

The Gift of the 12th Congressional District of Michigan

by Brian Joseph Davis

1.

Paul parked his Gremlin in the strip mall lot as night settled in. He hefted his body out of the car, feeling like his belly dragged behind a few good seconds. Approaching the door of his small law office he peered through the glass, past taped-on posters in red, white, and blue that urged citizens to “Vote Paul Poplawski for Congress,” and his personal least favorite, “Pops is the tops for the House!” That one was Mitch's idea. No one had ever called Paul “Pops” before.

His two volunteer phone girls were gone, but Mitch, his campaign manager, was still at his desk. Paul ambled in, glanced at a pile of mail and noticed a coupon sheet for Little Caesars. Mitch was lost in large printouts blanketing the desk—probably more columns of voter demographics and statistics that confused the hell out of Paul and cost him too much money. He pocketed the Little Caesars coupon. “Mitch, what are you still doing here?” he asked.

Not looking up, Mitch replied, “Trying to get you elected, last time I checked. And driving a car not made in Detroit still isn't helping. I told you to borrow your brother's T-bird.”

Paul had steered his campaign haphazardly and he knew he would likely not win. He saw it through because he believed that it was every American's right to run a faltering, under-funded campaign.

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/brian-joseph-davis/the-gift-of-the-12th-congressional-district-of-michigan>»

Copyright © 2010 Brian Joseph Davis. CC licensed as Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike. Some rights reserved.

But hiring Mitch, a fresh graduate in something called Communications, got Paul closer than he thought he could to Congress.

"Just stop— stop your calculations for one second," Paul stammered. "Your dad, Mitch? You should be at the funeral home. Making arrangements."

Mitch hoisted up his pale moon face and took off his glasses, which had the effect of making his button eyes disappear into even smaller dots. It struck Paul that Mitch was as ugly as his printouts. "The Twelfth District is 30 percent UAW," Mitch declared. "But we can get them. They are mad as hell at Carter over this hostage thing."

"Listen to me. I don't care how long ago your dad left, he's your dad. You will regret not being part of this."

"We run an ad on values. At the same time we do a final phone survey of uaw members where we ask, 'Would you feel the same way about your candidate if you knew that he was arrested at a swingers' party?' Image and values are how we're going to win this thing. One ad. Twenty phone workers. That's all we need."

"There's no more money left, Mitch. Get your coat on. I'll drive you there." As an afterthought, Paul added, "In my car not made in Detroit."

Mitch looked down again, past his printouts, towards the ashcolored carpet. He was the same color. Paul thumbed the coupons and took them reluctantly out of his pocket, tearing off a corner and handing it to Mitch. "Go next door, get some food for god's sake. You look terrible."

2.

In the previous months of campaign work Mitch had grown to hate Paul, though the low rent candidate was tolerated for the sole reason that he could, in spite of himself, win. So Mitch focused on the candidates—senatorial, gubernatorial—who would hire him after he installed Paul as a one-term oddity who cruised in on the rancor vote. The party had already noticed Mitch's fine, if frustrated, work with Paul. Mitch told him to trim his sideburns and button his collar, but Paul would just buy louder shirts and look more and more like the son of a Hamtramck butcher. The candidate's refusal to finish the fight during the final weeks was a willful acknowledgment that losing was possible.

Mitch scuttled down to the corner of the strip mall where Little Caesars glowed orange. As he grabbed the door handle he looked across the lot and saw his father's car idling, the exhaust filling the air with compact clouds. He was shocked for a second before figuring it out. "Damn," he muttered to himself. "Not now, Donald."

Inside, Mitch ordered his food and then sat at a stool by the window. It would be his first time eating since being told his father had died the night before of a heart attack. That morning his mother sent word that she wouldn't be able to fly in from Montana in time. She told him whatever he and Donald decided would be best.

His father had left the family slowly enough that most people barely noticed. As a geologist for Shell Oil, he traveled for weeks at a time, and at home he was a tall, sullen shadow. When Mitch was eight, the weeks that his father was away had turned into months. His mother sat him down and told him that his father would be living with someone else. A friend named Donald.

As Mitch grew older, his father grew tanner, and more expressive, than a sullen shadow. The happiness put weight on his face, a kind of vague chubbiness Mitch was just now inheriting. And then came

the sound. At first it was a single chime in time with his father's steps as he walked out the door to greet Mitch at the start of a visitation weekend. After several years, the sound became like carillon bells, tolling every step he made.

In '68, his father planned a Disneyland vacation with Mitch. They made it to the airport gate where they stood in line and wondered what was taking so long. When a woman in an airline vest and beehive passed by, Mitch's father tapped her arm and asked what the heck that contraption was up ahead. The woman explained it was a metal detector and that "Yes, it's totally harmless."

She walked on, and after several seconds, Mitch's father crouched down. "We're having a family emergency. I'm sorry." With that they left the airport.

The door to Little Caesars opened and fresh cold air collided with the smell of pizza. A man with close-cropped peppered hair and a still-dark mustache walked in. "Donald," Mitch whisper-shouted at him. "I said we'd figure things out later."

"I'm sorry, Mitchell. Your mom told me where you were. I just had a panic. First he's at the hospital and I couldn't see him, and now he's dead, and he's going to the funeral home, and I just—I just need your help."

"Okay, sit down, Donald. You know I will go along with whatever you want."

Donald eased onto a stool next to Mitch. "I know they're going to steal it all."

"Steal what?"

"His gold."

“His what?”

Donald glanced around and leaned in, “His jewelry.”

It was during a break from college that Mitch finally learned where the chiming came from. At a Tigers game he and his father went into the restroom. As usual, he went to a stall and Mitch went to the trough. The stall that day amplified his father's miraculous chiming sound, much like a belfry. Other men looked up and, rather than feeling pleasantly surprised at the sudden sound of ethereal metal crickets in their presence, left the restroom after hastily finishing their silent shaking. Mitch joined them, feeling like a coward for being afraid of his father's musicality.

When his father came out of the stall, the room was empty.

At his father's house the next morning, Mitch found a magazine on the kitchen table. Crudely printed, it featured black-and-white photographs of men and women displaying painful-looking but elegant rings and studs on their bodies and through flaps of skin. Mitch opened the magazine to a centerfold. It was a close-up of a flaccid penis adorned with religious care, studded with metal bumps and loops. The poser was kneeling on a Hudson's Bay blanket that Mitch remembered from the guest room. The spread was at once as otherworldly as a page of National Geographic and as hokey and suburban as a church bulletin. The caption read, “‘Dr. Rock' is a scientist who holds on to our record with his 41st piercing!” Mitch felt familial honor despite his confusion. His father was always the winning type.

“He was so afraid of metal detectors at the airport,” Donald said. “That's why he started using solid gold. I know you don't want to hear about it, but it was him and it was everything he had.”

Mitch figured he could get several thousand dollars for his father's jewelry. For much of 1980, gold had been selling at \$900 an ounce. This was one thing to thank Carter for, Mitch thought.

There would be more than enough for some real phone workers and an ad that could even run on Channel 7 instead of Channel 50. He would just tell Paul that the donor wanted to remain anonymous. "Okay, Donald. I have a meeting with the campaign staff right now. Tomorrow, you'll come to the funeral home with me. For now, go home, phone some friends. I'll see you in the morning."

They stood up and Donald hugged Mitch, who received the embrace with back slaps. "Your dad never forgave himself for not being around to see you grow up, you know that?"

3.

As Paul drove them to the Stavro Funeral Home, Mitch forced himself to eat the fast food. Mr. Stavro, who let them in, was a man with slicked down white hair and a matching carnation in the lapel of his brown suede suit. Paul sat in the lobby as Mr. Stavro and Mitch moved into an office.

"Your father is now here," Mr. Stavro explained as he and Mitch walked. "No checks tonight. We worry later. We just need to set the times for the visitation and services."

"What I'm wondering is if I could spend some time alone with my father? A few minutes."

"Oh, we do not recommend it," Mr. Stavro said with a shaking index finger. "We do much to present the deceased in a certain manner, and your father, he has just come from the hospital."

"I didn't get a chance to say goodbye." It was a line Mitch plucked from some TV-imbedded memory, and it did not seem to work.

"Our licences do not permit." Stavro shuffled a stack of prayer cards.

Mitch took a crumpled \$20 bill out of his front pocket. Mr. Stavro nodded his head. He led Mitch to the chapel and through a door at the back into a hallway that had the unkempt feel of backstage. Around a corner they came to a cinderblock room, half garage and half lab. On a gurney a body lay covered in a winding sheet. "We leave you now," Mr. Stavro finished, with a slight bow.

With short steps Mitch walked to the body. He reached his hand out and saw it trembling. His father lived the life he wanted to live and the onus to do the same would be Mitch's inheritance. With the courage of that thought, he pulled back the bottom half of the sheet, leaving the face covered. His father's shirt was left torn open, probably from when the paramedics treated him. The violation angered Mitch, who noticed a lightening bolt-shaped burn on the stomach, leading down to below his father's belt. What Mitch had come to steal had acted as a conductor when they put the paddles on him.

Mitch undid his father's belt and pants. He tugged the polyester open and down as much as could. As the body jostled, the jewelry made its chiming sound and when Mitch heard it, he wept. He edged the pants down more and more until he saw the gold. His father's crotch seemed made of gold and Mitch didn't have a clue how to remove any of it.

Some were like hoop earrings and he snapped them open, quickly putting them in his pocket. The golden ribs that dotted the shaft turned out to be barbell shaped doohickeys with ends that unscrewed. This took time, and Mitch abandoned his harvesting

after only 10 of them. He continued weeping and sniffing as he plucked off diamond shaped plumbs—four of them—that dangled from chains. He did calculations as to how much airtime each piece of gold would purchase, but halted at the horseshoe-shaped piece.

It was the largest, and its placement through the head and out the urethra filled Mitch with terror and wonder at the depth of his father's experiences and how he had found more mystery in his life than a geologist for Shell Oil had the right to find. Mitch tugged at the horseshoe but with the body's rigor mortis well set in, the golden thing would not budge. Mitch tugged and wept.

4.

While waiting in the lobby, Paul had settled on purchasing the ad time and hiring the extra help. To say no was to say no to Mitch, who ran this campaign as if he himself would be heading to Washington, working even on the day his father died.

What was the cost? Paul thought. It was a couple of payments on the boat, and he hadn't even been out on Lake St. Clair once the previous summer.

He was fully taken over by the delirium of boat payment math when Mr. Stavro came and suggested that the bereaved seemed to be upset and that perhaps it was time to collect him. Mr. Stavro pointed Paul towards the cinder block room and, as Paul found his way, he heard Mitch's sobs echoing down the hall. "Pops" Mr. Stavro announced before leaving, "You have our vote."

Paul wanted nothing more than to go to Mitch, put a hand on his shoulder and tell him tears were okay, that fathers disappeared. That's what they did, every morning while we grow up, and then permanently.

But Paul never had the chance to begin his homily. As he entered the room the whiteness reminded him of the butcher shop of his childhood, how it was clean and horrifying. Mitch's back was to Paul, hunched and lurching with sobs that sounded like snores flapping through jowls. Before Paul could open his mouth he saw Mitch's arm moving up and down, pushing around the body's groin area. Up and down, up and down—Paul's eye's followed in shock. But his ears were lulled by the gentle chiming sound that filled the room.

Paul understood that grief could drive men to strange acts, but even with all his knowledge gleaned from 20 years in real estate law, he didn't have a damn clue about what was going on in front of him.

He edged out of the room. Paul would return to the lobby, he resolved. He would sit down and wait for his campaign manager, telling Mr. Stavro that everything was all right. Paul would speak as little as possible on the ride to Mitch's apartment. Paul would say good night and, with respect for the dead in mind, wait until tomorrow to fire Mitch, who in the end was right. Politics did come down to image and values. Pops had to stay tops.

