

The Pirate's Life For Me

On Keith's 13th birthday, will he blow out his candles or walk the plank?

By Bryon Cahill • Art by Micah Farritor

It was *the Big 1-3*. That's what they had been calling it for almost a year. I was 12 years old for about 30 seconds before the promise of my teenage years became apparent. "Bravo!" my father exclaimed as I blew out my candles. "Before you know it, you'll hit the Big 1-3!"

"It's all downhill from here, Keith!" my mother joined in. The sound of their laughter chilled the restaurant's air. When the hilarity subsided, my father, always the big tipper, stood up and paid the amateur magician with three crisp \$50 bills. They vanished into the man's pocket. Abracadabra.

Through good times and through bad, there was one thing that could always be counted on as a constant in my young life: my parents' uncanny ability to embarrass me.

I awoke on my 13th birthday with past humiliations dancing in my head. I disappeared under the covers and took a deep breath. It had come. It was here. There was no escape. I got up, dressed, and shuffled my way toward my fate.

Downstairs in the kitchen, my parents were drinking coffee and reading the newspaper—two

activities that in any typical American household would seem completely normal but here at 33 Wigginton Way were anything but.

"Would you please pass the business section, dear?" my father asked nonchalantly. He couldn't hide the glimmer in his eye. My mother, who appeared to be one breath away from letting loose a joyous scream, handed him a few pages and sipped her coffee. She coughed on it, and her face scrunched up in distaste.

"Mmm," she lied. "Excellent brew." I rolled my eyes and poured myself a glass of orange juice.

"So, what are your plans for this absolutely ordinary Saturday?" my mother asked me. She didn't look up from her paper.

"You guys really couldn't be any more obvious," I said.

"Why, whatever do you mean, son?" my father asked. Never before had he called me that. It sounded eerie coming out of the side of his mouth.

"Whatever," I said. "Bring it."

Just then, the doorbell rang. My mother gagged on another mouthful of coffee and then managed

to compose herself. "Would you be a dear, dear, and see who that is?"

I sighed, put down my glass, and walked slowly through the kitchen and down the hall. I could feel my parents' eyes on my back as I reached for the doorknob.

I pulled it open an inch, maybe less. Through the open crack, I could see one tall black boot that went halfway up a man's leg. A giant hand swept down and pushed me aside. Those fingers were covered with rings. The door was flung open and smashed against the wall with such force that the paintings shook and tilted off center. The early morning sunlight framed the giant outline of a bearded pirate.

"Yar!" He entered and locked the door behind him.

"A pirate?" I shouted down the hall to my parents, who were now putting on a better show of mock surprise. Their jaws had dropped, and they stood in the kitchen's entryway without any hint of a smile.

"Seriously, a pirate? What am I, 5? Come on, the lame magician last year wasn't bad enough?"

"Ya don't look 5 ta me, matey." He reached down and pulled a long, thin hemp rope from one of his deep pockets and then advanced on my parents.

"Please don't hurt Keith. It's his birthday," my mother stammered before the pirate gagged her with a dirty bandanna he pulled from inside his ruffled red shirt. My parents complied like zombies, the perfect supporting characters in a play.



"That's right!" I agreed sarcastically. "It's the Big 1-3! Right, Dad?"

My father nodded. "Mmfff garrr eee!" The pirate had gagged Dad too.

"Is that right, now?" The pirate glared at me.

"Yeah," I said. "Surprise, surprise."

"Well then, maybe you'd like to come with me when I sail away on the high seas? I could use a new ship hand on board. Aye, that I could. Our last boy, he . . ." Petey glared at me then, as if he were sizing me up to decide whether I could handle the grim details. "Well, let's just say the lad was more well liked among the sharks than he was among the crew. God rest your young, dear soul, poor Mackey."

Heh. Amusing. I thought. This guy's got a whole back-ground story worked out and everything. If nothing else, you gotta admire his devotion to the role.

"Is that the game, then? I'm supposed to go with you to some ship somewhere? I suppose that's where we'll have the pirate party?" I looked at my parents, and they were shaking their heads quite **vehemently**. Then I considered Petey. In our sparkling, white-tiled country kitchen, he looked as out of place as a black bear in a bathtub. Yet, at the same time, there was something about him that seemed . . . just right?

"Fine. Let's get it over with." I resigned myself to whatever elaborate scheme my parents had prepared.

"Before we leave these landlubbers forever and make off for fortune and adventure, we'll be needin' a small bit of **booty**, young Keith. Can you do your Uncle Petey a favor and bring me the local treasure?"

My parents, true to their parts, made their disapproval apparent by shaking their heads and stomping their feet. Ignoring their Oscar-worthy performances, I trugged into their room and pulled my mother's jewelry box from her dresser. I brought it to "Uncle Petey," and he looked at me with what I could only suppose was respect. "Yer a bright good lad, young Keith. That you arrr! We'll make a dirty pirate out of ya yet!"

vocab

VEHEMENTLY: passionately, vigorously

BOOTY: loot, treasure, stolen items

"Whatever," I said. "Can we get this over with, please?" My parents were trying to scream through their gags. The rope that Petey had used to tie them up was tight, and they wouldn't be going anywhere anytime soon. For a moment, I admired their dedication to the day. They had really gone all out to annoy me this year. I had to admit, it was a little exciting.

"Come along, boy. The pirate's life awaits ya."

He smiled down on me, and his crooked, half-black, half-gold teeth protruded from his lips.

"See you at the party," I said to my parents. I left

'Come along, boy. The pirate's life awaits ya.'

with the grungy pirate and followed him down the street. As we reached the corner, I turned and noticed a tiny red car pull up in front of my house. Six clowns got out, some tall and thin, others short and pudgy. But Uncle Petey and I turned onto Main Street before I could see where they went. "Bizzarrrr," I said, trying out my pirate tongue.

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The wharf was busier than usual on that day in early summer. The fishermen's boats were long gone at 9:30, but the families in their sailboats and speedboats, the lovers in their rowboats and yachts, and the tourists boarding cruise boats and tour boats were in abundance as we made our way down the dock. I noticed that no one was paying us much attention. *Strange*, I thought. *You'd think people might question a man dressed up like a pirate followed by a kid holding a jewelry box.*

"Yo ho ho ho, the pirate's life for me!" Uncle Petey sang to himself. I was quite unimpressed by how clichéd he appeared to be. I wondered what kind of training a person needed to become a child's party pirate. And then it occurred to me that he was not at all a typical child's party pirate.

How many entertainment companies would allow their costumed employees to "kidnap" a person? Sure, Petey had my parents' consent—they must have signed a form or something—but still, what if



some dreadful thing happened to us on this little adventure? What if I were to fall and hit my head on one of the loose anchors hanging about on the dock? No insurance company in the world would cover it!

"Um, Petey?"

"Yar, matey. What you be wantin' now?" He scowled at me but did not hesitate in his steps. In fact, he seemed to be walking faster than before.

"I was just curious. What entertainment company do you work for? My friend Jillian is having a birthday in a couple of weeks, and I know she'd just love a professional pirate at her party," I lied. My friend Jillian was real, but her interest in pirates pretty much started and ended with Johnny Depp.

"Yer Uncle Petey works for no man, let alone any washbucklin' industry. Now quit yer belly-aching and let's get a move on."

"Right." The doubt that had sprung into my head receded a little. Of course he wouldn't break character. My parents would have made sure of that with a couple of handfuls of gold. Right true. "Look, Mommy! It's a pirate!" A little girl of

about 7 or 8 pointed at Uncle Petey as he stormed by. His long, dangling earrings swayed with his gait, and the mother held her daughter back. The girl smiled and waved, unafraid.

"Here we are now, young Keith." We were standing about 50 yards from the end of the dock. Sitting in the water just a few feet below us was a tiny skiff that looked big enough for one man and maybe a bucket of fish. "What are ya lookin' at down there now? Yer starin' like ya got mermaids in yer eyes."

"I . . . I don't know," I stutted. "I guess I was imagining something . . . a little bigger perhaps?"

Uncle Petey let out a boisterous laugh that seemed menacing to me. He held his belly above his skull-and-crossbones belt buckle. As he did so, I caught sight of something silver at his side. I was shocked that I hadn't noticed it before. "Now, just how big do ya like your rowboats to be, young friend?" He chuckled. "She serves her purpose well, ya can trust me on that. Now be a good lad and help me with these ropes." He bent down and started to untie one of the coils of rope from the dock, and I got a better look at the silver at his

side. It was a blade, for certain.

"Is... is that a real sword?" I barely whispered. Petey must have heard, because he jumped up and faced me.

"Aye, that's a sword all right, Keith. In fact, it's one of the reasons why I've come for ya. Now if ya don't mind, I'd like ya to get in the boat there and sit at the far end. Do it quiet-like and you won't have ta see the hilt of this here sword stickin' out yer belly." His eyes stared down at me. They had changed. His pupils were now marked with blood-red blotches, and the wrinkles at the corners of his sockets danced with heat and lightning.

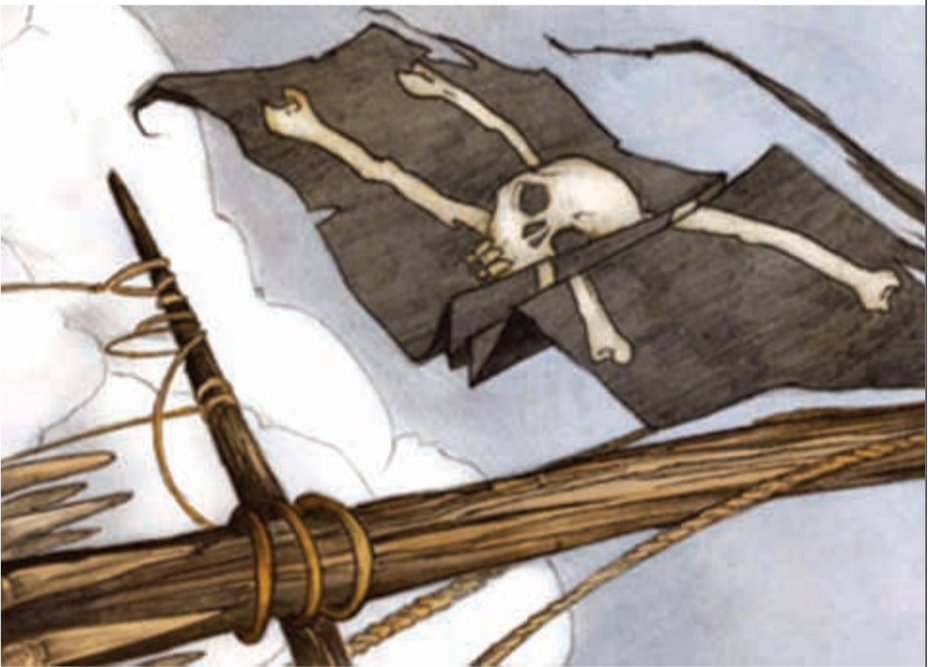
I took one step backward, and Petey's hand was immediately at his weapon. He clutched the leather handle with such strength that I knew it would be hopeless for me to run. He would have cut me into three pieces before I could even turn. Uncle Petey was no phony-baloney birthday pirate. He was the real deal. "Get in the boat, Keith," he said. "Now."

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As he rowed, I sat scrunched in the corner, trying not to look afraid. I recalled the clown car that had pulled up in front of my house, and I mentally kicked myself for not paying it more attention. *At least, my parents will be rescued by my real birthday entertainers.* I thought. In my last image of my parents, they were tied and gagged, screaming through their gags while I stole my poor mother's jewelry box. It was too much. I started to whimper. I did not cry, mind you. I'm tougher than that. But as my angry pout slowly turned to a mild quiver, Petey noticed, and he slapped me with his words.

"Oh, come off it now, lad! It's not as bad as all that! You've got to know that there's a reason to all this, don't ya?" The true-to-life pirate tried to console me, but it was no use. I figured I was either going to die soon or never return to Wigginton Way, and neither option was the least bit appealing. *Well, if I'm never to see them again, I'm sure as mud not gonna let this old pirate make off with Mom's jewelry!* I lifted the delicate family heirloom over my head, insanely made a wish, and heaved it far out into the sea. As it arced through the air, Petey hollered.

"Noo! What arr ya doin'?" And then an amazing



thing happened. Petey plunged into the water and began to swim after it! *Why in the world would he do that? Surely, being a pirate, he has plenty of treasures stashed away somewhere,* I thought. Then I grabbed the oars he had dropped. Unfortunately for me, I had never rowed before, and I ended up twirling the skiff in circles helplessly. Soon, Petey was back, hanging clumsily on the side of the boat.

"Ya most certainly are a landlubber then, aren't ya?" He heaved himself aboard clumsily. "Well, we'll be takin' care of that in good time. That we will." His clothes were soaked and clung to his body. He wrung out the braids in his thick black beard and pulled a long, slimy piece of green seaweed from his matted hair. "I swear, if ya weren't my own flesh and blood, I'd of killed ya for that." He reached into his pocket and pulled out an item that I recognized immediately. It was my mother's golden brooch, passed on to her from her mother and from her mother before that.

"G—Give me that." I demanded.

"Sorry lad. You've lost my trust, and yer gonna have ta earn it back now." Petey picked up the oars and started to row. I continued to sit there at the end of the rowboat, trying my best to look ugly and mean. "Aww, don't be such a grump, Keith. It'll all be just peaches and dandelion wine in the end."

of my attack caught him off guard, and he fell backward in the skiff. I looked in my hand and there was the sword. I had somehow managed to pull it free of its **sheath**. A bright, white glow emanated from it, and though it was nearly the size of me, it was as light as air. It felt right in my palm, as though it had always been there, as though it were meant for me.

"What did you mean when you said I'm your flesh and blood?"

"How many times do I have to tell ya? I'm your Uncle Petey! And you know just right what that means now, don't ya? Just lookin' at ya now, I can tell that you do. Your whole life is written there on your face. Disappointment, confusion, lack of meaning, it's all there. You've never felt like ya belonged." I did not argue with him. "Yar. That's right, Master Keith. You've been lied to yer whole life." I stared blindly

"Not a pirate, my foot! You've got the heart of your father in ya... yer real father." Petey laughed from his helpless position at the tip of my blade. "I could kill you, you know. I could kill you right now."

I lifted the delicate family heirloom

over my head, insanely made a wish, and heaved it far out into the sea.

ahead. I heard what he was saying, yes, but processing the words was a different story.

"Arr... for Blackbeard's sake... YER A PIRATE, KEITH! True and true. And this here brooch that your mother stole from us when she and your so-called father took ya..." He patted his vest and felt the weight of the gold beneath. "That's your claim to fortune."

"That's nonsense!" I shouted. "I am not a pirate!" In a flash, I was on him. I didn't care if he killed me—I just wanted to hurt him. The surprise

vocab

SHEATH: a case or covering for the blade of a sword

"This," I said, "is mine." And with those words, I ascended. ✎

WRITE ABOUT IT

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