**MICHAEL RITTENBERRY’S BEST CHRISTMAS**

--“I want to get up to see him,” I said. “You stay right where you are, William, and pull those covers up over your head,” Ma said. “When he gets in here, he’s not going to be any fit sight for you to look at.”

 Erskine Caldwell

 “The Night My Old Man Come Home”

My *Webster’s Dictionary* defines *idiot savant* as “a mentally defective person with an exceptional skill or talent in a special field, as a highly developed ability to play music or to do arithmetic calculations.” *Webster’s*, however, does not pretend to be politically correct, reaffirming merely past usage. The current politically correct term is simply *savant*, despite the fact that all fifty of the known savants in the world as of 2007 have certain kinds of mental impairments.

Michael Rittenberry has been bagging my groceries at the Kroger grocery on College Station Road and loading them first into my robin-egg blue Toyota and now my burgundy-toned Toyota since shortly after I moved to a place just off Morton Road on the east side of Athens, Georgia, in 1993. At first, I would hand him my keys, describe the car, and indicate where I was parked. After the first two or three times, he would grab the keys and proceed directly to the parking lot while I was still paying. He would have my driver’s side door open, awaiting my faithful tip. I would let him carry out the smallest plastic bags, even sometimes only a copy of *USA Today,* costing 75 cents, plus Michael’s $2.00 tip, occasionally in the form of a $2.00 bill, which at first bewildered him. I was genuinely surprised by his unexpected ability to remember and locate my car no matter where I happened to park, as Michael Rittenberry exhibited no obvious learning disabilities by his general deportment.

Then, I did not know that Michael could be classified as an idiot savant—I mean savant—certainly not based merely upon his car-lot-location-finding proficiency. I soon realized that my car was hardly the only one he could recognize for the many Kroger customers.

Over time I came to know him better.

Michael lived with his mother in an apartment in Athens Gardens Townhouse Homes, an edge-of-town public housing complex off Lexington Road. A sign at the entrance reads: “Loud Noise Prohibited.” His mother was on social security disability. Michael’s job was essential to their economic well-being. For several years Michael walked the 2.2 one-way miles to work and back. One day a few days after I had met him, he proudly announced that he now owned a white pickup truck. Just before Christmas, my wife and I would buy his mother and him a frozen ham or a turkey. He was a special guy.

One day, when Michael’s white pickup was in the shop for repair at the Chevron station across from Kroger, he asked if I could give him a ride home, as his 7:00 a.m. to 2 p.m. shift was just over. I obliged, knowing he could have walked.

When we arrived at the apartment, his real reason for asking for a ride became apparent: “Want you to meet mother,” he said. “She’s goin’ to thank you for the Christmas stuff.” I said, “Good, I’d like to meet her.” He said, “She hurts in her bones.”

Mrs. Bessie Rittenberry was a small, crumpled-up lady, maybe 60 years old. She greeted me warmly with a gentle hug and asked me to sit. She turned to Michael and mentioned that Bill had stopped by and said, “He wants you to call him. He has some new CD recording or something.”

After a few minutes of polite conversation, Mrs. Rittenberry asked, “I think Michael said you had a wife, don’t you?” I said, “Yes, her name is Emily.” She continued, “We’d like you to stop by for some ice cream sometime over the holidays. Now that Michael has a truck, he can bring it home from Kroger and not have it melt. Bi-Lo over there, it don’t carry none of the Kroger brand. Anyway, it’s made by Bryers, and it’s a bunch cheaper.” I took the phone number and said I’d check with Emily and let her know.

I was totally unprepared for what happened next. Michael said to me, “Bill just lives across the drive. Come with me. I want to surprise you.” Not having the wildest idea as to what was about to transpire, I said, “O.K., for just a minute.” Fortunately I had nothing from Kroger that was melting.

Bill let us in. Michael forgot to introduce me, so I thrust forward my hand, saying, “Bill, I’m Jim Wheeler.” Bill played the CD, a country song I had never heard.

Here’s the bombshell. Michael sat down at the piano and proceeded to play the entire song, like me having heard it only once and never before. I was utterly flabbergasted. Michael was visibly elated at my wonderment, evidently showing on my face. Michael volunteered, “I can do things with a piano. I wish I had one.”

It was a few days before Christmas when I called Mrs. Rittenberry to ask if we might come over in the afternnon. She seemed delighted.

I had of course told Emily about Michael’s remarkable musical ability, but we had no inkling of the astonishment we were about to experience when we heard the gripping account of a most unanticipated guest.

That Christmas Eve Day, as they call it down South, or the day before Christmas, Michael’s long-gone father suddenly and unexpectedly showed up at the door. Michael, about five when his father had left, had no real recollection of his dad.

We were told all the sordid particulars of the visit. Michael’s sister, Yolanda, from across Athens town, happened to be there at the time of his visit. She was there at the time of his visit. She was with us there now, adding colorful and vivid details to complement the outlandish recounting of events.

Here is the story in my own words:

Father Morris Rittenberry arrived downright inebriated. He first attempted to provide a history of where he had been and what he had done those past 33 years. The account was garbled, disjointed, and generally incoherent. He was just passing through. Michael was curious to meet him and warmed up to him quickly, but older sister Yolanda was standoffish. Michael finally took him over to Bill’s apartment and played the piano for his dad, who was bewildered and nearly speechless. “Who learned you that?” he inquired.

Michael was ecstatic and said, “I’m glad to see you, Dad. Please buy me a piano like this one.”

I will not recount the less pertinent events and inconsequential conversation, except to quote again, however, from Erskine Caldwell’s “Georgia Boy” short story: “I didn’t know my old man could make such a racket.”

The unexpected, out-of-the-bolt visit would result in the goose that laid the golden egg.

Was it guilt or extra cash, hopefully not from a robbery? Mr. Rittenberry arranged to have a piano delivered to the Athens Garden Townhouse Homes three days after Christmas.

Michael Rittenberry, the phenomenal idiot savant immensely enjoyed and would always treasure this, his best Christmas ever.

And yes, the ice cream and brownie cookies with walnuts were delicious.

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays, Michael, Mrs. Rittenberry, and Mr. Rittenberry, wherever you are.