

10/23/2021

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Today there would probably be a scummy milk bottle on the chair, and the jockstrap his brother wore to practice on the trampoline.

He'd not paid too much attention when he'd been in grade school. He'd left the house on his bicycle every morning in the fall and spring, and come home when he felt like it. Winters he had walked or hitched. And never bringing people around, not having any reason, he'd not minded the crazy look of the house. But the day the bus had stopped right where the flower bed used to be, he'd been gagged by the sight. The house had no roof to speak of, just a flat top, like a box. That's how his house had looked, like a box. Nothing about the house ran straight beside anything else; not the line of a sill, not the edge of a shingle, not the set of a doorjamb, and especially not one slat of one Venetian blind. Worst of all, though, was the truck his father had sitting on blocks in the side yard, a forty Chevy with the words *Norwalk Volunteer Rescue Corps* painted on the door. The old man enjoyed what flash was left over from the war effort. He'd bought the truck from a wrecker, and said he wanted to fix it up for the lawn maintenance business he ran, but the carcass had sat undisturbed in the side yard for several years now.

Standing by the strangers' mailboxes, he waited until the blinker light stopped flashing, and the bus moved on out of sight before he turned and walked down the road after it. He'd always followed this road home from grade school—years ago it seemed now—but it was only this fall he'd gone to junior high. When he was small, all along here it had been open country.

Home now, he found the mail was still in the box by the driveway. His father hadn't picked it up at lunchtime. Walter hoped that didn't mean it had been one of his mother's bad days. It could be simply that his father had been in a hurry to get going after lunch. He left it alone himself, probably most of it was the usual Rural Box Holder envelopes filled with penny coupons and news of some sale at a hardware store. He didn't get much mail anymore since he had quit the "y" downtown. They had always sent him quite a bit. *"Hi fellas! Another of our very popular Lad 'n' Dad Nites is on the calendar. Just a reminder. Sign up pronto."* He'd heard what they were like: a bottle of Dr. Pepper and some show-off guys in ladies' makeup doing a dance.

He adjusted his face into the expression he favored for entering a strange classroom at school, and eased his body through the front door, still screened, though it was growing chilly with the autumn weather. His mother was asleep on the studio couch in the front room. She was a large woman with no special shape to her face or her body either. Some of her hair was black and some of it gray. She wore a knit cotton T-shirt, taut across her heavy breasts, and a lint-covered skirt was bunched about her thighs and buttocks as she slept.

He decided against getting something to eat in the kitchen. The noise of the icebox door closing might waken her. He would have a hot dog later at the golf range where he sometimes worked after school. He picked his way out again through the breezeway to the garage, and there among the

Ann Parsons A Young Person with Get-Up-and-Go

EVERY DAY WALTER GOT OFF the school bus at the stop before his own, where an asphalt street cut up the hill to the left and out of sight into a thicket of pin oaks. By then, no other riders from the neighborhood remained on the bus to look from the windows and ask questions about his roundabout homecoming. The houses up here among the trees were carefully tended, fussed over.

If he stayed aboard, as he had the first day of school, the bus stopped next some distance down the road, right in front of his own driveway—what there was of it. When the town had widened this road, even the narrow flower bed in front had been erased. He remembered that he had been in the third grade when his mother had bought flower seeds from some Girl Scouts who came to the front door. She had worked for most of a week, rooting out the stones from the patch between the driveway and the front steps. Gardening was tough going, as the mailman had remarked each day when he saw his mother stooped over in the sun. It was no wonder she had given up the garden almost before the acid soil had poisoned and turned yellow the first young shoots. Then they'd widened the road, and the bare patch of ground went, too.

When the bus had stopped that first day, people sitting in their seats could look right through the gaping Venetian blinds into the sumporch. One of the blinds was stuck and had been since his father had first installed it a long time ago. The slats in the others had warped and split with the dampness of the climate, so that it might as well have been bare glass sitting there, face to face with the bare glass of the bus windows. He bet they could see the dirty old daybed his brother slept in and probably the pin-up pictures brought home from the garage where his brother worked. His brother's bed was never made, and the only other furniture on the porch was an old metal lawn chair that had spent some winters in the backyard.

mowers and spray guns—the tools of his father's trade—among the broken furniture and dried whitewash in cans, he found his bicycle. He slung one leg across the leatherette seat, and hopped and wobbled on his other the short length of the driveway to the road.

As he had yanked his bike from the tangle in the garage, his eye had fallen upon the spavined old sofa he could remember standing in the front room when he was small. That was all lots of people he knew had to sit on in their playrooms, just old couches, no good anymore for upstairs. Their mothers called such places the family room—often just a corner of the basement, the walls nothing but cement, dressed up with peach-colored paint. They weren't such nice places really. It was a matter of what they were named—in those same houses Walter was asked if he wanted to "wash his hands."

If he were to ask anyone over after supper, after dark, they wouldn't see the outside of his house, not even its shape. He could do it before it grew really cold. He could fix up the garage to be as good as a family room any day. He might even paint it, the inside, anyway.

The driving range was always busy late in the day, jammed with high-school boys from Darien (money to burn), and women shagging balls after their lesson with the pro. Walter made seventy-five cents an hour walking back and forth at the end of the lot and gathering up the balls in a bucket. As he walked, he wheeled along a square shield of wire mesh, keeping it always between himself and the flying balls. It wasn't bad work when the weather was clear, and on rainy days he didn't show up. It gave him a good feeling, spying out and gathering the white balls that lay hidden in the frost-puffed meadow. He crossed the field on the diagonal and slowly wobbled back again. The creaky wire cage was heavy, and he advanced at a deliberate speed. It was actually not necessary to push it quite so slowly as he did, but he found the pace right for thinking.

Castagna, the proprietor of the range, had manners that made even Brown-Nose Boske, the biggest patsy in the ninth grade, want to cheat him. Walter took his time, stooping, taking up the balls, feeling their impact make his pail ring and vibrate in his hands. He felt bound to walk even slower, finally, as he approached the counter where Castagna sat on a high stool, doling out scarred balls and shabby drivers.

"Enjoying your stroll, kid? Maybe you got this operation mixed with a Easter egg hunt, huh?"

"Mr. Castagna, I got to go now. I got homework my mother says I got to get done, or I can't work at all anymore."

Castagna didn't answer, but continued arranging putters in their notched rack. He wiped the phony trophies with which he decorated his cubbyhole, fitted two pretty women with irons, and finally, still not speaking, sliced some coins down the counter in payment, since he already had the cash drawer open to receive the women's money. Otherwise he'd have made Walter wait even longer. That's how he was

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Walter wheeled his bike through the parking lot, one tire screeching against the paintless fender, and took off, pedaling fast, and not caring if Castagna noticed that he wasn't headed toward home at all, but toward the shopping center. It stood by the railroad right-of-way, a flimsy horseshoe of brick storefronts with painted white gables and posts like those on the Congregational Church up the road.

He took out the famous-make steerhide wallet that had caught his eye at the discount house, and counted out the bills there. He selected a brush and a lamb's wool roller of the best quality, its softness sheathed in a plastic wrapper. The paint samples were pasted in books the size of the dictionary in the school library, the pages rich and heavy with the shining squares, all colors. He finally settled on a lightish tan, with nothing fruity about it.

He waited while a lady tried some collars on a poodle, and when the man behind the counter was free, he ordered three quarts of Sandalwood Buff. Who'd have guessed paint would cost so much?

"Better be sure that's the shade your mother has in mind, Sonny. We can't take it back, once I got it mixed, after all." The man thought he was some little kid.

"My mother said I could pick one all by myself."

"Oh, fixing up your room, huh? That's get-up-and-go. I'd like to see more young people today take such interest in their home surroundings. Most of 'em won't pick up their dirty drawers off the carpet on their way out the door. For you, friend, I throw in a brand-new stick to stir with, on the house."

They all sounded alike, once they got old.

He bought a sack of jelly doughnuts in the bakery next door. He ate them as he pedaled slowly home along the Post Road, keeping an eye out for wild-driving commuters who swarmed out of the station parking lot, in those beat-up cars they thought were so great for getting to work.

His father's truck was parked in the driveway, beaded with the mist of dried insecticide that pocked the underlying veil of lime. There was no print in washing the truck, his father often said; a sensible man confined his attention to the windshield. The truck's dull hide caused his brother's Ford, parked alongside, to shine all the brighter, with the glow of true enamel, rich and deep. Even the mudguards hanging at rest now glowed as if they had been rubbed with shoe polish.

Walter squeezed between the truck and the car, and wheeled his bicycle into the shadowy garage. He hauled open the screen door, nearly opaque with a haze of dust, and padded on noiseless sneakers into the back hallway.

The house smelled of rust; and this smell settled upon you most heavily in the dark hall.

The three others sat at the kitchen table where they always ate. The table had a white enamel top, and years of serving plates from heavy pans balanced on the edge had chiseled and gnawed at the rim until it was a wobbly scallop of dark blue chips.

"I'd like to think people who come home for their dinner at 7 P.M. has

got a good reason," his father said, rising from the table. He was on his way out. "But I'd be surprised a person I knew *did* have a good reason. I've never seen him *work* more than a half hour at a time, so which was it tonight, movies or the roller rink?" His father had a very loud voice from shouting over the roar of lawn mowers and power saws all day long. He did a lot of talking, too, without really expecting to hear an answer. Silence, Walter knew, was the best reply at these times, but someday he'd tell old Lardass what he could do.

Walter slid half a can of ravioli out into his plate and replaced the can in the saucepan of simmering water. They all came in at different times, so each helped himself, and left the rest of the can for the next person. If he ran out, he just opened a new one. Ravioli was one thing Walter couldn't get enough of. Even after the jelly doughnuts, he ate a whole can. His father had just finished, and was, as usual, in a big hurry to get down to the rowboat owned by a friend while it was still light enough to coast out into the harbor for crappies. Then he'd spend the evening drinking beer at the Polish American Yacht Club right next to the dock where the oyster boats came in. What a stink! His father usually gave the crappies to the man who owned the boat, since he didn't like cleaning them. "You feel like fish," his father said, "you can buy fishburgers all over town."

Tonight it was a help that the old man was in such a rush. He could count on his brother to take off any minute, too. Lately his brother had been hanging around at the airport. Some fool who was trying to set an altitude record for a flyweight Piper Cub needed another man riding along as a witness. They hadn't made it yet, but his father told him not to worry—they'd make the headlines one way or another any day now.

"So long, Shithead," his brother said, in a voice that was not unfriendly, and, moving his arm in a throwaway salute, headed out. In a minute he heard the roar of revved-up carburetors, and then he was gone.

His mother sat pushing a piece of bread around and around her plate with one finger, making stripes in the tomato sauce.

"Come on, Mamma, finish your supper so I can clean up."

The last one out washed her stuff—that was the rule—or it just got hard as cement sitting in the sink until they ran short of plates. She didn't eat much, and she left most of the food on her plate. She liked to play with it and mix it all up together: jelly, canned macaroni salad, and stew, for instance. Try to get *that* off when it's stood a couple of days in a dish.

She gave him one of her smiles, or rather, he thought, gave it to the sleeve of his shirt. (Her smiles were like the smile of a lady at the grocery store when she saw her cart had you blocked—very polite.) She gave her plate a little nudge toward him to show him how sorry she was that she'd held him up, and attended to the circle she was making on the table with her finger. After a while, he knew she'd sit in the other room until he went to bed, when he would guide her by the arm, and she would get the idea, and go upstairs by herself. One thing he didn't have to worry about was that she'd *go off* into the road or anywhere outside. It made her afraid to go

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out of the house. Big tears would run along her nose, past the corners of her mouth, and fall like those in comic books, several drops at a time, raining down.

He rinsed their plates and forks, poured out the hot water from the pan on the stove, and wiped up the circle of tomato sauce from the white table. Then, very gently, he wiped the fingers lying beside it. If you were careful when you touched her, she didn't cry.

He was free after that to get to work in the garage. Beyond the screen door was off limits for her, and he returned to his planning when he heard it slam behind him. Even the trip through the breezeway was too far for his mother. He never need worry that she'd come out here and be laughed at, or make people afraid, either. Out here, people would be left strictly alone. Anybody wanted a smoke, he could go right ahead. A person could say what he pleased, too—anything that came to mind, without stopping first to look in the other room or listen for footsteps. He had a friend whose mother was a pest whenever they fooled around over there. Always running off about an electric train that had cost so much and now nobody played with it. *Playard* with it, Christ!

He started moving it out, all of it—a broken lawn mower, the old couch that stank of mice, garden tools and the electric edger, newspapers sticky with dampness, the hose in wild, unyielding loops that angled about every heavy object in the place. He dragged and shoved it all out into the driveway where he sorted it by destination. He'd need to have the driveway cleared so the cars could park when they came home. Some of his father's stuff he could pile in the old shed at the rear of the lot where the cow had been kept for a while. (She'd had an actually pretty face, that cow, but when her milk had been tested they said she had Bang's disease, and she'd been sold for dog food.)

He got most of the things stashed away, and the rest he piled by the side of the house in the darkness. The couch he planned to move back inside after he finished painting.

As it got late, he hurried, sweating even in the October coolness. It was a mess to move in the dark, all sharp edges and splinters. He kicked the hose out of the way finally, and threw his weight against the open garage door, but it wouldn't budge. The track had long ago been forced out of shape by the bulging mess within. Just having that door closed would make quite a difference in the looks of the place. He could work something out tomorrow. He turned out the light and left the garage, surprisingly black in its emptiness.

He was awakened as usual next day by the sound of the toilet's flushing. His father was sullen and slow in the morning and made certain with his racket that no one in the family outlept him. He stood in the kitchen this morning, leaning over the stove as if it were a roaring fire, and warmed himself as he fried an egg.

"Who's been stirring up trouble outside? Those are valuable supplies, worth a lot of money. People who got so much energy could put it to use helping their father, who, I might add, works a twelve-hour day many a

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time." Then he buttered the toast for his wife and put it on the table before her. He stroked her coarse hair, like wire. "How's Mama today? If you behave yourself, act like a good girl for me, when I get home noontime, I'll turn on the movie, and you can watch all afternoon."

When would his father quit kidding himself? She'd as soon watch the burner on the stove, or the drip from the faucet, as TV or anything else. They dealt with breakfast as they dealt with other meals, substituting a skillet of bacon grease for a pan of water. You dropped in whatever you felt like: bacon, bread soaked in milk, or eggs, removed them when done, and left the pan for the next man. The last one out washed up. If he didn't wash his face until he was leaving, he could cut out after breakfast ahead of his brother. His mother was always awake early, too. The first one in gave her a piece of bread and jelly. She'd sit there watching the flame on the gas stove until the last one finished, and turned it off. Then she'd go sit in the front room until his father came home for lunch. Why she was the first one up mornings, Walter couldn't say. She had all the time in the world.

He, on the other hand, was pushed for time, if he planned to catch the bus up the road. Missing it meant a long bike ride to school, so he'd better get it out right away—the thing he had on his mind. He'd better cut out the stalling and say it.

"Listen, Daddy, I thought I might fix up the garage, and have a few kids over some night before it gets too cold out. We wouldn't be in anybody's way or scare Mama. Just mess around and listen to the radio, or play some cards. I got lots of friends, people who been nice to me, and I'd like to pay them back."

His father flipped the egg, breaking the yolk, and the flame sputtered with the grease that flew in a fine hot spray from the pan. He hadn't yet, in all these years, learned to cook his breakfast egg for himself, and when he answered, the volume of his voice caused his wife to turn her eyes from the flame.

"Worries me enough, you hanging around with trash, without you don't bring them here. That's all this house needs is a bunch of free-loading bums on the premises. Between you and your brother, I'd come home some night and find we was living in a roadhouse."

Walter slammed out the front door, along the cement walk, and stood still, looking at the empty driveway. Only two round stains, side by side on the pavement, gave a sign that the truck and the Ford had ever stood there. The old pickup loomed up, dull within the shadowy garage. The gloss on the beet-red convertible, and its chrome, gleamed undiminished in the rusty-smelling dark.

After a time, he crossed the driveway, turned the corner into the side yard, and made his way over the hard-packed cinders of the place to the old blue truck sitting on its blocks. He opened the doors that worked so easily and silently, and climbed in, shutting them behind him. He heard the school bus lumber past, and shortly thereafter the wheeze of the lawn-maintenance service departing, then the roar of the special carburetors. When they had gone, there was no sound in the morning darkness.