

## UNIT 2.4

# The Neighborhood Thief

**St. Patrick**—the patron saint of Ireland. Curiously, he has also been associated with liquor. His feast day, March 17, is a holiday on which great quantities of beer are consumed.

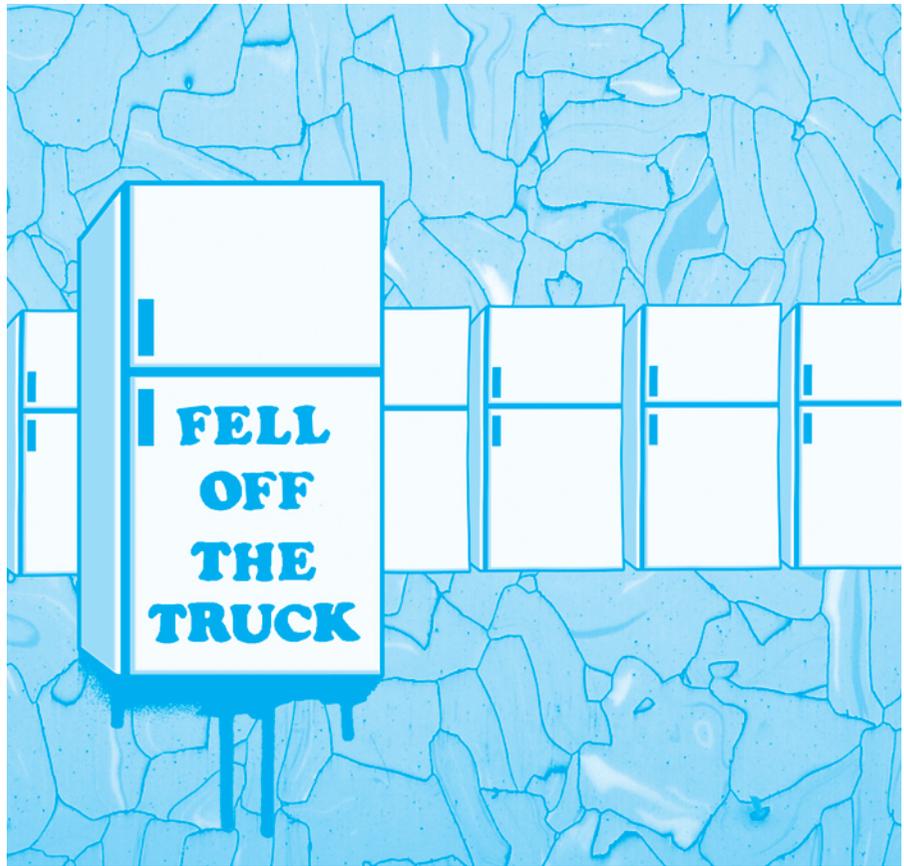
**grappa**—a very strong liquor made from the remains of the grapes after winemaking.

**recalcitrant**—resistant to authority

St. Patrick was a neighborhood saint with a special function. He was the guardian angel of the liquor cabinet and the wine cellar. Of course, no one in our upper low class area except Tony Eposito's father Salvatore had a wine cellar, and Mr. Eposito's fiery grappa was in gallon jugs. The families in the Jersey City Heights kept their prized liquor in the last cabinet of the family entertainment center in the living room, and there was always a statue of St. Patrick in front of the recessed door. The tradition was that only a spiritual blessing, a great triumph, or a tragedy of the worst ilk could occasion the removal of the statue from in front of the cabinet door. That meant that my father could drink the special whiskey hidden therein. If somehow the statue was missing, as it was sometimes when we cleaned up or danced too vigorously on the linoleum-clad floor that St. Patrick flew through the air and landed white-beard first on the ground, then anyone could drink the whiskey. But anyone wishing to pilfer my father's good stuff would receive a curse from St. Patrick and a beating from the old man.

I must say that I only saw St. Patrick removed from his perch three times in my youth. I always thought that St. Patrick had been installed in all the houses on Grace, Leonard, Poplar, Irving, and Hague Streets because Charlie O'Grady lived in the neighborhood. Charlie worked as a full-time delivery man for Sears and a part-time thief for everyone in the Heights. Whenever a family needed a large appliance such as a television, washer, dryer, or air conditioner, they would find Charlie in the street and say, "Now, Charlie, you know there's no rush, but if a washer falls off the truck, bring it over. Ours is on the brink." Wondrously, with all the stars aligned, somehow a washing machine would fall off the truck and right into Charlie's arms. He brought it up, all smiles, and my father moved the statue of St. Patrick, who had this look of benign acceptance probably perfected from having looked after a recalcitrant but fundamentally good-hearted people for so long. He understood why this savior in the brown Sears uniform rated so much that they took out the good whiskey.

Later on, my father explained, "He's no thief. A thief steals cigarettes from Tony's deli or a pair of stockings from the 5 and 10 store or Woolworth's. Charlie's like the Robin Hood of the appliance industry. He knows that people in the Heights can't afford Sears products. So he helps all of us out if he gets the chance. He gives it at a 75% discount." It all sounded so logical. Because the statue of St. Patrick was moved to celebrate Charlie's endeavors, in the Heights vernacular any grand theft



was referred to as a “Real St. Patrick’s Job.” And so it was that on a Saturday night on the walls of the park you could hear them talking about the other neighborhood thief, Brian Gioia: “You should have seen it. Gioia comes walking right down Kennedy Boulevard with a TV from two guys from Harrison right on his shoulders. He strolled right out of the store with it, like he owned it. A real St. Patrick’s Job.” And the poor saint, in his guard position in front of the Hennessey’s, must have shaken his head in pain at the misuse of his name. Gioia aspired to be like Charlie O’Grady, but he had a long way to go.

## **Reading Skills**

### *Literary Analysis*

Provide the following information for “The Neighborhood Thief.”

1. The characters:
2. The setting:
3. The plot:
4. The element of surprise:
5. The climax:
6. The theme:
7. The writing style:
8. Sources of humor: Did you find the story funny? Why? What are the elements that made you laugh?

## Reading Comprehension

### *Understanding Context*

Complete the following sentences based on the passage.

1. The statue of St. Patrick was placed in front of the liquor cabinet
2. St. Patrick was removed from his guard position when
3. Charlie O'Grady was able to steal large appliances because
4. When someone needed a new appliance in the neighborhood
5. Brian Gioia wanted to be
6. No one thought that what Charlie O'Grady was doing was wrong because
7. Inside the cabinet behind the statue of St. Patrick was

8. Charlie O’Grady was
  
9. A “Real St. Patrick’s Job” referred to
  
10. The people in the Heights neighborhood were able to buy appliances at a 75% discount because

## **Reading Skills**

### *Reflecting on What You’ve Read*

Think about the following questions, write your thoughts in your Reader’s Journal, and be prepared to participate in a classroom discussion.

1. Do you think that what Charlie O’Grady was doing was wrong? Is there any way to look at the situation that would justify his actions?
2. When you were growing up, did you know people who stole things? What was your reaction to their behavior?
3. Is stealing always wrong, or are there sometimes mitigating circumstances that reduce the severity of the deed?
4. Have you ever stolen anything? What did you steal? Did you get away with it? How did you feel afterward?

## **Description of the Illustration**

Examine the illustration that accompanies “The Neighborhood Thief.” What is going on in the illustration? What is the significance of the words appearing on the magnets on the refrigerator? Write a 12-sentence paragraph.

## ***The Toymaker***

***Isabella Cirilli***

**(1954– )**

Isabella Cirilli was born in Molfetta, Italy. She is the author of poetry and short fiction. Her poem “The City” (Book 1) won the W.F.U.V. Prize (Fordham University). Her autobiographical work *Papaveri* (written in Italian), about the immigrant experience, was published by Laterza in Bari, Italy.

In the faraway land of Nostalgia, there is a little village called Childhood Dreams. It is washed by the sea on one side and hugged by vineyards and olive and almond trees on the other sides. Life has been going on forever in this spot and one can easily notice this by the look of the worn-out stones in the streets, the low whitewashed houses, the expressive faces of the villagers, and most of all by the sea.

The sea has been the dominant force in the life of Childhood Dreams. It has given all that is needed to survive and more. The majority of the people are fishermen and fishing boat builders. These two trades, together with the sea, have created the triangle that balances the daily village life: the fishing boats are built so that the fishermen can catch fish and the sea makes all this possible. The landscape has always had colorful boats on the sea and white houses on the land; the swallows have always made nests in the roofs of the church bells; the sea gulls have always circled the dock, making the most wonderful noises while waiting for the fishermen to arrive with their plentiful cargo; the mothers have forever rocked their babies to the ancient melodies that sound like the sea waves and, because of all this, happiness has prevailed over sorrow.

This is why everyone in Childhood Dreams still remembers what happened to a boy named Marco, how sad life became for him, and how it all changed one day. . . .

Marco lived in Childhood Dreams with his mother and father in a little white house by the sea, since his father was a fisherman. Both parents loved Marco because they had wanted a child for many years and looked upon him as a little miracle when he came. All his little wishes were granted and all the affection in the world was always shown to him. Marco realized that this treatment was truly special, so he appreciated all his parents did for him and became aware of those who were less fortunate than he.



One day a terrible tragedy happened: his father was injured in a storm while fishing and was told by the doctor that he would never walk again. When a fisherman is told that he can no longer fish, life can seem so sad, and that is exactly what happened to Marco's father. He stayed in his room and looked at the sea all day long. He became silent and one could almost know what he was thinking by the look on his face. So wrapped up in his own problems was he that little by little he came to pay less attention to Marco and this caused the boy a great deal of pain. Marco's mother tried in vain to cheer her husband up and Marco tried to talk to his father, but nothing seemed to work.

The real concern for the sad fisherman was money. How was he going to take care of his family without a job? His friends would visit him with baskets of fruit, vegetables, and fish. He would smile faintly at them and thank them, but when they were gone, he would once again fall into despair. Many months passed by and only now did he realize that he had been selfish and neglected his son Marco. By this time Marco's toys had broken or he had become too old for them. Marco's friends now played with other young people because Marco had no new toys to share with them. As a result of this, the children gave him a new nickname: "The Poor Boy."

Marco's father used a wheelchair and was able to move himself tentatively around the house. He spent more time with Marco, but he also knew that whatever money the family had left was needed to buy

food and other essentials. Toys were at the bottom of the list and the boy's upcoming birthday was going to be a very sad day in comparison with his previous ones when he would receive a special gift he had looked forward to all year long.

One day, Marco's father received a special visit from a man named Giacomo. Giacomo was a very old man, and his years were written in the folds of his sun-baked face. He had spent nearly all his life in the shipyard building the most colorful and efficient fishing boats under the sun and his hands were full of calluses where they had held the hammer and saw. The old man's eyes were the color of the sea and his hair was white like the old houses in the village. Everyone respected Giacomo and welcomed his company since he was an honest and wise man and Marco's father sat with him and decided to vent his troubles. For the first time in months, he let all his feelings out almost as if Giacomo held the key to his heart and was now unlocking it.

Marco's father had a pressing problem: he wanted to give Marco something special for his birthday but with money lacking, he did not know what to do. He asked old Giacomo for advice. The old man gave it a little thought and finally suggested that Marco's father should use the scrap wood left over from the shipyard to build some wooden toys. Marco's father was delighted at the idea and decided to start building the toys as soon as Giacomo brought the wood over. While Marco was at school, his father started to build the most marvelous toys. Most of the models came from the memories of his childhood when everyone played with wooden toys. His recollections were the principal tool, and lots of figures began to take shape. He made a carriage with two horses, three puppets, a train, a clown who clapped hands, a castle with soldiers, a house, ten pins and a ball, a scooter, and a fishing boat.

Marco noticed a difference in his father's behavior but could not define what the change was. One thing was certain: his father seemed stronger, more confident, and strangely happy. For the first time in a long while, Marco's father was tired at night and was able to sleep peacefully. The toys were a big secret for Marco to discover on his birthday, and that day was arriving fast.

One by one the toys were finished and stood in a neat row in front of Marco's father. Each one had a special meaning and he was now imagining what Marco was going to feel at the first sight of them. His eyes swept across the room over and over again, and he finally realized that something was missing. It was color! The toys were indeed special, but what child does not glitter at the sight of the brightest reds, blues, yellows, greens, and oranges? Something had to be done fast, but he needed paint. Without money, where was he going to get it? He confided his fears to his wife who in turn went to visit Giacomo and made him aware of the problem. Giacomo came once again to visit

Marco's father with a cart full of paints and brushes: these were all he had left from the time he used to paint his fishing boats, but it was more than enough to paint Marco's toys. Marco's father was elated, thanked the old man for his kindness, and, on the nearest occasion, he began to paint the toys.

The colors, once used for the fishing boats, seemed to have magical powers because with every stroke of the brush every toy assumed a new character. They looked alive and happy and were sure to make his beloved child jump with joy. When he was finished, Marco's father put the toys to dry in the sea breeze and, looking at the clock, saw that it was already time for his boy to come home from school. Marco's birthday was in a week. All was done, but waiting was going to be difficult.

While Marco's father was counting the days with increasing joy, Marco was dreading his birthday. He knew the financial situation at home was bleak, so for him to expect a toy was asking too much. He was resigned to spending the day with his parents and he promised himself to try to smile, but all of this was very hard to do for a little boy.

On the night before his birthday, he went to sleep late, hoping to be really tired and maybe sleep throughout the following day. Maybe missing his birthday completely was not a bad idea after all. That night, while Marco was sleeping, his mother and father slowly brought the toys into his room and arranged them next to his bed. Then they quietly left the room. What a magical night!

It was Marco's birthday at last. Marco opened his eyes and at the sight of the toys, closed them again. It was definitely a dream, he thought, and kept his eyes closed so the vision would continue, but it did not. He opened his eyes again and saw all the toys. That was strange, he thought. People were supposed to dream with their eyes closed, not opened! Finally, he realized that the vision was real and he jumped out of bed touching, looking, holding, and squeezing all the toys he could. At the same time, he called out for his mother and father. His surprise was great, his joy immense. He had lots of fantastic toys the likes of which he had never seen before in his life. Where did they come from? Who had paid for them? Who had put them here? When his parents came into his room, he realized that they had something to do with them, and then his father told him the story. Marco was amazed at his father's talent and hugged him with tears in his eyes.

What a birthday! Marco was eager to tell all about the toys to his friends, who were sure that Marco was not telling the truth. When they finally saw the beautiful toys and learned that Marco's father had built and painted them all, they ran home to their parents and asked if they too could have the same toys as Marco. Soon the news traveled around the village and many people came to see the special toys. What was so

unusual about them was the fact that they seemed to come from a different age. No store sold them, and they were much sturdier than the plastic toys all the kids were breaking left and right. All the parents agreed that what Marco's father had achieved was truly remarkable and since their children were enchanted by the bright colors and charming shapes of the toys, they started to pour one request after another to have Marco's father build the same for them.

Marco's father accepted the proposals and soon started to build lots of toys in his house. Soon he put the sign "Toymaker's Shop" on his barn, and his days became filled with work. His pride was regained, and he was now able to buy food and clothes for his family again because he had a job.

Marco's father built the toys from wood, glue, and paint, but he also added one other material, love, which is a special ingredient that makes all things work better. From desperation came hope, from hope came determination, from determination came inspiration, from inspiration came success, and from success came peace and happiness.

The Toymaker, as everyone fondly calls Marco's father in the village of Childhood Dreams, works by the sea and makes toys all day long. The sound of his hammer and saw is heard in the area, but it soon mixes with the notes of the shipbuilders to form a sweet symphony. At night, though, only the sound of the sea's waves is heard, and the village people tuck themselves under the covers and listen to the ancient lullaby the sea has sung since the beginning of time. The mothers rock their babies like the waves and sing the same songs of the sea . . . soon all is still; that is, except the sea, that pulsating hearth, the reminder that life goes on and tomorrow will be a brand new day.

### **Reading Comprehension**

Answer each question in complete sentences.

1. What bad thing happens to Marco's father at the beginning of the story?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. How does he react to this tragedy at first?

3. What happens to change his life?
  
4. How do Marco's classmates treat him after his father's tragedy?
  
5. What role does old Giacomo play in the story?
  
6. How does Marco's father regain control of his life?
  
7. What happens on Marco's birthday?
  
8. How do the opinions of Marco's friends change after this birthday?
  
9. How does this change in his friends alter the situation for Marco's father?
  
10. What is the setting of the story? Why is it so important?

### **Third-Person Narrator and Point of View**

While not an actual character in the story in the way first-person narrators are, third-person narrators may interject their ideas into the literary piece through presentation of plot elements, delineating characters, and most of all through distinctive language. The author's ideas and their presentation is called **point of view**. Indicate the narrator's point of view at these points in the passage.

1. the attraction of the sea
2. the character of Giacomo
3. Marco's "friends"
4. Marco's father in the time just after the accident
5. the quality of wood toys
6. the importance of a birthday to a young boy
7. how important hope is in life
8. the difference between modern toys and Marco's father's toys

## **Text-Based Writing Assignment**

### *Overcoming Adversity*

“The Toymaker” is a story about overcoming adversity and succeeding against the odds. Write a story about how you or someone you know was able to overcome a serious obstacle to make progress in life.

## **Description of the Illustration**

Examine the picture that accompanies “The Toymaker.” What is going on in the picture? How does it relate to the story? Write a 12-sentence paragraph.