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What You Got to Hear

James Calvin Schaap

Kevin wanted like mad to get on the road. Mrs. Mellema, her fingers fanning through the old Bible in front of her, went on and on about her grandkids, how they loved Faith College, and how proud she was that four of her own grandchildren—“three of Gus and one of Mel”—could go on to get an education. A Christian college too. “None of my own children ever went on,” she said. “In those days nobody from Millburn, went, nobody ‘t’all.”

Kevin thought Millburn was one of those towns that would someday simply blow off the prairie, nothing but old folks and dogs and maybe a hundred frame houses hip high in bales to ward off the artic winds that bellied right up to their doorsteps, straight from the top of the world. But Millburn was on the highway, and his boss had said that he ought to stop—“it’s good PR,” he’d said—even though Faith College hadn’t seen a student from this close to nowhere since the Beatles quit. Millburn Church didn’t have more than six young people in the whole congregation. “Just stop up there,” Stevens had told him. “Give them a half hour after church and tell them about the college. Those old folks love the attention.”

“Our kids here just take off for the Cities right away,” Mrs. Mellema said. “When you grow up poor as sawdust, you don’t think about schooling. You get a job.”

“Sure,” Kevin said. He’d had a history major. But he really didn’t feel like being in Millburn, didn’t feel like having dinner with some eighty-year-old woman in a kitchen smock right out of the Depression, no matter how sweet. But the pastor had told him Mrs. Mellema had asked to have him over for dinner after

the service. “She’s hosted every visiting preacher and missionary that’s ever stopped in Millburn,” he’d told Kevin, “thinks it’s her job. She thinks of you as a preacher too, coming from the college and all. It’ll be worth your while, believe me,” he’d said.

Kevin hated obligation. He figured that one of the advantages of being a college recruiter was the freedom. But here he sat, Sunday night, when he could be somewhere south in the real world, in a motel room, eating a wet burrito, and watching ESPN.

She kept thumbing through the Bible and talking about her grandkids, all the time pointing up at the photos stuck in the edge of the buffet mirror. He wished she’d just get it over with, reading the Bible. The dinner had been all right if you like pork au grease, mashed potatoes, and beets—an okay meal if you’re into classic prairie cuisine, post-World War I. He wanted to be on the road, headed for civilization.

“What do you read for your devotions, Professor Banning?” she said. He wasn’t a professor, of course, but the minister had been right. She thought of him as some kind of church honcho.

“I read the church magazine, you know,” he said. He had to say something. Devotions was a nice idea, Kevin thought—something he’d likely start himself if he’d ever have kids.

“That’s good too, I bet,” she said, her lip turned down a bit as if she were disappointed. “At night sometime I read this here,” she said, picking out a flashy little reader from the back cover of the Bible, “but most of the time it’s just the Word. It’s what you got to hear.” She pursed her lips as if it were an apology for the truth. “Look at this,” she said, and she pointed at some notes in the inside cover.

“What is it?” he said.

"Shows how many times we been through this Bible." She pointed with the laminated bookmark. "Up till here was still when Wallace was alive." Her finger stopped where the fountain pen turned into a ball-point. "And here's what I been through myself since '89." Seven pairs of dates were scratched in under "started," and six under "ended." He couldn't help wonder what on earth she could find fresh in the Bible after that many times through.

"Oh, I can talk on and on—you just ask anybody. But you got to get out of here yet tonight or you'll end up staying over, and I didn't make up the guest room." She laughed as if it were a joke, but he knew it was meant as an invitation.

"I've got reservations," Kevin said, glancing at his watch. So she opened the Bible and read—for most of an hour, he figured—from the long last chapter of Nehemiah. He remembered the passage later only because of the strange story of Nehemiah beating the tar out of Levites, like some Old Testament thug. Really whacky passage, he remembered, totally obscure. Had no relevance at all to anything that he could think of. Devotions for her were simply a case of having to read something to satisfy her need for ritual. Old habits die hard, he thought.

Then she asked him to pray. Praying came as easily to Kevin as a twenty-minute PR speech for the college. He could flow over the phrases like some world class hurdler—how we covet God's blessings, how Faith College needed guidance on her mission, how he himself needed traveling mercies. Praying was second nature to him. In a recruiter's job, you're always asked to pray, whenever you do a church.

"That was a beautiful prayer," Mrs. Mellema said when he finished. "Educated people sure do know how to pray."

Kevin stood immediately, as if it were finally time for him to punch out. "You don't know how much I've enjoyed this, Mrs. Mellema," he said, gilding the lily, "but I've got to be going."

"Just one more thing," she said. She got up slowly from the table. "You just sit yet—five minutes and I'll have you out of here. I've got something for you."

When she walked out of the dining room, Kevin could see that she favored her right side a bit. She was a small woman, bent a bit, smaller, he supposed, than she was when children ran around the house and dozens of men worked the fields around town. She

was like Millburn itself that way, a symbol of an old way of life that had no future.

"I've got this book that I want to give you. I think it's worth some money maybe," she said, carrying it out in both arms. It's for the college."

It was a huge book, big as a leather-bound family Bible. When she placed it on the table in front of him, he opened the covers and found it stuffed with stamps.

"Years ago, Wallace worked in the post office," she told him, "but he never really gave up collecting."

There were hundreds of pages stuck with unmarked stamps in blocks of four, fresh from the post office—and others too, singles in little waxed-paper envelopes, one per page.

"You want to donate this to the college?" he said.

"It's worth quite a little, I know that," she told him. "I'd keep it for the kids, but they all got lots more money than we ever had anyway. I love Faith College for what it's done for our grandchildren. We don't want any credit for it," she said, as if her Wallace were standing right there behind her. "I mean, you just bring it in and don't fuss," she said.

When he held it in his hands, it had the feel of something valuable. That's when he remembered how the preacher had said it would be worth his while to have supper over there. He must have meant the stamps.

"One more thing," she said. She walked over to the buffet and picked up a little bundle. "I figure a man like you who travels all the time can really use these tracts—drop them around in places. I don't get out all that much anymore. Sometimes I put them around in the mall I when I'm at my kids in the Cities, but otherwise I got a hard job getting rid of them in town." She put the bundle down in front of him, a couple hundred bound in a plastic tie, a brick of silly tracts.

"Why, thank you, Mrs. Mellema," he said. "I'm sure I'll be able to use them." It wasn't a big lie, he figured, simply a matter of convenience.

He put the stamp book and the tracts in his duffle bag once he got to the car. Fifty miles towards the city, he looked up at the stars in the open black sky, and thought about Millburn, a dying town left behind by a world that was bursting into hyperspace, while a handful of Mrs. Mellemas still passed out tracts and read nightly about Nehemiah banging Levite heads.

*

He awoke Monday morning at seven when his watch alarm wailed like a siren. He had visits scheduled to two high schools and three individual calls, plus a financial aid meeting for prospective parents at some church in the evening. He pulled himself slowly out of bed, feeling the stale motel air like a cotton sheet around his tongue. Oddly enough, he woke up with Nehemiah on his mind. He reached for the Gideon Bible to make sure he could find that passage. Sure enough, there it was at verse 25: "So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them sweat by God. . ." Incredible, he thought. Today they'd be preachers, maybe. Missionaries? Maybe even professors. Maybe even recruiters. Church honchos. He had to remember the silly passage to tell Stevens.

He slapped the Gideon Bible back in the drawer. He needed to brush his teeth. He looked around for his duffel bag, but it seemed not to be in the room.

Angry with himself, he pulled on his trousers and socks, threw his jacket over his shoulders, and ran downstairs to the parking lot, key in hand. It wasn't in his car either. His tongue still felt like cloth. He ran back upstairs, sure that he hadn't looked closely enough in the room. But it wasn't there. It wasn't anywhere.

He sat back on the bed for a minute and stared at his image in the mirror, trying to remember what he'd done with his duffel bag. His hair rooster-tailed over his left ear, and his mustache was growing over his lip, as if Nehemiah himself had laid a hand on him. He'd had the bag at Mrs. Mellema's. He knew it was in the car because he'd shoved the stamps and the tracts in the moment he left her place. Late last night he'd bought a hamburger from a drive-through, but he never got out of the car. Once he'd got to his room, he'd gone right up, didn't even bother buying a paper, just carted all the junk up and hit the sack. He must have taken that bag in, he figured. He had to. He remembered carrying it, in fact. He remembered thinking that he ought to take the bag in for sure with that stamp collection in it. He'd stuffed his brief case under his arm, carried his suitcase in his left hand, and his duffel in the right. Sure, that was it. He'd taken it up all right.

Once more he searched all over, under both beds, under the sink, in the closet, even in the drawers of

the bureau. Nothing. In his mind he tried to recreate what must have happened. He had this duffel in his right hand, he'd reached in his back pocket for the key—of course, that was it: he'd put it down to get the key, then opened the door, went into the room, and left that stupid duffel outside.

He opened the door and looked both ways down the walkway. Nothing. It was gone. But the whole scene was perfectly clear now: he'd taken it up all right, but he'd left it sit there on the cement after he'd gone into his room. Sometime during the night, somebody grabbed it.

He hurried down to the front office. "Anybody bring in a brown duffel?" he said. "Round thing. Brown plastic. Looks like leather. Shoulder strap. I left it on the walk last night. Anything like that around?"

The woman behind the desk looked up from the early news just long enough to glare at him, then twist her head as if she were about to speak to a child.

It was gone. His toothbrush and all his toiletries, his hair dryer, some extra pairs of socks, his running shoes, and Mrs. Mellema's stamp collection, a gift to the college. That was gone too.

*

"I'm into gymnastics," the girl said. "I mean, if you don't have a team, I'm not particularly interested." She looked up from her fingernails. "What did you say the name was again?"

"Faith," Kevin said. "Faith College."

"Funny name."

"It's a Christian college," he told her.

"That's like, really nice," she said.

They were sitting in a spare office at Sweet Briar High School, but Kevin's mind was several hours north in a little old house that didn't have a square corner anywhere. He'd bought a new toothbrush and a hair dryer; a pair of running shoes would be no problem either. It was the stamp collection that stayed in his mind, even though he couldn't begin to guess where it might be by now. Some jerk likely picked it up off the sidewalk, took it to his room, dumped out the goods all over the floor, and then cussed up a storm when he saw that there wasn't a dime in it. Somewhere in a dumpster that stamp book—who knows how much it was worth?—was garbage, he figured.

"Can I get a dorm room by myself?" the girl said.

He wanted to say yes. He wanted to say that all

she had to do was keep acting the way she was and no one would want to live with her. “I don’t know if we have those kinds of special arrangements,” he said. “Meeting new kids is one of the great things about a small college like Faith.”

“I’m sure,” she said, chewing gum with her mouth open.

What was bothering him was that the book itself was gone. It was his fault, of course. He couldn’t blame God really, not for his own stupid negligence. But he was thinking that the issue went deeper than that. Here you’ve got this woman, he told himself, and she’s done nothing but pray and read the Bible and raise good kids through her entire life. Finally, she gives up this little treasure of hers, probably worth more than the house she lives in. But some almighty power dictates that the stamps won’t ever get where she intends them. That’s a bad joke, Lord, he said, almost like a prayer.

Of course, she didn’t have to know. He could write up a nice letter on school stationery, sign it with Stevens’ name—or even the President’s—and thank her cordially for the generous gift. She didn’t want hoopla. She said that. She didn’t want anyone to know.

“Do you have to go to church there?” the girl said.

“Students attend church,” he told her.

“I mean, do you they like *force* you to go?”

He felt as if he were talking to Ritz cracker. “No,” he said, “there’s nobody standing there at your bed, making you get dressed.” His answer was laced with too much sarcasm, but frankly he didn’t much care whether this Amanda Bickingley or Stickingley ever made it to campus.

He picked up a brochure from the stack on the table. Fortunately, his college stuff had been in a box in the trunk. Without the brochures and the slides, he’d have to suspend things for a day until he could get more through the mail. There wasn’t much in the satchel but the stamps.

The stamps. What was he going to do about the stamps? Of course, the fact was that nobody really knew about the gift. Stevens didn’t know. The people in Advancement didn’t know. Nobody knew but Mrs. Mellema and himself. And he could write that letter. Writing that letter wouldn’t be anything at all. Then it would be him—only him—that knew. Not a soul else

in the world.

“I get good grades,” this Amanda said. “Can I get some money?”

He wanted to say he’d get her a grant to go to the University and she could forget about Faith. “You’ll have to send in a statement before I can tell,” he said. She’d be the type to stay for about one semester’s worth of complaining about the lack of a good hairdresser.

“Of course, it’s not that my parents are poor,” she told him.

Of course not, he thought. Probably worth a thousand stamp collections. Certainly the college wouldn’t be any worse for not getting the stamps. Mrs. Mellema would have her reward in a forged letter from the President, and nobody else would ever have to know. It would be his own secret. Why tell? No purpose would be served anyway. Who knows how much the silly collection was worth? He’d lie. He’d have to. It was the only way out.

“Well,” Amanda said, looking up at the clock, “I just don’t know if your college is for me or not—what’s its name again?”

“Faith,” he said, giving her the nicest smile he could muster, “Faith College.”

He would have given her a sticker, but he wanted her to forget.

*

That night he got to thinking about Mrs. Mellema at her devotions, what she would be saying that night, praying for him, the liar, thanking God for her ability to help Faith College with her little stamp collection. He was staying in Mankato, in a place with an indoor pool, but he kept thinking about how the lady’s deeply felt prayers were going up to a God who could see all things and who was probably just shaking his head at the deception in the world.

*

It was late by the time he got in. There had been maybe twenty parents at the financial aid meeting, and he’d gone through his spiel as if it were pre-recorded. He took a dip in the pool, then sat in the sauna for a while before hitting the sheets, but he had this odd feeling of being slung around a rolling car, as if he’d been in an accident or someone had thrown him around the room. It was the lie that had him in its fist, his own lie. He kept thinking of her, of her sincere smiles, of the scribbling in the front cover of

the Bible, of the quality of prayer. And he thought about her reading that night, reading from the Word again, as she had for so many years.

He took out the Gideon Bible and read the first chapter of Esther only because he knew that's what she would be reading that night. The story made no sense at all, an odd account of a king who told his contrary wife to take a hike because he was afraid of the men in his kingdom losing control of their wives.

He read on, and there, early in chapter two, the leading lady moved in, Esther herself. He knew enough about the rest of the story to know that it was Esther who saved her people, God's chosen people. But it wasn't Esther he was thinking about exactly, it was Mrs. Mellema reading the the exact same story again that night, at least her seventh time, sitting there at the big table in a cheap house in some dried-up flatland podunk, alone, reading the Word again. What good would the silly story of a Jewish beauty queen ever do her?—he thought.

His skin felt as if it were alive from the sauna, as if every pore could breathe. The sheets were creased and perfectly clean. He shut out the lights and lay back. His watch peeped, told him it was midnight. And when he closed his eyes, he remembered how when he was a boy he used to pray the same ditty prayer every night: "Now I lay me. . ."

But he couldn't stop thinking about how God was hearing Mrs. Mellema's prayers, then looking at him, half-asleep in some generic motel room, and just shaking his head.

He didn't pray. He slept, not well. His body ached.

*

Kevin returned to the campus a week later. He had decided to ride out the lie. No one would ever know. He simply didn't have to tell anyone about the stamp collection, but it wouldn't leave him exactly, even though it was the perfect crime. The thought of that widow's mite haunted him day and night, as if someone were wrestling him to the floor. Everywhere he looked he saw stamps.

In his notebook he had a list of 45 students, 14 of them marked with asterisks as sure things, the rest iffy at most. That morning, Stevens had beaten him to work.

"Kevin," he said, "how was the Great White North?"

He nodded, holding up the list. "We'll hold

our own," he said. He went into his office and saw the mail stacked up on his desk, dozens of letters about conferences and seminars, catalogues from companies selling recruiting gimmicks—frisbees with the name of the college spun out around the edge, sun visors. tube socks—books scattered all over, phone calls to be returned. He circled his desk before he saw it: there on his chair stood his duffle bag, just as if he'd left it there the day he got in the car and took off for all points north. He slid open the zipper right away and looked inside. There was the stamp collection, and his hair dryer, and his toiletries, and a brick of tracts that he'd forgotten about. He scrambled through the contents, looking for a note. Nothing.

He ran out of the office. "Scott," he said, "somebody bring in my duffle bag?"

"Came in the mail yesterday," he said. "

"No letter or anything?"

"Nothing."

He went back inside and checked the bag. There were no flight tickets on the straps. It wasn't much more than a duffle, and he'd never really marked it well. How could it have got here? Maybe there was a letter, he thought. He pushed all the third-class mail aside and hunted for something. He found her letter right at the top of the stack of first-class mail. It was addressed to Professor Banning, Faith College, with no zip. Some secretary had circled the "professor" with a magic marker, then underlined it.

He ripped a side edge off the envelope and dropped the letter into his hand. It explained how she'd received a call from a man who'd found it, how the man said he was on his way to Duluth and how he'd drop it off if she'd give him her address. She did. He was a salesman, she said, and he found her telephone number on those tracts because, don't you know, she's always put her number on those little tracts but nobody'd ever called before, and isn't it something how the Lord works in such a mysterious way sometimes, that you just got to believe that he's got a sense of humor about things? And she said how she bet he was worried sick about his hair dryer and such, and how he could rest easy now. But most important, she said, was how God just wouldn't let those tracts sit somewhere in the trash, how they had to go out. And then she drew in a smiley face. "P.S.," it said, "I been reading in Esther again, and you

can't get a better story on TV." And one final note in parentheses: "May God bless your work at Faith."

He could have cried reading all of that. He took out the scrapbook and held it without opening it, turning the leather against his palms.

"Scott," he said, when he stepped back out of the office. "Look at this."

His boss's eyebrows arched when he handed him the old book. "What is it?" he said.

"Stamps. Old ones, some of them aren't even used."

"Where'd you get them?"

"Millburn," he said. "An old grandma who's got tons of grandchildren here. It's a gift to the college."

Stevens paged through the collection from back to front.

"It's kind of like history," he said. Some of the little envelopes nearly fell from the pages. "You bring it along?"

He could have said yes, but it would have been a lie. "Let's just say it got here," he said.

But Stevens wasn't really thinking about what Kevin said. He kept paging through the old book. "Some of these are old," he said. "You think it's really worth something?"

Kevin looked at the old big book sitting in

Stevens' hands, and it looked like a stone tablet almost, something taken down from some great mountain, smack in the middle of a cold, windswept prairie. "It's worth something all right," he said. "To me, it's worth a whole lot."

Stevens closed the book. "I'll bring it to Development. You better write the letter, since the lady gave it to you," he said.

"I'll write the letter," Kevin told him. He turned around and started back. "By the way, Scott," he said, "You ever read the book of Nehemiah?"

"The what?" Stevens said.

"The book of Nehemiah. There's this passage in there where Nehemiah says he knocks the tar out of the Levites—pulls their hair, beats on them, what-not else, just to get them to know the truth. Ever read that?"

"No," Stevens said, as if he really didn't care.

"I got to show you that," Kevin said, heading back into his office. I've got a Bible around here somewhere, and I got to show you that. You wouldn't believe it. It's the most amazing thing."

"Sure," Stevens said. "Read it to me sometime."

"Now," Kevin said. "It's something, I swear. You got to hear this."