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St. Gobbler's Day by Owen Egerton

It's Valentine's Day on aisle four, and has been for several weeks. At the Eckerd where I work there's an aisle for tooth care, for greeting cards, for pain-killers, for deodorants, for office supplies and one aisle, aisle four, reserved for the holidays. Right now that aisle is drowning in red plastic and cheap chocolate. A dozen fat babies with wings and togas dangle under the fluorescent lights. They're aiming their cardboard arrows down upon the few roaming customers, all men, buying last minute gifts, heart-shaped shit that we'll mark down by half first thing tomorrow morning.

"Doesn't it feel like it was just Groundhog Day? I swear, how time flies," Miss Gobbler says to me while retying a pink foil balloon to the arm of a red and white teddy bear. Miss Gobbler is fifty-three, unmarried, and cheerful to a fucking fault. She has the face of a Boston Terrier—eyes like oversized marbles set too far apart and a tiny mouth with narrow little teeth. She does the seasonal redecorating of aisle four like it's her home. Bunnies and eggs through most of the spring, American flags May through July, pumpkins and scarecrows start on September 1 and she often spends Halloween night pinning up the turkeys and pilgrims. Then Christmas, then Valentine's.

"Of course, it's never too early to start preparing for Saint Patrick's," she says and disappears into the storage closet.

To her, these aren't gimmicks. They are means of celebration, a way to mark the day.

"I do love Saint Patrick's, but Easter—hot doggy. That's a season," she says, returning from the closet with a large cardboard box.

Miss Gobbler has been working at this Eckerd for eleven years. She has a gold star on her nametag commemorating her dedicated service. I've only been here two years.

"Someday you'll have a gold star, too, if you try," she once told me. This made me sneeze.

Miss Gobbler tells me a story as she digs through the box, sorting different sized green shamrocks. I'm busy restocking the hair gel aisle.

"I read this in something, I think it was *Chicken Soup for the Holiday-Loving Soul...*"

Miss Gobbler's soul is so full of Chicken Soup I'm surprised she doesn't fart noodles.

"So this little girl, or boy, no, it's a girl, well, it doesn't matter..."

I should also point out that Miss Gobbler is the worst storyteller the world has ever known. She could witness a four-alarm fire at a baboon farm while screwing Mel Gibson and somehow bore you with the story.

"So this little kid has no friends because she has a cleft lip and so the other kids make fun of her."

"Why don't her parents get it fixed?" I ask.

"Well, I...mmm...I think they were poor?" She stumbles. "But, anyway, she buys Valentine cards for everyone in her class, even all the mean kids. Her mother is waiting for her to come home crying because her mother knows her daughter didn't get any cards because of her cleft lip, and the girl bursts into the house and yells, 'Not one!' and the mother starts to cry for her daughter, but the daughter completes her sentence. 'Not one. I didn't forget not one of the kids.'" Miss Gobbler beams.

"How did the mother know she didn't get any cards?"

"What?" her beam dims.

"You said the mother knew she got no cards. How?"

"The teacher called."

"Is that in the story?"

"It's implied."

"Is the little girl retarded?"

"No, just a cleft lip."

"Then why was she so proud of not forgetting anyone in her class? I think she's retarded."

"You're missing the point," she says.

"Which is?"

The question rattles Miss Gobbler. When Miss Gobbler is rattled she licks her lips with quick darts of the tongue.

"The point is to do loving things even if people are mean."

"Why? She bought them all cards and didn't get shit. The point is don't be stupid, save your money, and fix your fucking mouth."

The word fucking always gets Miss Gobbler. It hits her like a slap.

"But the next year she gets cards from everyone."

"Does it say that?"

"It's implied."

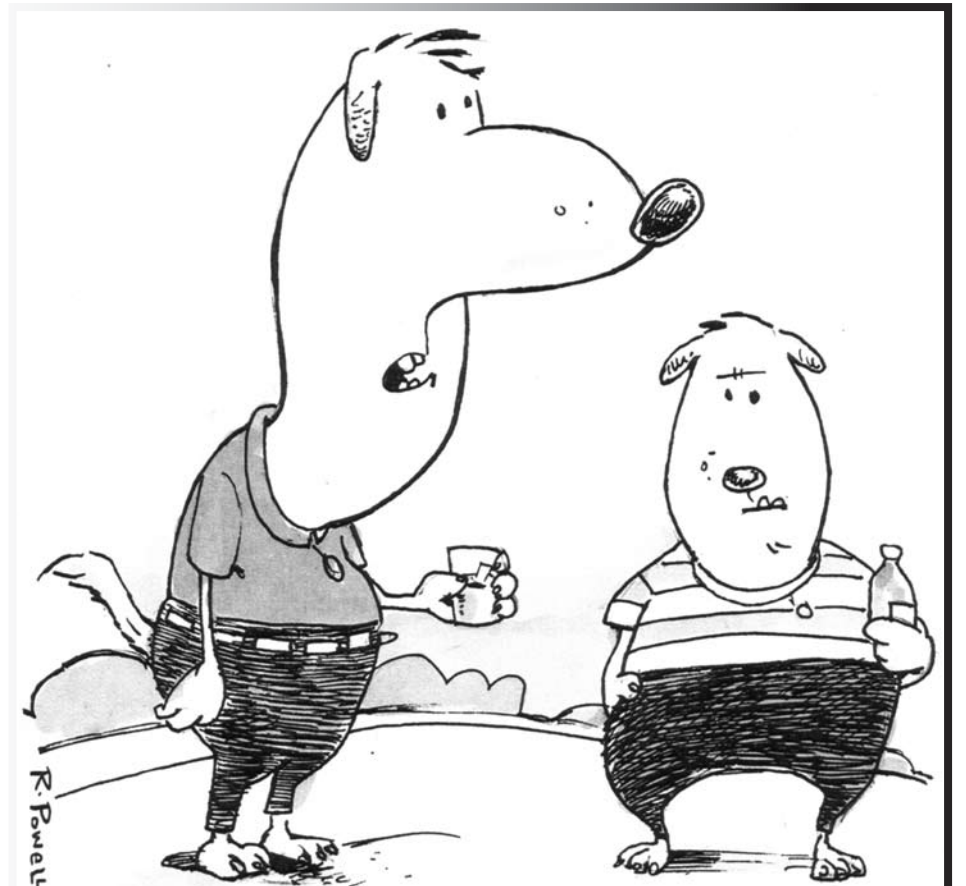
"I'm going on my smoke break."

I don't smoke. When I say smoke break I mean five-minutes-away-from-her break. I grab a Slim-Jim and eat it in the parking lot.

When I come back Miss Gobbler has pulled out a cardboard leprechaun from the box and has it talking with a cupid.

"Blarney Klarney, are ye having a good holiday?"

(Story continued on page 3)



...so I fetch the thing and I'm bringing it back and I stop and I say to myself, "What the hell am I doing? I don't LIKE sticks. I NEVER liked sticks!"

Rich Powell's work has appeared in many magazines and in video games, on CD labels, on websites and t-shirts, shoeboxes and bathroom stalls. You have a good chance of seeing his work in the latest **Mad Magazine**. He lives in North Carolina with his wife, Frankie and daughter, Bailey.