

2017

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Isolation is the Enemy: The Coping of the Weiss Family

My grandmother withered in a hospital bed for months before she died. She had always been the liveliest of people in our family, even though we all knew that she was the closest to death. Watching her fade in a dark hospital room, waiting for the doctors to bring her test results to us, was pure agony. To fight this agony, we simply played cards. A game of Rummy made us all forget the present situation and the waiting. It got us through the months: a simple reprieve from the grief and worrying that otherwise would have sapped our hope. Even though the games lasted a mere fifteen minutes at a time, they helped my father and I, bound together in the same circumstance, to remain strong for my grandmother.

In Raymond Carver's "A Small, Good Thing," Howard and Ann Weiss have nothing like this to help them steel through the torture of the waiting room. Throughout Scotty's process of dying, it is really his parents who are withering away. By isolating themselves and failing to take any kind of simple break from their constant waiting, their will is drained from them. Carver creates a story in which time is distorted, seeming to stand still for the Weisses as the world races forward without them. He centers the story around the isolated experiences of the parents and the endless nights in the hospital that they must endure while waiting for their boy to return to them. It is through the denial of food and fellowship that Carver demonstrates the plight upon those that are forced to sit in patience like the Weisses. They become a prime example of how isolation can destroy people, and that we must find community in fellow sufferers to get through tragedy and loss in our lives.

On the morning of Scotty's birthday, Carver uses "birthday boy" to describe him instead of his actual name. By doing so, he places the emphasis of the rest of the story upon the parents' experience with minimal value on Scotty. Howard and Ann Weiss are then able to be

individually isolated as the story progresses, and Carver capitalizes on this by focusing on an individual parent's experience as they return home and attempt to get a break from the hospital. An earlier passage of the story focuses on Howard's return home after having been at the hospital with Scotty that entire afternoon, beginning the time distortion in which it seems as though the parents wait for an eternity. "Until now, his life had gone smoothly and to his satisfaction-- college, marriage, another year of college for the advanced degree in business... Fatherhood" (Carver 62). Howard's emotions are centered upon his own struggles and loss in the situation, focusing the story upon him as well as his wife later once her own return home is described. As the waiting continues for the Weisses, however, their attempts to find a break are foiled each and every time.

As Howard and Joan try to find time to relax, the baker's calls begin. "Howard lathered his face and shaved. He'd just stretched out in the tub and closed his eyes when the telephone rang again" (Carver 63). This same interruption of vital relaxation occurs in Ann's trip home. "As she sat down on the sofa with her tea, the telephone rang" (Carver 75). Carver places the baker's calls at intervals that interrupt the Weiss' time of recuperation to deliberately wear them down. By draining the Weisses of energy, their willpower begins to deteriorate, and the time passes all the more slowly. Furthermore, the baker's calls are a sort of wake-up call for the Weisses, in which afterward, they feel guilt for trying to take care of themselves. They are instantly returned to their grief over Scotty without any rest whatsoever. Despite this lapse of time that to the Weisses seems long, they find out upon calling the hospital that Scotty is "...still sleeping. There's been no change" (Carver 76).

This theme of waiting on Scotty is reiterated throughout the story. "They waited all day, but the boy did not wake up" (Carver 69). Time then becomes the underlying focus for the text

until Scotty's death. The Weisses sit and wait on doctors and nurses while at the same time trying to fit in time for their personal health. "In an hour, another doctor came in" (Carver 68). "I was gone for exactly an hour and fifteen minutes. You go home for an hour and freshen up. Then come back" (Carver 72). Other analysts of the story have also uncovered similar temporal themes.

Harold Schweizer, an English professor at Bucknell University, notes that Carver's story is full of temporal markers. He, however, sees the markers as divided into three temporalities: the waiting room, the parking lot, and the cathedral. "All of these predictions render time measurable; all of them attempt to curtail time, to subject it to human desire. But as the narrative progresses, time simply runs its course: the parents wait, the doctors come and go" (Schweizer par. 4). While the parents dip into their first hours of waiting, they are *expecting* that Scotty will soon recover, and so, time passes more quickly. This demonstrates time speeding up and slowing down based on a person's desire. He then argues that once the Weisses run this course of expectation with no result, they shift to a course of hope and are thrust into a realm completely different from that of their son, and they can do nothing but wait indefinitely until he enters their own again. All the while, Ann and Howard drift farther apart into their own separate sections of this realm. "His coma meanwhile has removed the boy into a wholly other temporal realm that no one can enter" (Schweizer par. 7). Schweizer feels that the Weisses are brought out of this separate dimension in their meal with the baker, at which point, time moves normally for them again.

Above all else, Carver focuses on the Weisses' refusal of food, which in-turn starves their wills. On several occasions, they turn down the opportunity to eat and refuel their bodies, remarking that they are not hungry. "'Feel free to go out for a bite,' [Dr. Francis] said. 'It would

do you good...’ ‘I couldn’t eat anything,’ Ann said” (Carver 71). It is this denial of a simple break such as food that wears them so thin, driving them deeper into their own suffering and away from others. This refusal is reiterated several times to exemplify the extent of the Weisses hunger, and thus their suffering. “‘I don’t want any breakfast.’ ‘You know what I mean,’ he said. ‘Juice, something... Jesus, I’m not hungry either’” (Carver 78). By turning down breakfast, Howard and Ann pass up another opportunity to grow closer together and instead drift farther apart. In subtle ways, Carver also creates angelic references relating to food.

Near the end of the story, Ann notes that a “bald man in white pants and white canvas shoes pulled a heavy cart off the elevator... He reached down and slid a tray out of the cart... She could smell the unpleasant odors of warm food” (Carver 78). Here, food is related to a holy blessing from God to provide comfort to humanity: an allusion to communion that can provide the fellowship and community that the Weisses desperately need. Ann, however, finds the food repulsive, showing that she has sunk to the point in which she will not take any solace from any source. She is too far gone. Carver himself does not appear to be particularly religious; however, the religious references of his story cannot be ignored. Without committing to any distinct belief, Carver poses the idea that religion, if not “real” in a scientific sense, offers people the comfort and community that they need to feel safe and have strength in difficult times. It is a spiritual nourishment that does not need to be understood to make a difference in someone.

The Weisses do at one point submit to prayer, which provides them with some hope and relief from their tragic situation. “‘I’ve been praying,’ she said... ‘I almost thought I’d forgotten how, but it came back to me... ‘I’ve already prayed,’ [Howard] said” (Carver 68). The Weisses are driven back into faith by the circumstances, giving them at least a slight boost in hope and

unifying them in a small way. It is also interesting to point out that a religious reference is made in Ann's meeting of the Negro family, as well.

I regard Ann's encounter with the Negro family as the second most powerful scene in "A Small, Good Thing." It is clear at this point that Ann Weiss is experiencing deep levels of isolation and both physical and mental exhaustion. A deprivation of food has certainly amplified these feelings, but it is not until she stumbles upon an African-American family, which she inappropriately refers to as "Negro" to differentiate them further from herself, that she feels a connection to another human being again. They are united by their like situations. "She was afraid, and they were afraid. They had that in common" (Carver 74). This family is undergoing the same torturous experience of constant waiting and coping that the Weisses have been enduring, and Carver gives a clue as to the extent of their wait. "The little table was littered with hamburger wrappers and Styrofoam cups" (Carver 73). To accumulate such a clutter, the family has evidently remained in the waiting room for a long period, just as the Weisses have. The crucial difference: they had been eating.

The family is waiting for a child to heal who is in far worse danger of death than Scotty, at least seemingly at that time. Despite this graver circumstance, the family is able to keep hope, stay strong, and stay together in a time that has torn Ann and Howard apart both in respect to one another and internally. Though it is a simple fast food meal, it gives the family the nourishment and togetherness that they need in order to cope. Likewise, prayer has had the same hope-bringing effect for Franklin's mother, as shown when Ann notices her "lips moving silently, making words" (Carver 74). Prayer has acted as another glue to keep the family anchored to each other and hope. The Weisses, having failed to nourish themselves in any way and taking on their struggles entirely isolated, are not so prepared for the death of their son.

Scotty dies in a sudden manner, and it catches the Weisses completely off guard. Carver does not focus on their weeping and lamenting, but rather the somber and lonely feeling around them. Though the doctor makes several attempts at consolation, his effort is lost on the Weisses solely because he does not understand their loneliness and their suffering, nor can he express his emotions if he did. "I can't tell you how badly I feel. I'm so very sorry, I can't tell you" (Carver 80). When the Weisses arrive home, their feelings of isolation hit full force. Ann tells Howard in a calm voice as he cries on her lap, "Howard, he's gone. He's gone and now we'll have to get used to that. To being alone" (Carver 83). Scotty was the anchor that brought Ann and Howard together and kept them tied to the world around them rather than alone inside themselves. When he passes, the Weisses feel completely separated from the world: tired, hungry, and alone. The baker's final call is a low blow and the final straw for Ann. Since she has no one to help her to sort through her emotions, everything turns to rage. Her attack on the baker is the only outlet for her emotions that she has, but all those emotions shift to depression once her anger fades in the bakery, and without any method of coping, she breaks down. These raw emotions that have been accumulating throughout the story are finally put to rest in the night at the bakery.

The final scene of "A Small, Good Thing" is the pivotal ending to a building story. Carver has centered his story around this scene, creating emotion and suspense throughout each page and leading to a powerful resolution. At this point, the Weisses' worst fears have been realized, and the pain of losing their son is only amplified by the torturous waiting that they have endured over three days in a hospital internally alone and without any food. After Ann's breakdown, the baker sympathizes with the ex-parents, claiming that he, too, understands loneliness, and they all sit at a table as he feeds them sweet rolls, coffee, and rich bread. It is at this moment that Carver gives us a taste of the truth behind his story. The baker remarks, "You

have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this” (Carver 88). The following part of the scene in which they eat the dark bread is also very suggestive of the last supper: another allusion to communion.

In this way, Carver brings together each theme of the story: food, faith, and community. After a nightmarish eternity in a hospital, the three loners are brought together, leaning on each other for compassion and strength. As the story ends, the three “talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving” (Carver 89).

Another temporal marker is placed here, but it passes so easily for the Weisses because they now have each other and another sufferer to confide in, and above all, they enjoy themselves even in the most tragic event of their lives. As Schweizer puts it, “...the plentitude of their meal intimates a newly attained temporality where waiting is no more endured, where time is no longer” (Schweizer par. 17). In difficult times, people must find something, anything to keep themselves going and to stave off the madness in an inability to cope: to make time move at the pace it should. Whether it be food, prayer, or a simple card game, small things allow people to get through the worst of times by bringing them together. Facing these challenges alone will surely break a man down.

Carver has created a genuine example of the struggles undergone by the families that wait in the hospital rooms. It is scary, brutal, and downright impossible to overcome tragedy if one cannot keep his or her own self together. Sufferers understand other sufferers, and when a person isn't strong enough to stand alone, he or she needs to find someone who knows the same pain to lean on. Tragedy drives a wall between people, and it is their job to find whatever little thing they must do to break it down before they break down themselves.

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