rang twelve. Jim ran outside screaming at the top of his feeble lungs, “Happy New Year!” Then he ran in and sliced a pie that Betty had made for him earlier that day. After having a very small piece, he joined his wife in bed.

This had gone on every year for a good twenty years, and it continued for another ten. One day, their daughter, Mary, was staying with them on New Year’s Eve. They all visited in the living room waiting for twelve so Jim could have his fun and then they all could go to bed.

Twelve o’clock finally came and Grandpa Jim ran through the doors and shouted, “Happy New Year!” to the whole world. Betty and Mary sat laughing and Mary managed to say, “Oh, he’s still such a kid! When will he ever stop and grow up?”

“I’ve been waiting for that for thirty years,” Betty wearily stated.

“Has it really been that long?” Mary asked with awe.

“I should think at least that.”

“Wow.” Mary said beginning a small silence while they both knitted. Mary broke it a few minutes later. “Why does he do it?”

“Because of something he did as a kid a long time ago.” Betty said as a way of introduction to the story while she stowed away her knitting and prepared to give the fuller explanation. Being the great storyteller she was, Betty continued with great fervor, “Every year his family would stay up until midnight to usher in the new year and slice the pies. It was tradition. Well, one year he went to a friend’s house without bothering to tell anybody. So at midnight, instead of getting to welcome in the new year and slice pie, the family had to look for Jim. By the time they found him, they had been searching for the better part of two hours. However, Jim’s parents never told him that they were looking for him; instead, he thought that they had just come to get him. He never knew it until his sister told him after his parents passing.

“So...” Mary asked, “this is his way of...well, almost paying penance?”

“I guess so, if you want to call it that. Don’t get me wrong, but I consider it a very foolish thing to do. He’s going to freeze to death in that cold. One time, I told him I wouldn’t make any more pies for him to slice at New Year’s—hoping that would stop him. But instead, he would just go in the kitchen and try to make them himself. So, for obvious reasons, I still make him a pie to slice. But, oh well...”

“If it’s that important to him, I don’t see why we shouldn’t let him do as he wishes,” Mary suggested.

“I suppose so. If it helps relieve his guilt, I might as well concede. But he really has no reason to be plagued by guilt over the whole incident. I mean, his parents obviously didn’t want him to know about it and feel bad. They weren’t terribly hurt by him or anything. It was just a careless mistake he made that couldn’t have been corrected even if he had known about it.”

“Yeah,” Mary agreed.

“Your father has been out there long enough; tell him to come in and have some pie,” Betty commanded.

Mary walked over to the glass french doors at the back porch. There sat Papa on the patio couch. “He looks so peaceful! I kind of don’t want to disturb him.” Mary quickly ran out and then even more quickly entered. “Mother, Mother!” Mary’s voice was in despair; her face and hands were whitened by something more than cold. “Papa’s gone!”



Before closing his casket, Betty took the unsliced pie and laid it on Jim’s still chest. Mary, with tears in her eyes, took her hand and pressed it into the pie. Jim—Papa—Grandpa—was buried with Betty’s pie, Mary’s hand, and a clean conscience.

