

BUTTERFINGERS

By

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The cell phone rings wrenching Hank out of near-sleep. On the television, Bill Maher's ending monologue drones on about depressing election possibilities. "Who the fuck is calling me so late? Where's the damned phone?" Hank demands aloud, a habit forged from living alone too long.

Hank's arthritic hands, find the phone between his legs and then fumble it. "Should have set it to vibrate." Hank answers with a standard greeting featuring his trademark character voice before the caller has a chance to identify himself: "Hank Sitler, alive and well -- what'a you want?" "Wait, I can't hear you."

He stretches from the warm comfort of his well-worn stuffed chair to reach the coffee table in front of him. He scoots an open box of Butterfingers aside and finds the TV remote which is almost lost in the chaos of last Sunday's Times, candy wrappers, and prescription meds. "Ah, shit! No, I'm fine, it's the hip. Sorry." The TV is silenced. "Who is this?"

The caller is Larry Fredericks, a fellow actor with whom Hank worked in regional theatre as well as on Off-Broadway when they both were just starting out. When Larry lived in New York City before joining a resident company in Kentucky, Larry and his son, Clark, were family to Hank and his son, Henry Jr. Larry's wife left him for a saxophone player shortly after Clark arrived, and Hank's wife died of cancer when Henry Jr. was only eighteen months old.

Being actors and single dads in New York in the early 90's was a unique experience the men shared for more than fifteen years. They developed familial bonds with each other and with the kids as well. Money, food, lives, and love were shared.

The boys became blood brothers one afternoon in Hank's kitchen when they were seven years old. They were brothers

already in almost every sense of the word. When Hank or Larry found work out-of-town, the man remaining in the City was Dad to both boys. For almost four years when the boys were small, the dads and sons shared one apartment in Queens. When both men were working, they shared the cost of a baby sitter. The men had a rule: One of them stayed in town at all times.

Once, when the boys were age five, and Hank was working out-of-town, there was a severe thunder storm. Larry awakened to find both boys in his bed, fast asleep and snuggling to him. When Clark developed appendicitis, Larry was away. It was Hank who took Clark to the hospital and missed work as a waiter while nursing him after surgery. It was Hank who was tapped to explain wet dreams when Clark messed his sheets while in his charge.

Both Hank and Larry cared about and cared for the boys in equal measure. Both had cleaned up after the boys' bouts with stomach viruses and intestinal flus. The men had bathed, dressed, fed and provided butt wiping service to these kids. It was as though the boys had two fathers.

A great loss was felt by all when Larry moved to Kentucky. The boys who were entering high school at the time were hit hardest by the separation. There were many phone calls, emails and texts back and forth for the first year or so. The four reunited for a joint vacation in Colorado to celebrate the boys' graduation from high school. By then, the boys had grown in different directions. Henry Jr. would be moving to Evanston to study journalism at Northwestern on a full scholarship. Clark had begun acting locally, and had no plans to attend college. Clark dreamed of working as an actor in New York.

Hank and Larry also felt the effects of extended separation. But, phone calls on birthdays and holidays and frequent texts kept their lives loosely connected. This phone call coming late on a beautiful Friday night in October would tighten the ties that bind.

Hank ends the call with "I love you, man. You bet, I will call you. You tell him I'm on my way. Yeah, on my way - now let me go." Hank is crying. He quickly wipes his eyes and gets down to the business of finding his shoes and putting them on. He moves as quickly as he can to his

bedroom, leaning on walls for support. "Awe fuck it." He grabs at his hip, waits a moment for the pain to subside, then carefully puts one arm in a sweater. "O.K., you can do this." Near the door he finds his keys, a cane, and a paper mask. A thought stops him. He turns to see the box of Butterfingers on the coffee table.

Hank had never experienced Butterfingers until Clark, at age ten, broke his arm climbing trees in Central Park. When Hank visited him in Larry's Brooklyn apartment, he hugged the boy and tousled his curly blonde hair. "What can I get you that'll make you feel better and bribe you down out'a the damned trees? Clark smiled and said, "Butterfingers." Once Hank ate one, he, like Clark, was hooked. Thereafter, Hank kept a supply. He and Clark often shared Butterfingers.

Minutes later, Hank reaches the corner of West 34th Street and 6th Avenue. He carries the box of Butterfingers under an arm. He takes a determined breath and begins what used to be a fifteen minute walk down 6th to Bryant Park. How long would it take him now?

Near the 47th Street entrance to Bryant Park, Clark speaks with his Dad on a cell phone. "Dad, no, he's not here yet, and I'm tired of waiting. What can he do for me anyway?" A very tired Hank approaches slowly, stabbing the pavement with his cane; he's ashen with pain. Clark sees him. "He's here, Dad. Yeah, I will."

The men move to each other without speaking. Clark is struck with how much Hank has aged since he last saw him. Hank takes in the handsome thirty year old man Clark has become. He thinks, "Why would someone so young and beautiful want to extinguish himself?"

Clark notices the box of Butterfingers still clenched under Hank's arm, and try as he might to avoid it, he breaks down. Hank gently guides Clark into the park to a bench. They sit in silence. Hank places the box of Butterfingers in Clark's lap, then puts an arm around him. Clark, childlike, puts his head against Hank's chest and weeps.

Twenty minutes pass before Clark attempts to speak. When he does, he falls apart again, but manages to apologize. "I'm sorry." Hank hugs him tightly and

removes his mask, "It's O.K., kid -- I'd cry too if I lived in Gramercy Park." Clark laughs through his tears, "Why?" Hank shrugs, "Piss-elegant neighborhood, full of uppity celebrities - how in hell can you afford it?"

Clark explains that his girlfriend insisted on living there. "I have no reason to stay now. And I *can't* afford it." With that Clark opens the box of Butterfingers. He takes one and offers one to Hank. They sit in silence for a while crunching down on their favorite candy.

"How's Henry Jr? Doing great, I guess." Clark asks knowing Hank's honest response should be "Better than you." With surprising candor, Hank replies, "Better than you. I hope. At least he's not planning to hurt himself."

There's a difficult silence between them mercifully relieved by Clark's tearing paper from another Butterfinger. "Henry Jr's in Boston now. Did you know that?" Clark nods, "Yeah, Dad told me about his job. Fantastic. I wish we were kids again, back in Central Park climbing trees. Life was so simple."

Clark is about to take a bite when he notices Hank wiping his eyes. "Uncle Hank? Uncle Hank?" After a moment, Hank looks at Clark and smiles sadly, "You are still climbing trees, Clark ... they are just taller and more challenging to climb."

Hank listens as Clark talks around the real problem. He complains about work. He'd moved to the City to work as an actor just as the pandemic hit. Theatres closed and television and film work stalled. His job as a waiter ended as well. Hank wants to say "Jesus, Clark, you are describing what every actor in the whole fucking Country is goin' through!" But, Hank simply listens, and offers another Butterfinger, which quickly and noisily disappears.

Clark finally shares the root of his despair. He tells Hank that his three year old boy was abruptly taken back to Kentucky. The boy's Mom loves another man who she claims to be the child's biological father. Tears come again, gut heaving sobs.

"Shit fuck!" Hank hurts his hip as he reaches for an old tissue buried in a jean's pocket. Clark is stunned out

of his grief for a moment hearing this perplexing out-burst. "That was my hip talking. Sorry." Henry offers the tissue to Clark who looks at the tissue and politely refuses with a slight shake of the head. Henry wipes his own eyes and nose.

Words, tears, periods of silence except for the crunch of Butterfingers continue into the early morning. It's after 2:00 am; the men have been silent for a while. Hank pushes Clark's hair away from his face and kisses him gently on the forehead, then rises from the cold bench with difficulty. Clark assists him. "Can you get home O.K., Uncle Hank?" In his trademark character voice Hank robustly replies, "Oh, hell yes - try and stop me." Hank then takes Clark by the shoulders and asks, "What are you going to do now, my boy?" Clark's reply: "I'm going to climb the tree, Uncle Hank."

Hank watches Clark leave the park. He picks up the Butterfingers box, empty now except for wrappers, and tosses it in the recycle bin near the park's entrance. The walk up 6th to 34th will be longer, and even though it's very chilly now, Hank is warmed by Clark's parting embrace. He will get home, pour a Bourbon and call Larry. He will say, "I've done what I could."

