Letter to the Bean Factory

by Sturla Grey

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The mother left the father when Richie was four years old. The mother had always been a heavy drinker and had never loved the father, who she met as a *mitzvah* through the synagogue she briefly attended as a young woman in search of spirituality through her natural born Judaism. The rabbi's wife introduced them. It had the flavor of fate.

The mother had taken it seriously at the time, becoming a *Jewish* mother, and she took on the attendant tasks for a brief interval, until the father revolted her so thoroughly that her revulsion replaced the duty she briefly felt toward Richie, and his elder brother Thomas. Changing diapers and nurturing, she learned quickly, were not her thing. The idea she once had that mothering would organize her, somehow make her a woman with a life and a focus and somewhere to be each day, was vigorously sloughed off. She did not love the baby boys at all and she resented having to change their shitty diapers and being required to respond when they pulled at her for food and affection. She looked out the filthy window of the Sherman Way apartment as the boys stood crying by her legs and resentfully ignored them. The mother shot her resentment at them with silent arrows and wished they were dead.

At four in the afternoon, the mother would block off their bedroom window with heavy blankets, put them in there and lock the doors, telling them it was night time and they had to go to sleep. Richie would pee his bed, conforming his body to the side of the mattress away from the piss. The rule in the house was no leaving the room after mommy had closed the door. If he tried, the door would be

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staunchly locked from the outside, mother recruiting her afternoon cocktail somewhere down the block.

The mother took to heavier drinking for the first two years of her utter revulsion. Then she met a well-muscled black man at the corner liquor store one day while the boys were at school. The mother leapt through the escape hatch without a second thought. She left her two young sons, the father, and the small two bedroom apartment on Sherman Way in the valley that never had new carpet, fresh curtains, or quiet. She left the cars growling past during rush hour, children wanting, the father demanding his dinner, the screaming in her head without ceasing.

Now, the father sat at the kitchen table in the same apartment, alone. The father sat with a pen and paper, a plate of cold baked beans in front of him. He raged inside, seething with a furor so deep that he could barely breathe. The father turned a spoon over in his fingers, the thin sauce from the beans dripping off it, he thought, like water. Two-seventy-nine for these beans from a can with water sauce. The label stated clearly “thick maple sauce”. These beans would come out in a thick maple sauce and be warm and flavorful when heated. The father had envisioned this when he saw the can on the liquor store shelf.

The father worked all day at his job selling office supplies to a lot of ingrates, a lot of people who would not see value in the deal. A dumb-ox could not see what they really needed to make their business run right. They didn't appreciate his starched white shirt, navy blue tie, the care with which he parted and combed his oiled hair to the side. He shaved closely and carefully, putting himself together in the impeccable way one would for a wedding or a funeral.

These people, professionals they call themselves, they won't see what is needed for a business to run well, to run *right.* To buy in bulk is the thing, the way to save money on everything a business needs to run on a tight budget. They want to nickel and dime, a

little here, a little there, it's not smart.

The father made one sale the whole day, on a case of ball point *Bic* pens. Total yield in commission: two-twenty-five. The beans cost two-seventy-nine. He bought the beans and he walked home from the corner liquor store. The father opened the can with a rusty can opener, he was quite hungry, and watched as the beans poured out in the pan in a gush of thin water, not thick maple sauce at all. The father looked, and he thought, and he read the label on the can again, and he remarked " *the fuck — are you kiddin' me?"* He looked at the pan with the watery beans and read the label again and the rage, a white-hot thing that was not part of him came up and took him over.

The father read the label of the can, it had the address of the factory where the beans had been prepared and canned for Sunshine Foods, in Detroit. That was when he sat down to write the letter to the bean factory.

The father meant to tell the president of the bean factory exactly what he felt about these fraudulent beans of his, this lie that the president perpetrated on his packaging, this fraud president. Who could run a bean factory this way, really, a legitimate food plant, printing up labels that were full of shit, duping a whole country of Americans into buying something that said it had a "*thick maple sauce*" when indeed the sauce was water, colored with fucking brown food dye. It was *water*. And what is the big wise idea here? That no one will notice the negligence with which this fraud president is manufacturing his baked beans?

The father seethed so mightily that the pen shook with too much force to make good contact with the paper. A letter would not suffice. Something had to be broken, shattered, burned to ash. The quiet convulsed all around the father and he found himself so utterly incensed that here he was alone in a two bedroom apartment with

dirty carpets and no food in the fridge. His heart fought not to seize, blood vessels taught with rage.

He considered Eleanor, whom he wanted to be his girlfriend. She would acquiesce to his requests for a date from time to time, when she was harder up for a meal or a new pair of shoes that would cost him two week's pay to buy. She made no secret of wondering out loud where his two boys were and when they would come back to live with the father. She didn't want to be a step-mother and she didn't want no kids and Eleanor thought the father was a shit-heel for losing those boys. She would entertain the father's hirsute form laying sweaty on her breast for those new shoes. Once in a blue moon she could manage to stomach it.

Two miles away, in a yellow house off Talmage, the father's son Richie stayed, having had no father and no mother now for five years. There were two standard poodles and a teen-aged-boy-foster-brother and he wondered when the father would be coming to take him home again. That moment, as the father boiled over his letter to the bean factory, Richie lay in his single bed in the room he shared with his foster brother, and considered what the father was doing presently. He saw the father working, trying to save money so the boys could come home again, or the father was out looking for a new wife so there would be somebody to take care of the boys. Richie saw the father in the same outfit he had worn the day he dropped Richie and Thomas at the Department of Public Social Services. He turned them in like stray dogs to the pound. The dad wore his best suit, the navy blue, with a polyester shirt which he preferred because it did not wrinkle, and a yellow tie. His shoulders slumped and his eyes were dark, but he smiled and nodded as the woman from the office took the boys by the hand with their suitcases, like they were going on a vacation. They waved good bye to father. The father looked sheepish as the glass doors closed behind the boys. He walked toward his car, the weight of the world diminished from his shoulders into the ether.

The father began his letter to the bean factory in this manner. He chose the most evil wording his mind could come up with. Words that would sting. He began the letter:

Dear Mr. President. . .

The mother moved in with Leonard. . . *Lenny*, into a small two bedroom apartment in North Hollywood. It was painted a salmon pink on the outside with mosaic tiles on the façade and Victorian-looking lamps affixed to either side of a nomenclature sign which said "*Island Paradise"* in giant, white cursive letters that ended with a romantic flourish. She left that Sherman Way apartment and everyone in it without a second thought and she secretly marveled at how easy it had been when she finally set her mind to it.

Lenny couldn't leave his brood so easily, so he stayed in residence with his wife and three daughters in their house in Sylmar, he visited the Island Paradise regularly to see the mother in the salmon pink two-bedroom apartment.

The mother was exquisitely "ok" with the arrangement, because she knew that Lenny really loved only her. The mother went to her job as a warehouse secretary at a pipe plant every morning, she would groove on the interchange with her co-workers and the days would flow by effortlessly. The freedom she knew now was invigorating. She felt young and indestructible. Her body was alive with the sex that Lenny poured over her in generous doses when he saw her. *Little white bird* - he would call the mother, and he stroked her translucent white skin, against which her red lips were displayed, an open tear, wanting.

At night the mother would fix his favorite drink, Whiskey Sour, and they would talk of the day and sometimes make plans for the

weekend hours when Lenny would come to her all day and all night and he would not report home to his wife. After three or four whiskeys this way Lenny would approach the mother where she sat in the La-Z-Boy recliner. He would gently lift the TV tray and set it to the side, smile that big bright straight smile with such a delicious knowing in his eyes and she could smell the Kools on his breath. With his strong left hand he would push back the lever and lean her back as far as she could go. In one swoop he would spread her legs, push her full skirt up around her waist, pull down her panties, and feast until the mother could not breathe.

In a year of courting and seven years of marriage the father had never put his mouth on her pussy. She did not think of that now. She heard Lenny humming, *my sweet little salt water taffy,* against her wetness.

The mother drank more and more as the days passed in her freedom, her sense of natural existence a flotilla on a hard-lived life. After six years she and Lenny bought the *"Island Paradise"* apartment complex and the mother left her job at the pipe plant to manage their investment. She enjoyed looking after their tenants. The mother took to keeping her hair up in curlers all day until Lenny would arrive some time after supper, then she would fix herself up. He still ravished her. Once he brought a friend over on the weekend and after they had drunk quite a few whisky sours, Lenny undressed her in front of the friend. The friend lit a joint and they all toked together, the mother's head spinning in a most luscious kind of joy that left her feet dangling about eleven inches from the ground. Lenny and the friend shared the mother's body, she felt light as she came again and again. She lost track of whose lips were sucking on hers as she shuddered, until the sunrise came and she woke with Lenny laying against her, his friend gone.

The father dropped Eleanor at her apartment after they had gone to see *Taxi Driver* on a Friday night date. Too much blood, Eleanor

said, and the father was incensed that he had wasted twenty dollars on a date that would end with no ass. He smiled as he opened Eleanor's door and she politely pecked him on the cheek.

“Thanks, honey”, she said. “I'll see you soon.” He watched as her ungrateful ass swayed alluringly back and forth under her skirt as she walked through her front door and closed it securely behind her. The porch light blinked permanently off, a final “no”.

The father drove reluctantly back to the empty apartment on Sherman Way. The loneliness of the journey clanged mercilessly as he pulled into the assigned parking space under the building. He sat in the car. Tears came up in his eyes. He felt a searing self-pity that ate at his guts. He rested his forehead on the steering wheel for a time, he did not know for how long when he finally rose out of the car and went upstairs into the darkness.

The father sat at the kitchen table, a lone light shining down on his balding head as he screwed up his worst insults for the letter to the bean factory. He wrote in pencil first, the best way to get each word exactly right, the correct effect, the placement of words and their cadence so important to get exactly right.

Your lack of attentiveness reflects an incompetency on your part.

You should really consider a different profession.

You're a high-faluting worthless piece of shit with your careless disregard for the truth.

Eight years have passed since the father began his letter to the bean factory. He would get it right, and he would mail it at the right time, for maximum effect.

In the yellow house on Talmage, Richie was quiet for a very long time. In the quiet he shared with Dane, his foster brother, he was special. Dane was there waiting for him ever since the time in the

den when he let Richie feel inside his sweatpants. That was when Richie became special.

The foster parents would make Richie pick up the dog-shit in the back yard. The two big standard poodles would shit big sausage size shits and Richie would go out every night slightly afraid of the dark, and collect the dung, above the smell that made him gag, he would think of Dane, and be special. He would think of his father two miles away in the grey apartment, living with a new woman who needed a lot of attention and gifts and who did not delight in caring for seven- year-old boys. Dane's parents fostered Richie for the money and they made that clear as often as they could.

“You earn your keep,” Dane's father would say, and then sent Richie out in the night to pick up big thick poodle shit.

The father would visit on a Sunday every other month or so. He told Richie he wished he could take the boys back but his Eleanor wouldn't have it. The father told Richie it was better this way, that the foster family could take care of him and give him a family, and the father said he was sorry. Richie looked at the father and felt nothing. The stirring inside of him that was once so powerful had died.

Richie and Dane got crystal meth from the seniors at school. They came home together at lunch, took off their clothes and smoked the meth, stroking themselves casually, taking turns on each other until long after it had been time to go back to school. They hid in their room until after supper was finished and streetlights had come on outside. The foster parents never came upstairs to see if they were home after dark.

When Richie, who wanted only to be called Richard now, turned forty he made a pilgrimage to North Hollywood to see the mother for the first time since she left them. He had written down the address of the *“Island Paradise”* apartment complex. The mother

had told him she owned it outright now. Lenny never left her until he died of a heart attack three years ago. There was a pride in her voice that quavered with drunkenness. Richard had been sober for three years in AA. He wanted to make amends for his Fourth Step, a piece of direction his sponsor had given him.

Richard climbed the pebbled stairs of the apartment building to the second floor. He entered a dark, cool hallway through a glass door and marked the numbers on the doors as he passed: three, five, seven, finally arriving at door number nine. He paused when the sounds of music leaked through a three inch crack in the door.

“Mother?” he called, and waited for her to come and answer the door.

Richard waited, leaning on the door jam, listening intently for three minutes, maybe more. Nothing stirred, advertisements came on the radio. He pushed open the door, walked down a narrow hallway that opened out into a living room with green shag carpet, an imposing La-Z-Boy recliner, and fake ficus trees stationed in the corner next to a sliding glass door.

The figure was covered in a light blue chenille bathrobe, splayed out on her back on the floor by the glass door, her hair done up in large curlers, a slipper lying askew by her left foot. Richie crouched near the face and the rancid flame of bourbon leapt up at his nostrils. He didn't recognize this woman's face. She was a complete stranger. In her hand was a melted Klondike bar. A smear of chocolate marred her delicately wrinkled doily skin around the lipsticked mouth. Richard stood slowly. Felt nothing. Turned away. An hour later he would call the police and report a woman dead in her living room on Burbank Boulevard.

The father mailed the letter to the President of the bean factory one October eleven years after he had opened the can with the watery

baked beans. He typed the letter carefully three different times to make absolutely positive there was not one type-o in it. You couldn't be taken seriously if there was a type-o. The spacing was impeccable.

“You worthless piece of shit liar.”