

A stylized Christmas tree graphic composed of various colored shapes. The top is a large, curved shape with a yellow-to-orange gradient. Below it are several green shapes of varying sizes and orientations, some overlapping. To the left of the green shapes are several pink-to-purple gradient shapes, also overlapping. The entire graphic is set against a dark blue background.

“His Last Word was ‘Coming’”

A Christmas story by Pietro Grieco

I was in the kitchen putting the round pieces of dough on a tray to have fresh baked bread to have fresh baked bread. Mom and auntie Bessie were preparing a big salad with vegetables and fruit. I liked it when the salad had some berries, and for Christmas mom used to put a lot of different berries, including those that paint your tongue blue....

“You know Bessie, for Christmas, Tom always goes into this sentimental and melancholic mood.”

“Didn’t he lose his father on a Christmas day?”

“Yes, but that was more than thirty years ago.”

“Mary, must be his Russian blood.”

That was granny from the dinning room, fixing the table with my olde
“That’s the problem with deaf people. Mary, you never know when they hear or not.”

“Deaf people do not deceive me anymore. They hear exactly what they want, and when they want. If they do not want to know something, even if you scream into their ears, they are not going to hear you. But I have to tell you, they hear perfectly well the things you want to avoid them knowing. Do you want to see what I mean?”

“Oh, don’t bother the old woman.”

“You should go and live with your mother in law for a while.

Then I want to hear your comments...”

“Who knows? I could probably become selectively deaf, too!”

They laughed covering their mouth, but grandma wasn't in the dining room anymore. She had moved to the front room to look through the window.

“Mom, the tray is full. Can I put it in the oven now?”

“In a while, Katie, first we have to take the turkey out, and then we'll bake the bread. Gosh, the turkey must be ready by now, what do you think Bess?”

“Let me have a look at it, oh yah. This thermometer thing inside indicates that is ready. Oh it smells good.”

“Then take it out and I'll put the bread to bake. Good job Katie; now call your father. He must be on the porch outside, probably smoking his last one.”

I didn't answer her audibly, but I said to myself: “Yes, mom.” But my father wasn't on the porch; he was under the big tree in the front yard. We have two big trees at home, one in the front yard and the other in the back yard. The one in the back gives pears, and its branches spill over Jimmy's family's back yard. The one in the front only gives shade, and that's why I like the pear tree better. It is easy to climb, and I can call Jimmy and his sisters. I like Jimmy more than the rest of them. He's funny. I walked to where my father was and in the reflection of the lights from the Olson family Christmas tree, I

could see a small line, like a river running down my father's right cheek. I stood in awe, my father was crying! I never saw him, or my mom, cry. I thought the older ones didn't cry, only kids were allowed to cry. But my father was crying.

He was standing with his left elbow against the tree, with his head held in his left hand. In his right hand, the cigarette was consuming itself. He was speaking to himself. Alone. It was like a confession.

“I never told anybody, but I wasn't sleeping. I heard a great noise, then I waited, when I heard mom's voice screaming, ‘Oh, my god! Oh, my god!’ I got up and ran to the corridor. There, on my belly, at the top of the stairs I saw my dad on the floor. He was just at the end of the stairs, all twisted, not moving, his face resting on the floor with eyes fixed, looking at the door. Uncle Rob was saying to mom, ‘Please don't move him, in these cases it's best to wait for the doctor.’ When mom kneeled down, caressing his face, I went to bed again. I put my head under the pillow; I didn't want to hear the news...”

“I miss you dad, and still hope to see you again.”

Leaning against the tree, he was looking up through the branches, into the darkness, immersed in old emotions. He didn't see me when I was practically standing right in front of him. Now I could see the blinking Christmas tree lights reflected on both of his tear stained cheeks.

“Pa, do you feel okay?”

Surprised to hear my voice, he turned his head, cast down the cigarette, and cleaned his eyes and cheeks. Then he turned completely around and smiled at me.

“I’m okay, sweetie, I am okay.”

“Dad, were you really crying... Crying?”

He nodded, and made a noise, “Hm, Hm.” After a big sigh he spoke to me.

“I was remembering a Christmas, it was many years ago; I was probably one or two years older than you are now.”

“Nine?”

“Yeah, probably eight or nine. During that Christmas Eve all of the family, except my dad, worked on preparing the Christmas tree and the presents. Mom was in the kitchen with aunt Florie, preparing the turkey, fruit salad, pies, and other delicious food, and my sisters fixed the table really beautifully. I was hungry, but mom wanted to wait for my dad, and he wasn’t coming.”

“Was it in the old house?”

“Oh, no honey it was at granny’s my parents’ house. During those years we lived in the outskirts of Princeton, New Jersey, do you know where that is? During Christmas time, it always got really cold with a lot of snow, too. The east coast is really cold in winter and that’s why grandma moved us here.”

(I realized that everything in the east must be different. I didn’t tell anybody, but when the time arrives to go to college, I want to move

to Princeton; they say there is a good university there. It will be a nice opportunity to know the old home my father often speaks of.)

“Anyway, back to my story, I was hungry. The only things I had eaten all day were some nuts and crackers. When I went into the kitchen to tell my mom I wanted to eat something, she was telling aunt Florie, ‘Something must have happened to Fred. Will you stay with the children, while I go to the railway station?’”

My father owned a business in New York near Penn Station. He started his flower kiosk after a harsh discussion with his former boss. He decided to be independent and never again receive orders from someone else. With money that some friends lent him, he opened a big kiosk. He used to leave during the dark morning hours and come home at dusk. I liked to go with him when I didn’t have to go to school, and at mid morning he always used to ask me, “Are you hungry?” I was always hungry.

“Yes, dad.”

“Well, let’s make a deal then. Here I’ll lend you a dollar, but during the day you have to earn it back. Go to Joe’s Bakery at the corner of the street and tell him, ‘I’m Tom. Fred sent me.’”

“Yes, dad.”

I traveled like a happy fish, swimming against the up current of people on the street. As soon as I arrived at the Bakery, I gave my speech.

“I’m Tom, and I have been sent by Fred, my dad. A dollar Sandwich, please.”

“Are you Fred’s son?”

“Yeah!”

“Aha! What does your father do?”

“He’s the florist. He sells flowers.”

“Then you’re not Fred’s son. He sells plants.”

“Well, dad sells plants and flowers.”

“Okay, if you say so. I’m going to make you the biggest sandwich you’ve ever eaten in your life.”

They were really big, at least half a baguette.

“Ham and cheese?”

“Yes!”

“Lettuce?”

“Yes!”

“A good amount of onions?”

“No!”

“No?”

“I don’t like onions.”

“Then to compensate, a good amount of garlic, okay?”

“No! I don’t like garlic, either.”

“Then you’re definitely not Fred’s son.”

“Yes, I am!”

“He told me his son loves onions and garlic.”

“But today I don’t want onions and garlic.”

“What’s going on..., are you expecting to kiss a girl?”

“Well, I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Then you couldn’t be Fred’s son. He said his son has a lot of girl friends.”

“Yes, I am! But my friends don’t live in New York.”

“Ah, okay. Some tomato?”

“Yes! And some ketchup, too, please.”

“Ketchup? No ketchup is going to ruin Joe’s sandwiches, okay?

Here is your sandwich. It is one dollar and six cents.”

“But I only have one dollar, for a one-dollar sandwich.”

“If you are Fred’s son, you should know that you have to pay taxes. If we don’t pay taxes in New York we go to jail, didn’t you know that? And I don’t want to go to jail for a sandwich. I think it will be better if you take your dollar and your sandwich, this way we can both avoid jail, don’t you think? He looked straight into my eyes, winking one of them, and added: It is better to be free, right boy?”

“Yeah!”

I clutched my sandwich and the bag in which Joe always included a coffee for my father and a coke for me, and I swam downstream, back to my father’s kiosk, breathless.

“Jo... Jo... Joe said I had to pay taxes, but since I didn’t have the six cents he gave me the dollar back.”

“That’s what he said, ha? Now, I think the dollar is yours.

Remember our deal? I lent it to you and you promised to earn it back, or did you already forget about that?”

“No, dad, I’ll work all day and earn it. I promise”

I never could finish the first part of the sandwich, which was cut in three. Because I was so full I offered some to my father. He used to say that he wasn’t hungry, but he was going to eat some of it because to throw food away was a sin. Those sandwiches were like heaven, especially to eat them there in the middle of the street while my father was selling flowers. Generally, I earned my dollar delivering some packages to the office buildings around us, changing the water, and cutting the rotten leaves. When we went home, at the end of the day, I was so tired I immediately went to sleep in the train.

“Dad?”

I interrupted my dad’s story

“Yes, Katie.”

“What happened that Christmas Eve when grandpa didn’t come home to have supper?”

“Oh, you’re right, I forgot all about it. Well, after mom left, auntie Florie let us eat something, because it was already after midnight already. After a while, we didn’t know what to, so auntie said, ‘Let’s go to the station.’ When we arrived, a train was departing and a few passengers were leaving the platform. Mom was going

up and down looking into the train for a familiar face. My father didn't appear. The next train was going to come in a little over an hour, and after that the following one would arrive three hours later. Mom explained all this, as she had memorized the official schedules. Mom was really anxious, and we were a little bit scared, too. Auntie Flore suggested calling the police. My mother reacted badly to this, 'what are you saying, woman! Don't make me more nervous. Please think about what you're saying!'"

"After half an hour a train going to New York stopped in the other platform. After the train left, there was dad waving at us. 'Dad!' I cried and nearly jumped into the tracks to go to the other side. 'Coming, Coming, son. Wait there!'"

"When we met I hugged him, and my sisters joined us, too. But mom was so angry and started questioning him. 'Why did you come so late? You promised me you would come home early today. What happened to you?' He smiled, and said, 'Nothing. I fell asleep on the train, and when I woke up, I realized I was quite far away from Princeton. I had to wait for the next train to New York to come back. That's all, Mary please don't be angry. It was a good day, I sold everything.' My mother started crying and hugged him. We all hugged and cried together. We were a crying huddle, right on the platform! Going home, dad said to me, 'Jump up on my shoulders.' And mom said to him, 'He is already too heavy,

Fred.’ But dad answered, ‘I’m never too tired for my boy.’ He said to me, ‘Hold on tight son,’ he said, because this time he was hand in hand with my sisters. I put my hands on his head to keep my balance while he walked. ‘I’m the tallest of the family,’ I said, and all laughed. When we arrived home, we were the happiest family in the neighborhood, and probably even the whole world, too.”

“We sat at the table but nobody was hungry anymore. My father, after drinking a cup of wine, said, ‘I’m going to take a shower and go straight to bed. Leave some turkey for me for tomorrow.’ We replied that we were going to eat everything, and laughed. But in the end we all went to bed. The following day we had a late lunch, and remembering how we cried on the station, all hugged as a scrum, we couldn’t stop laughing.”

At that precise moment, Brenda, my older sister called us from the porch, interrupting father. I liked dad’s story, but I was feeling cold now.

“Dad, it’s cold, we better go in.”

“Yeah, it is cold.”

He took my hand. Then I stopped him.

“Dad, why don’t you put me up on your shoulders like grandpa did to you?”

He hoisted me up. We went inside, and I felt like the tallest member of the family. We ate a good Christmas meal. Finishing my ice-cream, I impishly jumped up on the chair and raising my voice above all the rest, I said, “Dad, dad, a quickie, why don’t you tell the story of grandpa again?” First, everyone just stared at me, then at my father. He smiled at me, and then at ma, then at my deaf grandma, their eyes exchanging a conversation. Finally he said, “Okay.” Little by little he told the story again, and this time the only thing he added was that the last word he remembered of his father was “Coming!” And the new story was better than before.

Pietro Grieco © 2010