

Family Shopping

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Though this was Mark's third day of shopping for a family, his optimism hadn't waned.

A silver-haired man with two shopping bags stood at the bus stop. Thinking he could be his grandfather, Mark pulled around the next corner and parked. He hurried along the sidewalk, then slowed down, not wanting to startle the old man.

The man glanced Mark's way, pretending to look down the street for the bus.

"Excuse me," Mark said, pleased to note a credible family resemblance. "I'm looking for a grandfather."

"Sorry, kid," the old man grouched. "I ain't seen nobody today."

"No, I mean you." Mark smiled. "I want *you* to be my grandfather. I'd be paying you for your time of course," he added as enticement.

The old man drew his head back, looked Mark up and down, and stepped back a little. "You'd better get out of the sun, kid," he said, and resumed looking for the bus.

"It all started with a girl I met," Mark said, hoping to sound sane. "Her name's Francine."

The old man looked back at Mark, his belly jiggling with a silent laugh. "Everything starts with a girl," he said. "Ever read the Bible? Not much really happens until Eve shows up. They can drive a man to do crazy things, that's for sure."

"We're engaged," Mark said. "The problem is, Francine's got her heart set on a big, old-fashioned wedding."

"Getting cold feet, huh?"

“No, that’s not it at all,” Mark protested. “The problem is that I don’t have a family. My parents split up when I was ten. I took an awful lot of ribbing in school. All the other kids had families. When I got to high school, I almost dropped out. I spent most of the time bouncing back and forth, in and out of foster homes, some of them pretty weird, too, like people you’d only meet on a bus.”

The old man nodded. “I know what you mean.”

“Let me drive you where you’re going,” Mark said, looking into the man’s deep brown eyes for the first time.

The man returned his gaze, and stroked his stubbly chin.

“Please,” Mark said. “I could tell you the rest of the story on the way.”

The man shrugged. “You look like a decent kid. A little mixed up, that’s all. And hearing other people’s stories always makes me glad God didn’t give me a bigger load to carry.”

Mark picked up the shopping bags and they walked to his car. The bags were heavier than they looked. Mark paused in his tale several times to catch his breath.

“I’ve got myself into a real fix,” he said. “I never met a girl like Francine. I’d do anything in the world to make her happy. That’s why I need a family — at least for the wedding and the reception. I’ll get you a good suit if you don’t have one. There’ll be plenty of food and drinks and music. I’ll even buy the gift you’re supposed to give us.”

The old man tilted his head as if considering it.

“So what do you say, ‘Grumpy?’ That’s what I used to call you when I was a kid, and that’s how I talk about you to Francine.”

“I’ve done sillier things in my time for free. Turn here.”

Mark carried the shopping bags up three tall flights to the old man's apartment. After chatting in the doorway, Mark and Grumpy exchanged phone numbers.

If things went well, Grumpy would need only a night or two of coaching, just to make sure their "family memories" coincided.

Tired of driving around looking for the rest of his family, Mark parked in the shade alongside the county courthouse and sat on one of the dark green benches, hoping that someone interesting might catch his eye. A judge in the family would be pretty impressive, though a judge wouldn't come cheap.

Mark noticed a shirtless young man, about his own age, laying sod on the trampled courthouse lawn.

"Hi," Mark said. The young gardener looked up, rising slowly from his hunched-over position. Mark extended his hand and introduced himself.

"Paul," the man said, fumbling to get his grimy glove off. "What's up?" he asked.

"Not much," Mark said. "Kind of warm for so early in the summer, huh? Can I buy you a drink?"

"That sounds pretty good right now, but I don't knock off for another half-hour," Paul told him. "D'you work for the county?" he asked.

Mark shook his head. Unable to concoct much of an explanation on such short notice, he said, "You're just the kind of guy I'm looking for, that's all."

"You're not quite my type," Paul grumbled. He turned away and unrolled another strip of sod.

Mark laughed. "I'm sorry," he said. "You took it the wrong way. I meant to say I'm looking for a best friend."

"Everybody is," Paul remarked. "So what?" He kicked at the rich black edges of the sod with the heels of his muddy workboots.

"I meant to say I'm looking for a best man. But the best man is usually your best friend, and right now I don't have either. I'm getting married in two weeks and I don't have anyone yet to be the best man. I haven't been in town all that long and. . ."

Paul continued to stomp on the strip of sod.

"I'm sorry I bothered you," Mark said, and turned away.

"Hold on a minute. I didn't say I wouldn't. Just let me finish up this section and we'll talk about it, OK?"

Mark gave Paul a hand rolling out the rest of the sod, while providing him with more background to his predicament. Then they washed up from a hose inside the courthouse garage. Paul put on a clean shirt from his locker. They walked up the street to the tavern.

"It's on me, OK?" Mark said. Paul gave him no argument. "Two beers."

"I know what you're facing," Paul told him. "My own family is scattered all over the country. I hardly ever see them. I guess it's up to everybody to make their own families."

"Yeah, and I'm going to do it right," Mark said. "Time's running out on me, though."

"You can count on me, buddy," Paul told him. "To friendship!" he said, laughing and raising his glass of beer.

Since Francine worked at the bookstore until closing, Mark stopped to have supper before going home. Behind the counter at the coffee shop, he recognized his “mother.” The simple burger and fries she served him on the blue-rimmed china plate brought back years’ worth of newly-minted memories. Mark savored every mouthful, passing the time reading yesterday’s paper until the woman got off work when the restaurant closed at ten.

As she handed in her order book and draped her pink sweater over the shoulders of her waitress’ uniform, Mark gulped down the last of his coffee. He paid his bill at the register, and they walked out together.

“I thought you were staying for breakfast too,” she said.

“No,” Mark said, grinning. “I just don’t like to eat too fast. Do you mind if I discuss some business with you?” Mark asked. “I didn’t want to say anything in front of your boss.”

Mark realized at once that his proposal must have sounded a little strange to the woman. Fortunately for him, she did not interrupt the practiced flow of his explanation, though she clutched her purse tightly at first. They walked to the bus stop.

Mark didn’t mention his car parked around the corner, so when the bus arrived, they got on together. Mark’s story unfolded one block at a time.

“You must love her very much to go through all this,” the woman said. “But, I don’t understand why you lied to her in the first place.”

“It didn’t start out as lying exactly,” Mark said, squirming. “Francine talked a lot about her family. I made a few things up just to keep the conversation going. Everybody has a mother and father. The rest is only details, I guess. It started like a snowball coming down a hill. Then, the more I told her, the more Francine wanted to know about my family. I didn’t think it would go this far.”

“You know, it might be nice to see something turn out the way it’s supposed to for once,” the woman said, patting Mark’s arm. “OK. I’ll do it. I don’t want to be the party pooper.”

Mark saw his mother to her door and shook her hand, promising to drop off some books on interior decorating. That was her passionate hobby, as far as Francine’s mother understood.

“Well, good night, *son*,” she said, replacing the handshake with a kiss on his cheek. She stepped back and said, “Francine is a very lucky girl to have found such a sweet boy.”

Mark waited for the next bus to take him back to his car. It had been a long night.

All of the spaces on Mark’s copy of the seating chart were now occupied by red check marks, except for two of the most important. Mark stood in line at the bank to withdraw the last of the money he would need to outfit all his relatives for the wedding. He asked the half-asleep teller whether the bank had a securities department. He still needed to find his Uncle Carl, the stockbroker. Francine’s father was eager to meet Uncle Carl.

The teller told him they were too small a banking concern to have an investment broker on their staff. She handed him his passbook and turned on her smile for the next customer.

Mark turned to leave the teller’s window when someone tapped him on the shoulder.

“Looking for a good place to invest your money, young man?” the man asked. He was dressed faultlessly in a gray three-piece worsted, the very image Mark had formed of his Uncle Carl.

“How much have you to invest, if I may be so bold?”

“Right now, about forty-eight dollars,” Mark replied.

The gentleman clicked his tongue. “Well, you’re still young. But why, might I ask, were you inquiring after a stockbroker?”

“It’s a long story,” Mark told him. “I’m sorry. I have another errand to run, so. . .”

“Mind if I tag along? I’m always interested in finding out what the younger generation is up to.” The man kept pace with Mark as they walked along, though he often seemed to fall a chapter or two behind in comprehending the tale of Mark’s odd predicament.

“So I still need to find my Uncle Carl,” Mark said. “You’d be perfect, but I couldn’t pay you for your trouble. I’m just about broke.”

“Suppose I wanted to do it just for the fun of it?”

For a change, it was Mark who wore the puzzled expression.

“I retired from the stock market because I felt that life was passing me up. I hardly got to know my children when they were growing up and going through these things. Now *they’re* busy and don’t have time for me. All along I planned secure futures for them — while the present slipped away. Maybe this is my second chance — even if I don’t deserve one. Please count me in, Mark. And don’t worry. I won’t recommend any stocks to your future father-in-law I wouldn’t consider for my own portfolio.”

“Thanks, Uncle Carl,” Mark said, pumping the man’s hand. He almost felt like kissing it. “Here’s the wedding invitation.” He wrote his phone number on the embossed envelope in a hasty scrawl. “Excuse me, Uncle Carl, but I’ve still got to order a corsage for Francine.”

“Mind if I come with you?” Uncle Carl asked. “I never got in on any of the planning for my own kids’ weddings. My wife took care of all that. I merely paid for things,” he said, laughing.

The salesgirl at McKinnon’s Florist had shown Mark every flower and arrangement suitable for corsages at least twice. Finally, Mark turned to Uncle Carl for advice on how to proceed.

“Please, miss, there’s been a little mix-up on the groom’s part,” Uncle Carl said. “His sister is to be one of the bridesmaids. But, you see, he hasn’t got a sister. And the bride is looking forward to meeting her. We shouldn’t let a minor detail stand in the way of making that day perfect for them, should we?”

“Am I getting this right?” the salesgirl asked. “You want me to stand in as his sister?”

“Exactly,” Uncle Carl said. “But, for right now, we need your expert advice. Let me put it to you this way. If you were engaged to marry this handsome young man, which corsage would you hope to receive from him on that beautiful day?”

“Well. . . I. . . uh,” the girl stammered with embarrassment. “This one,” she said, pointing out a white rose surrounded by small blue cornflowers.

“That’s the one then,” Uncle Carl announced. “Thank you. . . I don’t believe I caught your name, miss.” He extended his hand to her. “I’m your Uncle Carl.”

“Karen,” the girl said.

“Good, Karen. And which corsage would you choose for yourself as the groom’s lovely sister? Don’t outdo the bride now,” he admonished.

The girl blushed, but again had no trouble in deciding quickly. She pointed out a cluster of pink tea-roses.

“I think that matches your hair and complexion to a tee,” Uncle Carl remarked. “Please, accept that as my gift to you. I should also like to furnish your bridesmaid’s gown. You’ve been so helpful to us, Karen.”

“But. . . I don’t even. . .”

“Where’s her invitation?” Uncle Carl asked Mark. “Here, my dear,” he said, handing her the embossed card. “I’ll see you at the wedding. Come along, nephew.”

Mark was speechless after Uncle Carl’s non-stop sales pitch, but he thanked Karen with a smile that came directly from his heart.

By the day of the wedding, most of Mark’s family had not met one another. He supplied them with stick-on tags: “Hello. My name is. . .” Beneath their names he thoughtfully stated their relation to the groom — that is, to himself.

Francine’s mother refused to deface her gown in such a manner. But after a hundred untagged people rushed past her, she seemed quite flustered. Finally, when she’d been mistaken for the bride’s grandmother for the third time, she put on her own name tag, having only praise for her new son-in-law’s clever idea.

Mark was pleased with how well things were going, the more so as it made Francine glow with happiness. He thought he had the loveliest bride in the world. And it was Francine who had brought his own family to him, though she didn’t know it.

One by one, as the night wore on, each member of Mark’s family promised to stay on after the wedding. “I got something out of the deal, too,” Paul told him. “Until a couple of weeks ago, I never had a childhood friend. I guess it’s never too late. Thanks for including me,” he said, and hugged Mark.

Grumpy and Uncle Carl seemed to be getting along better than Mark would have thought possible, for they had occupied such different stations in life. Then Francine's father got hold of Uncle Carl, and he shook his hand furiously.

"Your nephew speaks highly of you," Mark's new father-in-law said. "I was wondering what you thought about investing in one of the new biotech firms so much in the news these days."

Uncle Carl didn't seem to mind having his ear bent. They chatted over their cocktails like old college chums at a reunion.

Mark's sister, Karen, told him she was having a far better time than she imagined she would. "I was so afraid I'd be envious of the bride. But I'm happy for her. I've got a new sister as well as a new brother. Not too bad for an only child. Thank you," she said, and kissed him.

As the bride tossed her bouquet into the crowd of unmarried women, Uncle Carl stood behind Karen, waving his arms as wildly as if he were on the trading floor of the stock exchange. It must have helped. Karen caught the bouquet with the apparent ease of a seasoned outfielder.

And, when it came time to toast the new bride and groom, Mark's side was louder. Francine's mother remarked to someone at her elbow that Mark's family were somewhat crude to begin with and they had probably drunk too much.

Mark looked around the room and thought his side of the family was simply having a better time. Family gatherings were still new and exciting to them.