

The Birthday Gift

The boy blinks, his small face tilting up, then down, the brilliance of the disk overpowering. It forms purple spots on his closed eyelids—its heat makes him sleepy. The Farmall sputters, the flapper on the exhaust pipe snaps and he opens his eyes. The sled is now several feet ahead.

“What’er ya doing? the father asks. Ya ain’t supposed to look at that.”

The boy walks up to the sled and drops his stone onto other stones. It makes a dull clack. “Dad, what’s it made of?”

“What is what made of?”

“The sun.”

“Don’t they teach that stuff in school?”

“Sort of, but it don’t mean nothing.”

“Well let’s see. Last I heard it’s a burning ball of gas—a lot bigger than the earth, though.”

The boy struggles with a large stone, flipping it end over end up to the edge of the sled, its one side encrusted with partially dried clay. Somehow the explanation is not satisfactory, and he decides to get more specific. “So it’s not solid at all?”

“No, I guess not.”

“How far away is it?”

“Long, long ways away—millions of miles away.”

“It don’t look that far.”

“Well it is.”

“Could anybody reach it?”

“Nooo,” the father replies, shutting the tractor’s engine down and glancing at the sun. “Well I suppose someday, with the right rocket ship. But you’d burn up before ya got to it.” He jumps off the tractor to help muscle the rock onto the sled.

His father stands against the sun and the boy squints, looking up from beneath the brim of his baseball cap. He points to a stone. “Why’s this one all scratched up?”

The father laughs and rests his hand on the boy’s head. “Now think on it a little bit. Why ya suppose we’re getting all these rocks out a here? The scratches are from our plows and disks riding over ’em—dulling ’em out, getting wedged, messing up the planters.”

At four o’clock the sun is past its peak, but it’s also the hottest part of the day. The father reaches for the Tupperware pitcher, its once translucent surface darkened long ago by the dusky soil. “Let’s take a water break, then unload these rocks. We can just dump ’em for now, then get ready for supper. How’s that sound, son?”

“Good, Dad. Hey Dad, how come we don’t go fishing

anymore. I'm tired of eating chicken all the time."

"Fishing hasn't been much good—the river's changed." He leans his arms on top of a tire fender and stares toward the swamp. "Yup, things are always changing."

"Some things stay the same, don't they?"

"No, not really. Look at yourself—yer getting taller just about every day." He smiles and then hands his son the water pitcher. Back on the tractor's metal seat, he pushes in the starter and the throaty hum of the engine returns.

The boy rides on top of the rocks, knocking a few off by accident. He doesn't say anything—the workday is pretty much over and the tractor is rolling ahead now at a higher speed.

Past the end of a hedge, the rock pile comes into view, sitting in the middle of a field. It must be at least six feet tall and spreads out for several yards in all directions. The boy's grandpa began it a long time ago. Normally they would heave each rock up toward the top to keep it tight. Today his father backs up to the pile, then gets down to raise the sled's bed using two car jacks—they're rigged together at the front. They click upward and the rocks slide to the low end. Back in his seat he pops the clutch, the tractor jumps ahead and the rocks tumble off. He watches his son lower the bed. At a certain point the jacks start to ratchet down automatically, the connected handles jerking up and down with a rapid fire clicking. He

shuts the engine off, climbs down and stares at the boy. The boy stares back, motionless.

“Yer going to be twelve years old in a few days. I’d like ya to drive the tractor back for me.”

He knew he heard right; with the engine down there was no mistaking the words. “Sure Dad, I can do it.”

“Well, come on then, I’ll help ya up.” His father raises his left arm as a guide and he climbs into the seat. “Mash down on those pedals,” he says. His legs are long enough—that’s a good sign.

“Should I start it now?”

“No, I got to explain something first.”

His father proceeds to tell him about the gears, the clutch, the correct throttle speed, and how to steer and use the double brake pedals to pivot around tight. The boy starts the engine. He moves the shift into first gear and releases the clutch; the machine sputters forward into the disked field. The engine starts to bog.

“Give her more gas, son.” The engine gets louder and his father has to walk fast to keep up. “Start to turn now, just use the wheel, not too tight. Watch them ruts.”

The boy cuts into a breeze and feels the heat of the exhaust across his face, the smell of its spent gasoline burnt forever now in his brain. He turns a bit too tight and the front tires plow

straight ahead through the dirt before they catch and jerk the machine to the left.

“Too fast,” the father yells. “Try using that left brake next time.”

He rides high in the seat, floating above the field, all seeing and all powerful. But all too soon his father waves him over and the boy follows him to the lane. Walking ahead and a tad to the left, his father turns frequently to check on him.

Once back at the farm, they unhitch the sled and the father has him practice backing into the shed. “Should I shut it off?” he asks.

“Naw, bring it out here on the drive. I’m fixing to hose it down.”

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“I got out some fish,” the father says. He drops the catfish fillets into a fry pan and they crackle and hiss in the hot oil. In another skillet sliced potatoes are already frying and in a saucepan he melts a frozen mass of peas. Soon they are ready to eat. The boy knows enough not to ask too many questions at supper. His father eats slowly, in silence, staring toward the middle of the table. The boy stares at the spot as well. A pair of ceramic salt and pepper shakers used to sit there—brightly colored chickens—but these are gone now.

“Did ya like the fish?”

“Yes sir.”

“Okay then. Go out and feed the animals and I’ll clean up the dishes. Son, you did a great job with the tractor today. I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks, Dad. I drove good, didn’t I?”

“Yes you did.” The father smiles for a second and then shoves his chair back from the table to get up.

When the boy returns into the house, he notices a flat box on the dining room table. The clutter had been pushed aside to make a spot for it. His heart jumps when he sees it’s the Houdini Magic Kit, containing seventy-five magic tricks plus the magic wand, just like the one in the catalog. He runs into the living room where his father sits on the couch, watching the news. That couch used to be covered in plastic to keep it clean.

“Dad, you remembered!” He hugs his father.

“That’s the one you wanted now?”

“Yeah, it is. Thanks.”

“Y’all be getting a party at school on Monday, won’t ya?”

“Yeah. It don’t last but a few minutes, but that’s okay.”

“Well, I’m not good at arranging that kind of thing, like your mother would’ve done.”

The boy tromps upstairs to his bedroom. He rips off the Cellophane wrap—it’s no hand-me-down gift, and lifts off the

box top. It's crammed full. He goes from the instructions to the various trick components and back again, impatiently trying to take it all in, like a bum at a banquet. He fiddles with the disappearing coin trick, wanting to see how it works inside, but ends up breaking the plastic drawer. He's only temporarily disappointed because there's so much more. He practices the magic hanky trick to try on his father. It's almost dusk; he knows this is his dad's time, but it's not very dark yet, and besides, he wants to ask him about driving the tractor tomorrow.

He leaves out the front door to check on the Farmall. The old machine is still wet and the faded red paint looks shiny, clean and beautiful. He walks around to the back of the house. The sun has turned the tops of their pine trees orange and spring peepers call from down in the woods. His father stands with one leg resting on the bench of their picnic table. His right forearm leans on his knee and he shakes his head from side to side, mumbling. A pint bottle along with some tools and parts sit on the table—he was always trying to fix things there. The boy hesitates.

“Dad?”

The father snaps his head toward him. “What'er ya doing out here, can't ya see I'm busy? Can't ya see? Get ready for bed. I'll see ya tomorrow.”

“Oh—sure, see ya tomorrow.” He turns and walks back into the house.

His feelings are not really hurt—he knows not to interrupt his father, he knows the routine, it’s always the same. He plays with the magic tricks in his room until his eyelids grow heavy. He packs them back in their box and then slides it under the bed. Resting his head on a dingy pillowcase, he stares at the ceiling. Within the fading light he shuts his eyes and smiles. He imagines driving the Farmall again, sitting high above the land, his father’s presence felt somewhere in the distance, shining bright and warm, watching, until the hypnotic singing of frogs seeps into his reverie like mist, dream-like, and he finds himself flying.