

Through the Cracks

OLD MAN CRAVETTS LIKED TO SLEEP IN HIS DINGHY by the shore, when the downeast nights were hot and steamy. A reclusive old coot, he was ornery as the shotgun he kept by his side.

Timothy was about six, with a face sweet and round as an altar boy's. His Momma had taken off with the train engineer six months back, no forwarding address. The town was looking after Timmy, shuttling him from home to home as the need arose and folks' schedules changed. The town loved the boy, but he wasn't always convenient.

So the Samsons and Clarks took him on alternate Tuesdays, and the Changs and MacLellans alternated Fridays, and every third Sunday he went to the Nordholms, and . . . well, it was complicated. But he didn't have to switch schools, thank goodness. Timmy went every weekday to Miss Jones's first-grade class down at PS 36, just as he ought to. A rolling, tumbling little stone he was, a boy who kept his possessions all folded up in a backpack. That was his life.

Eddie managed all this as best she could, keeping track on a calendar down by the station. You could see it on the wall when you went to buy a ticket. She collected the tickets for the train and sold them, too. That was Eddie's job.

Anyway, one night between the Clarks' and the MacLellans', a Wednesday I think, little Timothy just slipped right through the cracks like a nickel on the boardwalk down by the arcade. The Clarks thought he was at the Samsons', and the MacLellans just forgot about little Tim entirely.

This was the very same night that old man Cravetts woke up from one hell of a bender, stood upright in his boat, grabbed his shotgun,

Opposite:
Frank Duveneck
(American, 1848–1919).
The Whistling Boy.
Oil on canvas,
27 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 21 $\frac{1}{8}$ in., 1872.
Cincinnati Art Museum.
Gift of the Artist.
(1904.196)

shot it three times in the air, then fell back asleep like a babe in arms. The force of those returns, each one just a little, shoved that boat right off its mooring there by the water until that boat was set out to sea, the old man in it, sound asleep. Now Tim, he's watching all this, 'cause he's got no home that night but the stars above.

Morning comes, and no one notices anything except Miss Jones, when she goes to take roll in first grade, PS 36. One by one she calls the names of the girls and boys in the class, and each one says "Present, Miss Jones!" Except Timothy. Timothy wasn't there.

Miss Jones thinks this is odd, since Timmy rarely missed school, so she sends Jake, the custodian, over to the train station to find out where Timothy is supposed to be. Edie says he was at the Rivertons' last night because the Samsons had company, and the MacLellans were out of town. So Jake gets on his bicycle and rides over to the County Store, where Papa Joe Riverton works. Papa Joe says "Nope, nope, haven't seen Timmy, he wasn't with us last night. We traded with the Simpsons." Well, Jake was running all over town, sent from one family to the next, trying to track down who was looking after little Tim that day. As it turns out, no one was.

By noon they had a search party going, one group scouring the woods, another following the train tracks, a third splitting up between the shore and the sea. By nightfall they still hadn't found him, and you can bet lots of soul searching was going on by then. *How could we have been so careless with this boy*, they asked themselves. As each family found out who had had Timmy and when, they began to get a picture of how thoughtless they had been of him and how homeless the boy actually was.

Now they wanted nothing more than to find Timmy and bring him home—this time to a real home, one where he could stay. His own room, his own bed. No more life in a backpack. If they just had another chance, they'd make it right.

The search group down by the water discovers that old man Cravetts' boat is missing and they go berserk, thinking to themselves *Oh my God, that whiskey-drinking pervert! Sure as hell, he's taken the boy with nothing good on his mind.*

Everyone in town who's got a boat is out on the water quick as snow melts in summer. They're ready to lynch the old man soon as they find him. They search with their dinghies and lanterns, their fishing boats, too. They get the Coast Guard out, and the State Troopers to cover the roads. Pictures of Cravetts, looking like Jehovah, scraggly beard and all, are on the ten o'clock news, along with a snapshot of Timmy with his angelic smile.

Morning comes and still no break in the case. Classes have been interrupted, pupils kept occupied with games in the gym. The town's

on its knees, wracked with remorse and fear. If only they could turn back the clock, and do it all over again. They'd love this boy better this time. They'd give him a home. They longed for a second chance.

No one even noticed the pair, the old man and the boy, walking into town toward the school, Cravetts using his gun as a walking stick. He was limping a little, leaning on the boy, small though he was, for support.

Miss Jones was the only one in the classroom, cleaning her blackboards and saying her prayers, at a loss for anything else to do, when the two walked in. "Miss Jones, Miss Jones," Timmy cried, "Look who I found!"

Timmy told her how Cravetts' boat had slipped out to sea, how he ran after it for a long time, 'til the moonlight faded and his legs gave out. He slept that night in an abandoned boathouse. Next morning he trudged through the woods, thinking to take a shortcut to town.

"But I got lost, Miss Jones. Everything looked different," he said. "I walked and walked. Then I came to this big river. It was too deep for me to get across, so I walked along it. Then I found Mr. Cravetts!" Timmy gave a big smile and looked over at the man, who by now had set himself down on a chair by Miss Jones's desk.

Turns out, the old man's boat got pulled by the tides into the estuary, where it ran up on some rocks. Busted the boat clean through and tossed the old man out like a leaf in winter. That's where Timmy found him, cold and wet. The two of them spent the night in the woods, 'cause Cravetts couldn't walk so well.

"He's hurt, and he needs a place to stay, Miss Jones. Do you think we could find him a one? I'll take care of him," Timmy said.

Miss Jones bent down and scooped little Timmy into her arms with tears of relief. Then she turned to Cravetts. "How about we get that leg of yours seen to, and then we figure things out?" Next she called Edie. Soon the medics, the Sheriff, coffee, and cocoa were on the way.

Miss Jones took them both home with her that day. But not 'til the town had hoisted Timmy on their shoulders and carried him up and down the schoolhouse steps.

Then she gave them each hot baths followed by scrambled eggs and hotcakes with maple syrup and butter. Finally she put them down for naps like babies.

It was supposed to be just temporary, while Miss Jones's fiancé was out of town. But the old man and the boy kind of grew on her, and the fiancé didn't. He wasn't so nice to the newcomers, which put him in a whole new light.

I think you can figure out the rest of the story. The two castaways came to live with Miss Jones permanent like. 'Course the town helped. They built a room for Cravetts off the kitchen, where he wouldn't have to climb any stairs and could come and go as he pleased. Built Timmy one above it, with a big, round window that looked out to sea. Old man Cravetts even dried out, except for the occasional bender. Timmy got five gold stars on his next report card at PS 36.

And the town—well, they got their second chance. They treated each other with a little more care after that; young, old, and in-between.

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