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Locked in Place

Hierarchies have been entrenched throughout human history, chiefs to clans, masters to slaves. As the system evolved, excessive paperwork and unjust rulings arose. The red tape, intended to reflect the morals of the time and enact order and accuracy, has often tripped and doomed innocent individuals. Flannery O'Connor delves into the mindset of one of those people betrayed by the system in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." The Misfit's perception stems from his experience of broken promises; to subvert that trend, he keeps his word and does not try to obscure his intentions. This mentality sharply contrasts with the authority figures in the story—Bailey, the grandma, even Jesus. Through the Misfit's characterization, Flannery O'Connor seems to imply that morality is indeterminate and stagnant, plugged into an archaic system. The pervasive master-slave relationship links to the inevitable failings of role models and people in power.

If the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" represents all of the norms and moralities of the past generation, Bailey and his car represent all of the norms and moralities of the present generation. During the ride, Bailey, the nameless mom, and the nameless baby all sit upfront in silence, so it seems as if the grandma and the kids are being transported against their wills. Contextually, this scenario is quite ironic: most Western governments emphasize the inalienable rights of free choice, and litigation made by those in power is meant to reflect its citizens' desires. Bailey represents the reality: litigation, made by aloof figures, is not easily accessible and is often molded by the past—the "old" authority, so to say. Bailey consistently fails at his job. He is opposed to listening to his kids, telling them that "'[i]f you don't shut up, we won't go anywhere'" (O'Connor 5). When he finally obeys the "old" authority (the grandma), he indirectly leads them to the Misfit. During the confrontation with the murderer, he fails to protect his

family, “squatting in a position of a runner … but [not moving]” (O’Connor 8). As he makes mistake after irreversible mistake, he drags his family along. Bailey’s leverage is a lethal imbalance of power.

Red Sammy Butt and his wife’s dynamic is similar to Bailey’s relationship with his family. Red Sam’s very appearance—“khaki trousers reached just to his hip bones and his stomach hung over them like a sack of meal swaying under his shirt” (O’Connor 4)—projects a sense of stagnancy. The comparison between his stomach and cornmeal, a staple food that indigenous people introduced to settlers, reflects his consumption of other people’s hard work. His wife is a “burnt-brown woman” (O’Connor 4) who is at his beck and call, running the restaurant while he lounges and complains. However unjust, she is chained to his command as much as Red Sam's gray monkey is chained to the small chinaberry tree.

The trees in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” are “full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled” (O’Connor 2). The ones that are closest to the sun, to the top, hog the silver resource and stunt the trees underneath them. Their roots prevent them from straying from their ranks. In America, there is often a narrative around those who “made it.” They pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, reworked rags into Coach, Louis Vuitton, Dior, and reached the end of the rainbow. Their success is attributed to them and them alone, but external factors work as hard as the triumphant individual, including luck, connections, and governmental action. One such federal policy is trickle-down economics, a political theory stating that “tax breaks and benefits for corporations and the wealthy will trickle down to everyone else” (Kenton). In other words, giving resources to those at the top will benefit those at the bottom. Eventually. When this method was implemented under Ronald Reagan, total federal receipts increased by almost $400 billion, seemingly confirming that the theory worked (Kenton). Since then, though, trickle-down economics has been placed under scrutiny. Critics argue that it contributes to the growing income inequality in the US, that tax cuts may lead to the wealthy hoarding more and more money, that the results seen in the 1980s could be attributed to some other policy like the Federal Reserve Bank’s influence (Kenton). However much taxes are cut, some businesses still prioritize profit over benevolence, leading to dangerous working conditions, unsustainable practices, and ridiculously low

wages. A trickle-down economy seems more like an attempt to push down workers than raise them up, leading to perpetual debt and deterioration.

The children symbolize something quite different: they are a turnover of a new generation and a restart button. Throughout the story, June Star and John Wesley are unashamedly honest, asking questions, insulting people, declaring things unfair as they see them. "'What are you telling US what to do for?'" (O'Connor 8) because "[t]hey could never do what THEY wanted to do" (O'Connor 5). The other characters cloak themselves underneath facades, but June Star and John Wesley are as straightforward as they can be. Their names have Satanic origins, which deepens their comparison to Satan himself: discontent with the world, they may seek to overthrow what is presently in place. They have the most potential to usurp the existing state of affairs, so when the monkey sees them, it "[springs] back into the tree and [gets] on the highest limb" (O'Connor 3). The monkey can escape to a world of infinite possibilities, but it stays chained, perhaps deliberately, to the small, confined heaven it knows in the forms of chinaberries and silver.

This stagnancy, this neither-too-hot-neither-too-cold-no-sun-yet-no-clouds setting, is expressed in the grandma's significant role. At first glance, Bailey calls the shots. His first word is a rigid order, "No" (O'Connor 5), and his refusal to acknowledge the grandmother seems to be a sign of a new reign. The grandma's decisions revolve around him: "[she doesn't] want to go to Florida," but she bows down to his choice; she "[hides] a basket with Pitty Sing, the cat, in it" because Bailey doesn't like him (O'Connor 1). At a deeper level, the grandma's authority underlies every twist and turn. In the words of June Star,"'[s]he has to go everywhere we go'" (O'Connor 1). When the family passes by a cotton field, John Wesley asks about the locations of the plantations, and the grandma drily says, "'Gone With the Wind.'" *Gone With the Wind* is a dramatic piece about a southern belle trudging through warfare and her romantic problems, but layered underneath the main storyline is a disreputable system. Though published about seven decades after the emancipation of slavery, it is a book receptive to the confederacy and the slave system. *Gone With the Wind* covers up problematic structures, similar to the grandma's and Bailey's administrations. The hypocrisy eventually leads to detrimental consequences. Filled with the desire to

head to her hometown in Tennessee, back to her past connections and lifestyle, the grandma superimposes that image onto her present situation and eventually guides the family to their doom. The old authority still influences the present day, and the present day is not as progressive as some would think.

The Misfit appears to be an antagonist to this status quo but quickly turns into a conformist. Where the grandma is a deceitful, self-proclaimed Christian, the Misfit's role is unambiguously foreshadowed and his dedication and humbleness hold true. Despite this, papers drive his entire existence. The newspaper, written in permanent ink by esoteric and detached authors, introduces him in the beginning and sends the story down its predetermined path. The Misfit justifies his actions because "'[the authorities] could prove I had committed [a crime] because they had the papers on me'" (O'Connor 11) and thus it "'wasn't no mistake'" (O'Connor 10) that he was put into jail. Regardless of the consistency of his actions, the Misfit expresses subtler hypocrisy. He comes to Bailey's defense when he claims that "'[s]ometimes, a man says things he don't mean'" (O'Connor 8) yet holds this infringement against Jesus, a person he has never met. He refuses Bailey's shirt and the grandma's aid but ultimately takes the shirt off Bailey's back, wearing it as if it were his own. He "[points] the toe of his shoe into the ground and [makes] a little hole and then [covers] it up again" (O'Connor 8), making shallow, temporary marks.

Communication, food, and transportation companies, and private prisons all capitalize from putting more people behind bars than less, perpetuating incarceration rather than reforming the US prison system. The goal of incarceration is to prevent crime, but a large part of the funds is invested in punishment, making it more difficult or near impossible for prisoners to adjust to normal society, and thus leading to increased rates of recidivism; some states mandate prisoners to labor with little or no pay, often in dangerous or menial tasks such as fire-fighting or working for fast food chains (Second Thought). "'Turn to the right, it was a wall … [t]urn to the left, it was a wall'" (O'Connor 10)—prison is not just physical infrastructure, and it follows a person to the outside world. Even after years of discontent over the current treatment of criminals, the US still harbors the highest incarceration rates in the world. Unfortunately, those in poverty disproportionately suffer through this cycle and stigma. The grandma in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" highly prioritizes wealth, using it as her main argument against the Misfit

and turning up her nose against "common people." "In any case of an accident, anyone seeing [the grandma] dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (O'Connor 2). Despite the mistreatment, prison may sometimes seem less grueling than the outside world, where the concern over finding a "good man" and thus the discrimination for those deemed "bad" is lessened.

The Innocence Project is an organization dedicated to acquitting those who are wrongfully convicted, compiling cases evident of that injustice. In one instance, a woman was found in her house, murdered by multiple stab wounds and showing signs of sexual assault. Police initially suspected Kirk Eaton, a known sex offender, to be the perpetrator, but mistakenly arrested George Allen. Even after realizing their error, the detective continued the interrogation; according to the report, Allen was under the influence of alcohol, there was sparse physical evidence that he was involved in the crime, and multiple alibis testified he'd been home when the crime occurred. Nevertheless, he was convicted of capital murder, rape, sodomy, and first-degree burglary and sentenced to jail for ninety-five years ("George"). George Allen's case isn't rare. The Innocence Project freed around 375 people in the United States by the simple process of DNA testing; realistically, the number of victims can be assumed to be much higher than 375. Eyewitness testimony is highly valued in the court, but it is also highly susceptible to alteration. False memories can be generated by simply changing one word or phrase for another—did the cars *hit* each other or did the cars *smash into* each other? Repeated misinformation, leading questions, time, and hypnosis (Cherry)—which was used during George Allen's trial on one of the witnesses—contribute to this effect. "An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought," writes James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time.* History is, however, written by the "winners," and memories are easily forged or repressed. An "invented past" may be more pervasive and permanent than an authentic one.

Instant validation not only limits prison systems but also education. Some social theorists, like David Lempert, attribute social progress to cultural assimilation or an attempt by global powers to proliferate their ideologies. He claims that social progress is rarely consummate, as progress for one group, such as the status of women and some minorities, may entail disregard for another group, such as

those in poverty or other minorities. Instead of free will, social justice, and moral development, perhaps biology, environment, and technological adaptation determine "social progress" in industrial societies. To test the possibility of progress, Lempert introduced a program into two major universities—Stanford and the University of California, Berkeley—that embodied "adaptive social changes that offered greater efficiency in learning; restorative social changes to protect identities of students and communities; and three elements of transformative social change and meritocracy … that were responsive to communities from bottom-up, rather than the current top-down system of … preparing students to fit in existing slots." Thirty years later, Lempert believes that most of the elements of social progress were stripped away, while the components that did not challenge the current administration were maintained (Lempert). As is the case with trickle-down economics, sustainable, long-term advancement was bypassed for a select group of individuals' short-term benefit.

Near the end of "A Good Man is Hard to Find," two interesting developments occur in the grandma and Bailey. Bailey demonstrates his first line of fondness, telling his mom, "'I'll be back in a minute, Mamma, wait on me!'" (O'Connor 9), and the grandma is described as "[sitting] in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's" (O'Connor 12). When they begin to become more childlike, open to listening and learning, the Misfit and his cronies shoot them dead. The family never gets to see the ending car mileage, but the Misfit keeps it going—he changes things, but he doesn't *change* things. Like the monkey, he is wary of the children and adheres to the present system with its shiny silver objects. That isn't to say progress is impossible. In response to the growing concern over the treatment of prisoners, the Halden Prison, committed to reformation rather than punishment, opened in Norway. Today, Norway has one of the lowest recidivism rates in the world, and incarceration rates have dropped significantly (Second Thought).

The corruption that pervades social, political, economic institutions drives people to seek salvation. Religions serve as reference points and rest stops, consoling people in the darkest of times; they lay the foundation for numerous inspirational quotes and cultural achievements and have many individual benefits, providing support systems and stability. But as much as religion can be used as a tool, it can also

be used as an object of blunt force. Historically, different religions and or religious interpretations have been pitted against each other in an attempt to cull out the superior one. Gold, God, and Glory served as the basis for colonization and justified atrocities. Devoutness may be used as a facade of generosity to hide apathy and hatred. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the grandma uses religion as a pity card to convince the Misfit to spare her, who in turn began his murderous spree because he felt he'd been betrayed by Jesus; "'Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead … and He shouldn't have done it'" (O'Connor 11). Yet, the Misfit just as easily could've felt he was a messenger for God and still resort to the same violence. Religion is a house made of bricks, and the bricks can be chipped away and thrown around.

The Misfit moniker is a response to his belief that his assimilation is impossible. The irony is, he fits in fairly well. The Misfit is just like Bailey, whose sullen, reticent demeanor contrasts sharply with his bright blue parrot shirt, who fails at being the castle wall or the representative. He is just like the grandma, who is equally terrible at representing her company, looking down on common blood, and seeing a black boy without britches as inspiration for artistry. He is the nameless mother and baby, whose insignificant deaths highlight the insignificance of their lives. The little black boy without britches had a considerably more embarrassing predicament than the Misfit without a shirt. Nobody pays any attention to this but June Star. Time goes on and social structures advance, but people will always follow the laws, even if they are detrimental or misleading. A "good man" in the story is defined through the grandma's point of view as someone who agrees with her. In that way, a "good man" is not hard to find at all—they are everywhere, echoing past mistakes and beliefs underneath a convincing portrayal of autonomy. History is not just written by the winners. It's written by those in power, and it's written by those who have been fooled. God's words, however virtuous, are unfit to be one man's salvation, let alone the world and its perpetual timeline.

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