

Excerpt from *Pass the Damn Salt, Please!* by Dan McLaughlin © 2009
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Chapter 26

Meet her parents

“And this is my Mom.” Rachel.

“Thank you for having me over, Ms. Robertson.” Riley.

“It is our pleasure. We have heard so many nice things about you.” Her Mom.

“Same here. So this is the ancestral home I have heard so much about.” Riley.

“Yes this is it, chateau Robertson. Now why don’t the two of you show Riley around while I put these flowers in a vase. It was so nice of you to bring them.” Her Mom.

“It was my pleasure. Rachel is always talking about how much you like your garden.” Riley.

“Oh my goodness yes.” Her Mom.

“It’s her second child.” Her Dad.

“And first grandchild.” Rachel.

“All wrapped up in one.” Her Dad.

“Now you two stop it. Be nice.” Her Mom.

“Before we get started Riley, can I get you something to drink?” Her Dad.

“That would be great, thank you.” Riley.

“I got almost everything here, bourbon, scotch, all kinds of beer...” Her Dad.

“Daddy.” Rachel.

“Actually if it’s OK do you have any thing without alcohol?” Riley.

“Daddy, I told you that Riley does not drink.” Rachel.

“Oh well, with the liquid courage of alcohol comes a certain amount of oblivion. Sorry Riley. So what would you like?” Her Dad.

“Anything diet would be fine.” Riley.

“Uh how about some mineral water?” Her Dad.

“That would be fine, thank you.” Riley.

“So you don’t drink alcohol? Are you an some kind of alcoholic?” Her Dad.

“Daddy!” Rachel.

“That’s OK honey. They are allowed to admit that they are an alcoholic. It’s a step or something. Am I right? Do you have one of those medallions or something?” Her Dad.

“I think I have heard that too, but in my case I just never developed a taste for alcohol. So no, I don’t have a medallion. Well not for sobriety.” Riley.

“Well good man. Of course at the firm you pretty much had to drink to get along and get anywhere.” Her Dad.

“So speaks His Lordship of Rationalization.” Her Mom.

“I heard that.” Her Dad.

“I know that.” Her Mom.

“So your daughter says that you do a lot of community service work. I hear you are a pretty mean Santa, Mr. Robertson.” Riley.

“Oh yeah, you are looking at once again the Head Elf for this years Operation Ho Ho Ho.” Her Dad.

“Head elf? Are congratulations in order? Or did you just leave the room at the wrong time and get chosen for the job while absent?” Riley.

“(Laughter.) Head Elf means basically you are the transportation guy.” Her Dad.

“Daddy has been doing it for ages. Congratulations Daddy.” Rachel.

“Thank you honey. You see with Operation Ho Ho Ho there is Santa, who hands the toys out, Mrs. Santa who organizes the toys.” Her Dad.

“And the elf.” Rachel.

“And the elf who drives the sleigh.” Her Dad.

“Or car.” Rachel.

“Or car, yes. The Head Elf is the guy who figures out all the routes so as many kids as possible get something in one evening. It’s done through the Junior Chamber of Commerce.” Her Dad.

“Sounds very cool. How many houses does the JC Santa and company cover in a night?” Riley.

“Well last year we had 68 Santas making 23 stops each from about 5 to 9pm.” Her Dad.

“Wow. That is about what, almost 6 stops an hour?” Riley.

“Chimney swoops, yeah. Yeah they really have to hustle because for a lot of kids these might be the only gifts they get from Santa that year. So it is my job to minimize the travel time so we can do as many chimney swoops as we can.” Her Dad.

“So how long have you been doing this?” Riley.

“Well I have been Head Elf for a couple of years. I started out as just a simple elf driving whoever needed it.” Her Dad.

“The Gypsy Elf?” Riley.

“I’m sorry?” Her Dad.

“Like a gypsy cab, Daddy.” Rachel.

“Oh no, it has to be very organized. Otherwise you’ll never get to all your houses that you need to. Then I got promoted and so then Rachel’s mother and I were a Santa team. You remember that honey?” Her Dad.

“Yes I do. You were a very good Santa, I must say.” Her Mom.

“Yes and you shined as Mrs. Santa. Talk about organized. Each gift had a discreet tag with the kid’s name on it which I could palm as I handed the gift over. And she never got one wrong. Simply amazing. We certainly had a lot of those kids really believing in Santa Claus, didn’t we honey?” Her Dad.

“Well your ‘Ho Ho Ho’ certainly put it over the top.” Her Mom.

“C’mom Daddy, do it. Show Riley.” Rachel.

“Well...(Laughter.)” Her Dad.

“Pleasssssse?” Rachel.

“Well OK. Now the real secret to a good Santa laugh is really a sharp push from the belly. You want three sharp distinct deep hos. HO HO HO.” Her Dad.

(Laughter and applause.)

“For many years Christmas was for me watching mom and dad dressing up as the Santas.” Rachel.

“I think we still have that damn bell around here someplace, don’t we hon?” Her Dad.

“Yes, I think it’s still around here.” Her Mom.

“Now you might not know this Riley, but when Rachel was real little she would wake us up Christmas morning by ringing the bell as loud as she could while screaming ‘Merry Christmas’ at the top of her lungs?” Her Dad.

“Usually at about 4 am. (Laughter.)” Her Mom.

“You know Rachel, somehow you never told me this story.” Riley.

“Thanks Dad, Mom. You might as well go and finish it.” Rachel.

“There’s more?” Riley.

“Oh yes, you see about the time Rachael turned 7, her father decided to develop a condition he called ‘*septiodioamnesio*’.” Her Mom.

“‘*Septiodioamnesio*’?” Riley

“Oh yes, ‘*septiodioamnesio*’ also known by its common name as 7 day amnesia, is a very very rare disease that primarily effects Santas for the seven days after an Operation Ho Ho Ho whereby the Santas forget where they put their Santa bell.” Her Dad.

“Do I need to mention that Operation Ho Ho Ho happened 6 days before Christmas?” Rachel.

“(Laughter.) Not really, but I am certainly enjoying the direction this story is going. Go on, please.” Riley.

“Oh it gets much better. So every year right after operation Ho Ho Ho, I would sit Rachel down and explain that I felt a case of ‘*septiodioamnesio*’ coming on.” Her Dad.

“(Laughter.) I would like to point out in my defense that this was WAY before the Internet.” Rachel.

“(Laughter.) And that poor Santa Daddy simply could not find the Santa Bell.” Her Dad.

“Again.” Her Mom.

“(Laughter.) Which I am guessing was invariably found on the eighth day.” Riley.

“(Laughter.) Oh he is a smart one honey.” Her Mom.

“But knowing you, Rachel you were not long satisfied with your father’s simple explanation, were you?” Riley.

“No of course not. And being a dutiful daughter I did not want my father to suffer the ravages of ‘*septiodioamnesio*’ without trying to help the poor Dad. Or Santa. (Laughter.)” Rachel.

“(Laughter.) So where did your inquisitive mind take you?” Riley.

“After a bit I focused on environmental causes. You see I began to notice ‘*septiodioamnesio*’ only seemed ‘to happen right around Christmas. So it seemed to me maybe it was the noise caused by the bell that actually triggered the onset of the disease, not some bacteria or germ.” Rachel.

“OK, a reasonable hypothesis, I guess.” Riley.

“Yes to scientifically verify it I devised a test based on Gresham’s Law.” Rachel.

“Bad money drives out good?” Riley.

“Smart or at least he paid attention somewhere along the line.” Her Mom.

“You knew Gresham’s law before you were 10?” Riley.

“Rachel was quite the reader as a child.” Her Mom.

“Wow.” Riley.

“Well I was around 10. So from Gresham’s Law I derived the thesis that bad noise would drive out the good noise. Of hiding.” Rachel.

“So how did you test this astute hypothesis?” Riley.

“I went out and bought the biggest air horn I could find and right at 4 am I cranked that puppy up. (Laughter.) Right outside of their bedroom. After my parents came tumbling out and I explained my theory and cure, it was pretty much decided that while a debilitating disease such as *‘septiodioamnesio’* was truly a very bad thing, the presence (and sound) of the beloved Christmas bell could protect a household from the even more piercing sounds of an air horn. (Laughter and applause.)” Rachel.

“Wow. Again. Remind me to never piss you off. That’s just so so so...” Riley.

“Clever?” Rachel.

“Yeah OK ‘clever.’ He says in the voice one uses to someone carrying a loaded shotgun.” Riley.

“You’ll get along with her just fine Riley.” Her Mom.

“I can be a pretty quick study when the incentive is there. So Rachel tells me you’re quite a gardener, Ms. Robertson.” Riley.

“Oh please call me Jennifer. Yes, although I think I sometimes kill more than I plant.” Jennifer, her Mom.

“Oh mother that is not true. You have quite the green thumb.” Rachel.

“So how do you stand on the issue of xeriscaping?” Riley.
“Oh God here we go.” Her Dad.

“Oh hush dear. My position is quite clear. I love my roses and if we have to make a desert of the rest of the state so I can have them, well then everyone else can develop a taste for succulents and native weeds. Now I am not against water conservation and use of weeds by other people, but I will have my roses. The colors and smells when they bloom make life worth living. They are simply exquisite.” Jennifer, her mom.

“Are you interested in reviving the older varieties?” Riley.

“Oh I like them like my men, all young, big, vibrant and with flashes of color and smells.” Jennifer, her mom.

“Thank you, dear.” Her Dad.

“Oh I suppose that could describe you too. Well except the young part. And vibrant. Where was I, oh yes as for those tiny old flowers; I don’t care for them as much.” Jennifer, her Mom.

“Do you belong to a garden club or anything?” Riley.

“Does she. Lord, it’s the center of her universe.” Her Dad.

“Hush dear, mummy is talking. Put your muzzle back in your drink. Yes, for many years I was chairperson of the Rose Committee.” Jennifer, her mom.

“And President of the entire club for about 10, weren’t you mother?” Rachel.

“Yes and that is when we started going out in the community more to encourage proper landscaping. With the Community Rose program. Has Rachel mentioned that to you yet?” Jennifer, her Mom.

“I am not sure if I remember...” Riley.

“Well she should have. It’s a program where we go thought neighborhoods anonymously and then later give deserving yards a “Community Rose.” It is a plaque shaped like a rose saying that that year that yard was recognized as having outstanding merit. We do it to encourage and reward both effort and execution. Many times we go back to the same neighborhood and many more yards are all spruced up.” Jennifer, her Mom.

“I remember sometimes driving down the street with Mom and how there would always be someone working in their yard who would make a special effort to wave or say hello.” Rachel.

“Oh really?” Riley.

“Or going to the nursery with Mom. It’s like you were going there as part of a rock star’s entourage.” Rachel.

“It was like Demeter herself was back and walking among mere mortals. People flocking around here thrusting forward plants for her blessing.” Her Dad.

“Yes, that’s what we called it, The Blessing of the Plants by Saint Jennifer.” Rachel.

“And woe to those who selected poorly or pruned ill judiciously.” Her Dad.

“Blasphemers!” Rachel.

“Idolaters!” Her Dad.

“Concrete lovers!” Rachel.

“Well there is simply a right and a wrong way to do something. If you are going to do something and it takes the same amount of energy to do it right as wrong you might as well do it right. There is nothing in a poorly performed effort that is worthy of praise.” Jennifer, her Mom.

“In the sainted words of my beloved grandmother, ‘Lazy people work twice as hard.’” Riley.

“Oh dear god, not another one.” Her Dad.

“Well, I didn’t say I necessarily agree with her all the time. Like everything else a truly expert lazy person can pick their spots for maximum laziness.” Riley.

“So you think laziness is something that can be taught?” Her Dad.

“Oh yes, a naturally lazy talent can be totally wasted on the wrong person.” Riley.

“Oh Riley, I disagree. By definition a lazy person is one who is not doing anything. To take the effort to become a better lazy person is additional effort. Therefore less lazy.” Rachel.

“Good point honey. Laziness is an innate state attained by doing nothing.” Her Dad.

OK I see your point, but what if by a certain expenditure of energy of effort in the short run the lazy person can incur a far greater degree of future sloth.” Riley.

“Can you give me an example?” Her Dad.

“Ok, say there is a lazy person sitting on his butt on the sofa, watching TV. A lazy person in their natural habitat, yes?” Riley.

“OK I am with you.” Her Dad.

“Now if we were to take your position to its logical conclusion, any time the lazy person got up out of the sofa he...” Riley.

“Or she.” Rachel.

“Or she yes thank you would be less lazy, yes?” Riley.

“Yes.” Her Dad.

“Now what would you say that if the lazy person got up off the sofa and went out and purchased for him...” Riley.

Or her.” Rachel.

“Or her, yes, thank you a lottery ticket which won him, I’m waiting...” Riley.

“Oh I’m sorry I was eating some chips, or her.” Rachel.

“Or her, yes, thank you enough money that they, Ha,” Riley.

“Brat.” Rachel.

“Just thinking of you dear, enjoy the chips, that the formerly lazy person need never get off the sofa ever

again.” Riley.

“Huh. So what you are saying is that with a modicum of energy expended the lazy person can become a lazy plus 2 person with a plus .4 expenditure of energy.” Her Dad.

“A little more algebraic than I am used to, but yes and furthermore since this is not intuitively obvious it means it must be a learned behavior. Someone has to tell this lesson to a little slother. That means education and change from the initial natural state to an increased level of laziness.” Riley.

“See Daddy, he thinks like a lawyer.” Rachel.

“Oh dear god save us all. Well Riley I think that your grandmother was absolutely right in the way she intended. ‘Measure twice, cut once.’” Jennifer, her Mom.

“Well you would.” Her Dad.

“Well some of us have standards.” Jennifer, her Mom.

“Well some of us are self-righteous know-it-alls who live for making other people miserable.” Her Dad.

“Well some of us have to do something or otherwise someone would qualify for the ‘wallowing in filth and sloth’ event in the Olympics.” Jennifer, her Mom.

“Oh give me a break.” Her Dad.

“Speaks the man who goes through 5 rolls of toilet paper for every bar of soap.” Jennifer, her Mom.

“Mother, isn’t there something in the kitchen we should check up on?” Rachel.

“Oh I suppose you are right dear, let’s go check it out.” Jennifer, her Mom. (They leave.)

“Well I’m sorry you had to see her go off like that. She does it pretty regular like these days.” Her Dad.

“Errrr. Ummm.” Riley.

“But you didn’t hear that from me. I mean officially that’s what we’re here for, all here just to keep them happy.” Her Dad.

“So ummm, speaking of exploding, did you happen to catch the game last night?” Riley.

“Oh yeah the (blanks) the only team starting 5 power forwards ever known to mankind.” Her Dad.

“Not to mention a bench consisting of 6 other power forwards.” Riley.

“Not to mention the 3 more on injured reserve.” Her

Dad.

“Now to be fair, they DID have a guard who could shoot a three.” Riley.

“Who they traded.” Her Dad.

“For a ‘center’ who was also 6’8” 220.” Riley.

“Imagine that.” Her Dad.

“Who would have ever guessed it?” Riley.

“Not me.” Her Dad.

“Jesus, for what that GM makes, you’d think he’s have a brain cell or two rattling up there.” Riley.

“You don’t think it’s the owner calling the shots?” Her Dad.

“Well OK but the larger point is that with all they charge to see a game...” Riley.

“And plus what they held the city up to buy the land their arena is on...” Her Dad.

“You know, and this is a totally random thought...” Riley.

“Go ahead.” Her Dad.

“If they are so stupid as to have 12 power forwards what does it say about us that we keep on paying to go see them as well as tax ourselves to keep them around?” Riley.

“Put like that, it can only make one despair of democracy and the alleged rationality of the masses.” Her Dad.

“Well you know what Morris Udall, the congressman from New Mexico once said after losing an election.” Riley.

“No, what was that?” Her Dad.

“The people have spoken. The bastards.” Riley.

“Amen to that. And then we have to live with the idiots that they got bamboozled into voting for.” Her Dad.

“As opposed to our idiots.” Riley.

“Well yes.” Her Dad. (Jennifer, her Mom and Rachel re-enter.)

“Well you will all be glad to know the kitchen is still there.” Rachel.

“In all its pristine glory?” Her Dad.

“Why yes and whatever do you mean by that dear?” Jennifer, her mom.

“All I meant is that I am so glad you were able to find it and find your way back without leaving a messy trail of bread crumbs which would mar the clean perfection that is central to life here at chateau Robertson.” Her Dad.

“Well if you were ever here at meal time, you might be surprised at what else could be found around here.” Jennifer, her Mom.

“I am here sometimes at dinner.” Her Dad.

“Oh you are so right. I didn’t say both here and sober. I am so sorry.” Jennifer, her Mom.

“OK! Well, this has been fun. Look at that time. Thanks Mom and Dad for having us over.” Rachel.

“Oh don’t go honey, don’t let your Father drive you away.” Jennifer, her Mom.

“Oh no we had tickets to go to this thing later and later is now getting to be sooner and we don’t want to be late. Parking you know.” Riley.

“Oh yes well it is getting so hard to find places to park these days.” Jennifer, her Mom.

“What thing?” Her Dad.

“Don’t be crude, dear. Rachel says she wants to go so

we will let her. Go back to your drinking.” Jennifer, her mom.

“Oh no it’s all right. There is a new show opening, Plein air of the plain people. It’s a show of plein air portraits of peasants by some pretty good plein art artists I know Rachel really likes.” Riley.

“Well honey I hate to see you go. Your Mother can be such a holy terror sometimes.” Her Dad.

“Well it has certainly been very nice meeting the both of you. Thank you so much for having us over.” Riley.

“Well Riley it has been our pleasure.” Jennifer, her Mom.

“Yes Riley it certainly has. Nice to meet you son. Maybe we will get us a guard back someday. Love you pumpkin.” Her Dad.

“Thanks Daddy. Love you too. Love you Mom.” Rachel.

“Yes good-bye, dear. Thank you so much for dropping by and introducing us to Riley.” Jennifer, her mom.

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