

Goody-Goody

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"Don't be such a goody-goody, Wilson." The voice arched over the heads of children and parents alike, catching Wilson Pettijohn like a narc shoving a perp against the hood of a car. The bookstore smelled of newly spilled ink and the scorched ozone of fear. Wilson's first instinct was to bolt for an exit. He had just finished reading his poem about Ernest, who is followed home by an elephant which he hides in his room. "The Elephant in the Room" was the title poem from Wilson's most recent book, on the children's best seller list for seven weeks.

Wilson fought to disguise his panic. He had been skittery even before the interruption. He did not do well with live audiences, let alone hecklers. It was his custom to keep his head down, to avoid the gaze of children, whose stares conveyed the disconcerting belief that Wilson had read their minds when in fact he had no idea what they really thought. Wilson looked for the heckler, attempting to wrap himself in his children's author disguise, rabbit eyes peering over reading glasses and under bushy brows. "Excuse me?" He said.

"I said, don't be such a goody-goody. Every kid here knows Ernest's parents wouldn't let him keep the elephant just for being honest." The speaker stood and Wilson recognized him immediately—a giraffish, pale man with long dark hair pulled back in a precise pony tail, a goatee that lent the vague appearance of evil. His shirt was made of some shiny material printed with reptilian scales. Tiberius Zaugg himself.

A gasp of excitement circulated among the children in the folding chairs like a breeze through plastic bags on a two a.m. street. They too knew Zaugg.

"Mr. Zaugg, why have you derailed my reading?"

"Why to learn from the master of course." Zaugg made a Cat In the Hatesque bow. "Except I have some teensy-weensy suggestions." His fingers dimensioned an eyelet in space.

Pettijohn looked at Margo, his tour rep, who had conveyed him to the Giant Peach Bookstore that morning. It was a small venue, ideal for the beginning of a tour, at a stage before he hit his stride—if Wilson could ever be said to hit a stride. Margo had stopped knitting and slowly moved her head from side to side as if to say "no, don't respond."

"And what might your suggestions be?" Wilson knew the question was a mistake, even as he asked it.

"Well, let's be honest with the kids." Zaugg strolled to the front of the room, lizardish shirt shimmering. "If you give them such a story, sure they're entertained. They get the message: lying bad, truth good. But we all lie, so where does that leave us? I lie, so I'm bad? It's like a lite beer product placement in Winnie the Pooh. *Don't wander in the Hundred Acre Wood or you'll end up on the witch's table with an apple in your mouth.* The moral is for the parents, not the kids. Tastes great, less filling."

A murmur arose from the audience, children whispering like birds within a bush, cat approaching. Parents crossed arms, frowned.

"Adults have a responsibility to children to right them from wrong. Sift good from evil." Wilson was aware that he was in a trap, fumbling words, but couldn't help himself.

Zaugg smiled. "That presumes adults know the difference—a dubious proposition. Kids know. They have fears about the awful truths of the world, like cooked spinach and drug dealers lurking on street corners and adults conspiring to put an end to life on earth. What do you think guys?"

Children's voices jostled to out-agree one another.

"Mr. Zaugg," Wilson could feel himself flashing hot, blood slamming through his veins. The reference to drug dealers had made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. "Part of rightness from wrongness is kindness for allness." Wilson winced at his own words. He tended to speak childishly when under stress. "Which you are hardly displaying now."

"Of course. You're right." Zaugg was smoother than his shirt. "I was in the area and simply wanted to hear my absolute idol read. I apologize for interrupting." He bowed ceremoniously. "Perhaps I can make it up to the kids by reciting a poem from my new book? That way, they will have heard both master and disciple. What do you say, kids?" He swept his arm through the air in a Willy Wonka-ish way. An enthusiastic response erupted. "Yeah, yeah!" "Mabel's Ten Foot Tongue!" "The one about if we were the frog's pets!" "The Day Gravity Reversed!"

Zaugg raised his palms and produced quiet. He began to recite:

*Everyday Jezzy Siphon went out into the world
With her mind like a flag, curiosity unfurled*

A ferry wake of delight eddied through the audience. Zaugg kept on for some time about little Jezzy, gathering "butterflies and popsicle sticks" and other quirky things that went directly into her scoop shovel head, crowding out such trivia as two plus two and c-a-t.

*Jezzy arrived home very late for dinner,
 Mother's patience starving thinner and thinner,
 "It's time to clear your mind some, Jezzy.
 It's way too, far too, much too busy."
 Jezzy yearned to this once keep her treasures,
 the sum of all her wandering pleasures.
 But as Mother kept persisting,
 Jezzy gave up resisting*

It went on far too long. Wilson had seen the book and the grotesque illustration of the mother emptying the collected delights of Jezzy's day from the girl's hinged brain case directly into a garbage can. The only memory Jezzy was allowed to keep was a mentally frayed bunny rabbit that hopped in a dreary circle.

By the end of the poem, Jezzy's mother had given up. Jezzy had arc welded her own cranial hinges shut, the butterflies and popsicles and tadpoles with faces like cherubs safely locked away inside. Wilson could not help but envy Zaugg his fluid delivery, unaided by hard copy. There was giddy applause from the children but the parents' hands barely moved.

"Thanks, guys." With an expansive wave, Zaugg exited the bookstore.

"Can you imagine the gall?" At dinner that same night Wilson was still upset. Margo sat knitting in the restaurant, the click of needles irritating Wilson like the gears of a taxi meter. Mercifully, Zaugg had not materialized at the evening reading, where Wilson fumbled through the poems as if he'd never seen them before.

"Can't we get an injunction? He's impairing my ability to make a living. Let him get his own audience."

"He's perfectly good at that," Margo said, pausing with the needles. "He's in heavy demand for readings, even six months after his last release. The question is, what does he want?"

"Are his sales better than mine?"

"I'd have to check." A problem in Margo's strip of knitting suddenly demanded close attention.

"Hey there. What a coinky-dink," Zaugg had appeared from behind Wilson. He wore a black, shiny shirt with tiny skeletons under his expensive-looking sport coat. "Can I sit down for a moment to discuss a business proposition? Just five minutes and I promise I'll leave you two alone. Wouldn't want to ruin your date." Zaugg extruded a greasy smile.

"It's not a date," Margo said far too quickly.

Wilson considered briefly whether to snatch a knitting needle and attempt to kabob Zaugg's heart. But perhaps that would be an overreaction.

"Will it prevent you from harassing me further?"

"Absolutely." Zaugg smiled, grabbed a chair from a nearby table and wedged himself between Wilson and Margo. He leaned in, a giant caterpillar on a mushroom about to reveal a smug secret. "Look, you're the guy who invented sweetness and light, which parents wolf down like reduced fat popcorn—as they should. My stuff is, of course, more on the dark side. Kids love it, but the parents are a bit iffy. What really works is the tension between us. Juxtaposition of dark and light, yin versus yang, good and not-so-good. Our individual

sales will go through the roof. Then we collaborate on the next book.” He flashed his smarmy grin and Wilson suddenly felt very small. “You see, I want the parents to like me, too. I even want you to like me.”

Wilson had long loathed the business side of writing, the proposals and the meetings, the promo tours, the deals. Deals in the dark, deals in the light, deals with guns drawn, headed for a fight.

Margo pursed her lips, raised her eyebrows. “Interesting.”

“I will continue to bushwhack you at readings, like I’m on the attack—the playful stalker thing. You saw how well the audience responded this morning. You could always ‘win,’ of course; we wouldn’t want to scandalize the parents. After all, they’ve got the credit cards.”

Win? How could Wilson win against free wheeling, glib, wildly creative Tiberius Zaugg? Wilson worked like a chain gang convict to put out a book every two years, fussing over pen and ink illustrations, which, in the end looked distressingly similar to his initial drafts. Zaugg spat out something new six times a year—a book, play, even a movie script.

“I would sooner sign a book contract with the devil,” Wilson said.

“Hey, killer idea. I’ll use it if you don’t want to. But let’s get some perspective here. I’m not evil, just interesting.”

“Oh. And I’m not interesting?” He looked beyond Zaugg at Margo, who remained expressionless.

“Mr. Zaugg, I’ve been writing children’s books for more than twenty years. I am as good as any of my peers. And you are not my peer.”

“Oh, ouch. Look, sorry if I offended you. I thought the audience reaction this morning would sell the deal. I know how great you are, you’re my idol, the reason . . . look, never mind that. Lately you’re sort of, well, in a rut, aren’t you? A victim of your own formula. The

two of us working together, could be so much more.”

“Your five minutes are up, Mr. Zaugg. I will not prey on children’s fears, as you do, to make a buck.”

Zaugg looked stricken, like he might throw a fit. Then he smiled and dropped his voice to nearly a whisper, gazing directly into Wilson’s eyes. “But children have fears. Lots of them. They’re like little criminals, listening for footsteps in the night.” Wilson stared back, time suspended as the world threatened to shatter. But Zaugg had already left.

After a bit, Margo began knitting again.

“We are going to sue, are we not?” It was ten weeks after Zaugg first accosted him at the Giant Peach, an act he had not repeated.

“We’ll see.” Delilah Chomsky, Wilson’s publisher, was a brusque woman with no children of her own, devoted to gardening and the management of a string of children’s authors. He sat in her office, stacked with book manuscripts carefully arranged so as not to obscure the paintings of gardens on the walls. Delilah had told Wilson what to do for seventeen years. At times, he felt that Wilson Pettijohn was more her creation than his.

“What do you mean, ‘we’ll see?’ It’s plagiarism.”

Delilah looked as if she were dealing with a child who was ill too much, wanting to dispense with the sympathy and get straight to the medicine.

Zaugg’s new book was a departure from his usual. The pages were illustrated by Zaugg himself in a snarky pen and ink, clearly spoofing the Pettijohn style. The poems featured Willy B. Goody, next door neighbor to Zamander “Zam” Zauss. Zam was dark, smart, persecuted

and poor, while Goody was obedient, clueless, privileged and dim. Goody helped an old lady across the street, distracted while that same old lady kicked a stray dog. Goody's father, the owner of the local candy factory, made sure that the maximum allowable level of bat feces was added to his product. Events propelled the two main characters through twisted parodies of Wilson's most well known poems. The house made of vegetables is instead a castle made of ice cream, attacked by marauding preschoolers, with Zam rescuing Goody from the goopy molten mess. Goody brings home a pair of white rhinos who proceed to multiply like rabbits, destroying everything in sight. Zam cleverly resolves the situations, though Goody always receives the credit. The level of frenetic invention exceeded anything Wilson had ever seen. Sales were in runaway mode and the publisher was having trouble keeping the book stocked.

"Oh please, Wilson, don't be childish. There's no law against satire. Besides, it's marketing genius."

"By using me?"

"Of course." Delilah smiled cheerlessly, as if speaking to a toddler about macroeconomics.

Wilson recognized the cliché of conspiracy, as obvious as being chosen last for playground basketball in school. Hackneyed, overused, boring.

"You're talking to him, aren't you?"

Delilah paused, as if calculating the return on the truth. "Yes. His agent contacted us a month ago. We talked joint marketing, but it turns out Mr. Zaugg may be interested in a new publisher, in which case, joint marketing is a given."

"You can't do that without my permission."

"Yes, we can. Your numbers have declined the last three times out. It's within your contract and it will be financially advantageous. For all of us."

Wilson had never felt more betrayed. Not when Steve, his best friend, rolled over on him to the police. Not when his mother had put him in the foster home.

"No, it will not be advantageous. Because I quit."

On a walk, two months later, Wilson sensed something moving behind the hedge. He knew no dog dwelt in this yard, because he had walked past this particular house many times through the years, and at least twice a day recently. Wilson now spent most of each day walking, unable to write two words that rhymed or make a drawing that looked appreciably different from snarled fishing line. He knew someone lurked behind the laurel hedge precisely because he was no longer able to lose himself in a story while walking, unable to find the lamp post at the back of the wardrobe. He was stuck in survival mode, gone underground, doubling back on strangers to see if they were tailing him. So it wasn't entirely a surprise when Tiberlous Zaugg opened the front gate and stepped directly into his path. Wilson had his little aerosol can of pepper spray at the ready, wishing it was his old .38 instead.

"Stop, or you're going to get it right in the face."

"Oooh, the street Pettijohn emerges." Wilson noticed how long Zaugg's eye teeth were, like fangs. Zaugg was dressed in his customary black pants, a shimmering rayon shirt printed with little skull and crossbones.

"I'm warning you, Zaugg."

"What? This is a public street. Besides, I just want to talk, and you won't return my phone calls or letters. You really should have a website, you know."

"I told you, I don't want to collaborate with you, read with you, or have anything to do with you." He stared straight into Zaugg's eyes. Zaugg even looked afraid. "How did you find me?"

"Oh, come on, it's not hard to find you. Coffee at seven at the same place every day, same walk, same everything. How about you mix it up a bit and write something with me? It will be great."

"Never."

Zaugg moved his hands. Wilson gestured with the spray and he froze again.

"But whyyyyyy?" Zaugg's whine was the preamble to a Veruka Salt tantrum. "Why why why why? It's not like I'm trying to turn you to the dark side. Luke, I am not your father!" Zaugg twisted his body as if he might screw himself into the ground. "In fact, it's rather the other way around. I'm trying to save you from becoming a parody of yourself, stagnating into an embarrassment. Look, I told you—you're my idol, you're why I'm me. I know all about your screwed-up life, but it doesn't matter."

Wilson had a flashback of hiding in a ditch in the dark, the tinnitus of close firing reverberating in his skull, yet he could not place the memory.

"Not interested," Pettijohn said.

"Okay," Zaugg said, as if reaching some sort of decision. He raised his palms in supplication. "But I have to warn you. I know more

about you than anyone else in the world besides yourself. Like the DSHS office on Oakland Avenue. Your tour in Nam and Steve, your buddy who set you up in the dope business, then used you as a trade in. He got out before you did, by the way. Hell, I even know where your mother is buried. Do you, Norman Darden?"

Wilson felt a strange tranquility rise within, relieved that the game was now transparent. Zaugg knew the secrets of his dealing, the bust, time served. "So what are you going to do, blackmail me?"

Zaugg grinned. "I certainly have the material to remove you from the over-crowded field of children's literature. There aren't a lot of convicted felon kiddie-lit authors for some reason. But that's not what I want. For the longest time, I wanted to be you. I want to help you. I'm your biggest fan."

How could he want to be me? I don't want to be me.

Wilson regarded Zaugg with the same level of trust reserved for Theo Drier, the little guy who took a dislike to him in prison because Norman—for then he was not yet Wilson Pettijohn—was always reading and so repeatedly bumping into Drier in the chow line. Drier had announced he would blind Norman in the prison yard if he saw him with another book. Norman chose the library instead of exercise and began to write poetry of unintentionally childish simplicity.

"Why don't you just back away, stop following me? If you know about my life, you know enough to be afraid."

"Au contraire. I even know you're bluffing. You never hurt anybody. And I guess I just have to know—what you are so afraid of?"

Wilson backed away, aiming the nozzle of the pepper spray at Zaugg's face, which was smiling in that awful, sympathetic way that Wilson could not stand.

The Giant Peach Bookstore had not changed in the three years since Wilson had first been accosted there by Zaugg. Wilson was now in the middle of reading the title poem from *Go Inside, You'll Be Alright* when he recognized Zaugg in the audience. The man himself was transformed. His long black hair was cut much shorter, scraggly and unkempt, even streaked with gray. He wore a bushy hermit beard and he had gained weight, his torso sloped like an Assyrian monument. Completing the disguise was a yellow T-shirt instead of a shiny silk print. Zaugg now looked like a carny roustabout, not a children's book author.

Had he hoped to hide in plain sight? No matter. Zaugg was the nemesis Wilson had prepared for. Wilson kept reading.

*When you go beyond the shadow,
Beyond the furthest fort,
Share a hiding place with the fear you know,
Of the crawliest, scariest sort.*

The last three years had been both the worst and best in his life. At first he had moved from place to place, avoided routine. Dyed his hair black, then brown, then white again. Grew facial hair and shaved. After a while, he began to try to write and draw again, sitting before his Smith Corona portable for days at a time, snow blind in the wilderness of blank pages. Drawings refused to resolve, rigid fragments diverging. He considered disappearing to a foreign country, establishing another new identity. But escape only led him away from creativity. Zaugg's words haunted him. What are you so afraid of?

Almost a year into his wrestling match with the wild things, Wilson hired a private investigator. He was surprised and oddly

embarrassed to learn that his mother was buried less than one hundred miles away, resting in a graveyard near the state hospital where she had resided for the last seventeen years of her life. Her grave was under a small flat stone, identical to many others, inscribed with her name and dates, silent on the issues of schizophrenia and progeny.

*When the fear whispers your name,
At the oasis in the Serengeti,
Talk to the mummy politely,
Offer to share your spaghetti.*

The writing began as a trickle. The poems about paralyzing fear and grand adventure, sinister forces and quiet fortitude arrived like water seeking a lower level. When he got stuck, he returned to the question: *what are you so afraid of?*

It began with the moment he had been dropped off at the front door of the Department of Social and Health Services on Oakland Avenue by his mother, fifty-three years prior. In the first poem, Willy Worth is delivered to a similar location by his fictional aunt, who blubbers unconvincingly. Willy marches resolutely into an edifice drawn to appear a thousand feet tall.

It was just so when little Normy's mother had dropped him off at age eight, though she had not cried, not even gone dew-eyed. She was unalterably decided on saving her child from his own mother. *Go on inside. You'll be alright*, she said. Stop your blubbering. Part of Wilson had been glad to escape her rage and depression, the days isolated in the apartment, afraid to leave even to attend school. The other part was a labyrinth of guilt. How often had he yearned for the exit of insanity himself? He was simply unable to find the right door.

Willy, in the opening poem, never actually goes into the building, instead turning left through a small news shop in the lobby, steering through the stacks of magazines and the racks of gum and candy to a side exit. Willy possessed a self assurance Wilson never had.

Right now, both fact and fiction were history. Wilson Pettijohn's new book was stacked on tables banking the reader's alcove. A life-sized cardboard picture of Wilson Pettijohn faced outwards. From the podium, Wilson only could see the back of the picture, a blank silhouette, supported by nothing more than a small triangular strut.

This was Wilson's first reading to support *Go On Inside, You'll Be Alright*. He was nervous about the new editor, who had suggested so few changes that he suspected she had not read the book at all. The book had been rushed into print far too quickly by the new publisher. There was speculation in the press about whether his disappearance had been a publicity stunt. The New York Times Book Review said, inexplicably, "Mr. Pettijohn has at last transcended the genre of children's literature and written a book that should be read by all." Wilson had considered writing to demand a retraction. He would have preferred that many people not read his book, especially Tiberius Zaugg.

It was too easy to have a character face terrors on paper. And so he was here, reading aloud, ready to do the deal. Without stop or stutter, Wilson read the list of fears Willy had conquered, then waited for the applause to die.

"Hey everyone!" Wilson said. "We have a celebrity with us today—Mr. Tiberius Zaugg."

Zaugg appeared surprised, swiveling his head, blinking. He put up a long arm, but said nothing as the polite round of applause ebbed quickly, as if the audience was not quite sure who this was.

It was true that Zaugg hadn't published a children's book in three years. His last published work was a novel for adults, which did not do well. According to the private investigator, Zaugg was now working on a computer game, something with levels and quests and the like. Why Zaugg had shifted focus wasn't clear. What could he possibly be looking for that he could not find in children's books?

"Ti, would you like to come up and give us a few poems?"

Wilson's heart raced towards breakdown, but he wasn't going to back off. He had the appropriate weapons. Courtesy of the investigator, he knew Zaugg's real name was Randy Sarterman, knew of his multiple experiences in juvenile detention, his shoplifting record and his adolescent crystal meth addiction after the messy divorce of his parents.

From the back of the audience, Zaugg shook his head.

Wilson expected Zaugg to challenge him, deftly try to steal his audience. Wilson wasn't prepared for Zaugg to decline the invitation. The gauntlet had been ignored, his plan derailed.

Wilson began to panic. He checked the location of the exit. Suddenly, it was clear what he had to do. He had put Willy to the test. He had to follow.

"You know, I've made some mistakes in my life," he said to the audience. "I went to prison because I sold marijuana. What I want to tell you is that it is impossible to guess what you don't know. About life." It sounded like somebody else talking across a distance, irrelevant and inexplicable.

*Standing before you is an illegal drug vendor,
a fraudulent, worthless, convicted, pretender.
Though sorry and wasted and basely aberrant,
It could be I once sold dope to your parent.*

Wilson realized that he'd actually said this aloud. 'Aberrant' would have to go. Life suddenly was a big word that children could not understand and Wilson could not demonstrate for them. Zaugg was in the back of the now restive crowd, exaggeratedly shaking his head from side to side, mouthing NO, his primate-length arms scissoring before him. The truth was, Wilson had been a terrible dope dealer, too timid to make any more than a marginal living. The earnest faces in the audience were murmuring, confused. It was all going oh so wrong.

"Just remember that you can never know who you will become. And the absolute worst thing is that there are no do-overs."

"Mr. Pettijohn?" It was Zaugg's voice, sounding desperate. "Mr. Pettijohn, can you read 'Playing Go Fish With the Spider?' I have always been terrified of spiders. I used to have nightmares about spiders every night. But your poem helped me. I have a pet tarantula now that is my best friend. I named him Julio, after the spider in your poem."

Nervous laughter rippled through the crowd. It was extraordinary, Wilson thought, how much Zaugg's voice, once so menacing could sound like that of a little boy.

The two men locked gazes across the heads of the crowd. So many possible exits. The poem, preposterously, was the most urgent.

"Of course," Wilson said.

Wilson read "Go Fish," where Willy plays cards with the giant hairy beast around a little camp fire deep in the spider's cave. The spider holds a hand of cards at the end of each leg, but Willy wins anyway and overcomes his terror of spiders besides. Wilson found himself reciting from memory.

Wilson looked up and saw tears welling in Zaugg's eyes, one escaping down his cheek, into the big beard, like a small animal bolting for the scrub. There was a large smile on the incongruously hairy face. Wilson felt he could read the boy's mind and it did not frighten him a bit. □