**Even Homeowners Need Heroes**

Jack Powers

I AM having a hard time adjusting to being a homeowner. I find myself doing things I used to laugh at my father for doing: raking every single leaf off the lawn, maniacally clipping every blade that escapes my lawn mower, picking up stray beer cans and McDonald's bags while shaking my head and muttering, ''Kids.''

When I've been having these out-of-body experiences, the old Jack sees the new Jack and wonders who this guy is who's watering the lawn or cleaning cobwebs from the cellar ceiling. Usually the old Jack is amused, but sometimes the laughter rings hollow. Sometimes, fear replaces the humor. The self-image I'm comfortable with is younger; he's a party animal, laughing at convention, free of possessions. Where did this passion for property come from? Who is this guy wearing my clothes? He's got my hair and name. Who is this new me?

I realize I'm having an identity crisis. Sometimes, I don't even recognize myself, this new homeowner caulking the cracking clapboard. I blink and see someone else, an older man, pulling weeds out of the flower patch. I rub my eyes and see him clearly. It's not me at all, it's Mr. Harden, super homeowner, patching the rotted window, spackling the crack in the wall. I suppose we all need heroes and role models, and I realize he is mine, my role model for a role I never envisioned playing, my guide for a trip I never thought I'd take.

The first time I saw Mr. Harden, I was dropping off his son, Rick. We were 16; we had just got our driver's licenses. I stepped out of the car to let Rick out of the back seat. I looked up and out of the garage he appeared, tall, thin, short black hair, a little longer on top, black-frame glasses and shorts. I couldn't believe it. He was Dennis the Menace's father, right down to the little squiggles for knees. He walked right off the funny pages.

As I became better friends with Rick, I saw Mr. Harden more frequently. He was always working in the yard or on the house, building a deck or making a playroom in the basement. And he would never just let us pick up Rick and go to look for girls and cruise around in cars, our idea of a good time. He would always try to draw us into a game, or to meet some relative from Long Island, or worse, to grab a hammer and help him finish his latest project. After a while, I was the only one who would go in for Rick. I didn't mind being pulled into something for a little while, but I never forgot that my mission was to help Rick escape.

The weirdest thing that Mr. Harden did was sleep with a flashlight next to his bed. The Hardens lived on the corner of Dandy Drive, a street that Mr. Harden thought should be much quieter than it was. When some newly licensed teen-ager would screech around the corner or scream by late at night, Mr. Harden would fly out the front door to catch the offender. In his pajamas, he would stand in the middle of the road. Flashlight in hand, glasses askew, he would try to make out the letters of the license plate rapidly receding down the road. He would never become discouraged, never give up; he only became more determined to make a better plan to get out the door more quickly.

Rick told me his father cleared away all the obstacles between his bed and the front door. He began to sleep with his glasses on, his flashlight in hand under his pillow. He left the front door unlocked and oiled the catch for quick opening. He learned to recognize the sound of the tires and the direction of their squeal, so he would know immediately where to train his flashlight as he raced out the door.

I was fascinated by this obsession of his, from the first time I discovered it. His dedication, his seriousness amazed me. I wanted to be a part of it, but how only occurred to me by accident late one night. We were taking a short cut to Pinetum Park to meet some friends for a party, when I flew by the Hardens' home.

''There's some guy running behind us with a flashlight,'' John said from the back seat. ''It's my father,'' Rick said. I took a quick left up Clover Place and floored it out of sight, but I was hooked: the adrenaline flowing, the flirtation with danger. It was like running the gauntlet. I knew I'd have to do it again.

We didn't want to press our luck or overdo a good thing, but every so often, when things got slow on our late night rides, we would take a quick cruise past Rick's house. It was disappointing when he didn't appear, when we realized he was out or on vacation, or we came by too late or too early. After a while, even Rick couldn't resist the action. We would fly by in the Hardens' old red Maverick, with the lights off to make it harder to recognize.

The most fun was to drive by fast, racing the flashlight, and maybe 15 minutes later drive up slowly and quietly and drop Rick off. We would wave to Mr. Harden at the door as we carefully drove off, like two old ladies going to church.

I think of Mr. Harden, as I work in the yard or paint the house, wondering if we would laugh if we saw me now. Especially though, I think of him late at night, when a car drives by too fast on our quiet street. I thought of him late last night, as I flew out the front door after a careless speeder. In the beam of my flashlight, I saw a red Maverick receding from view. I thought I saw a thin dark head, hair a little longer on top, and dark rimmed glasses. I thought, ''Could it be...'' No, I won't believe it until I see those little squiggles for knees.

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