Only Sissies Cry

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Abstract

SWINGING her bare feet to the lowest branch, Francie Olson slid out of the apple tree, skinned her elbow on the bark, and ran across the yard to meet Tom and Jo Ann Hutchcroft. She had never seen Jo Ann run so fast...
SWINGING her bare feet to the lowest branch, Francie Olson slid out of the apple tree, skinned her elbow on the bark, and ran across the yard to meet Tom and Jo Ann Hutchcroft. She had never seen Jo Ann run so fast. Why, she was almost keeping up with Tom.

"You just oughter see it, Francie," Tom panted.

"It's a great big red one with yellow stripes," little Jo Ann put in.

"Jo, you always got to tell everything," Tom complained. "Every time I start, you hafta butt in and—"

"What's red with yellow stripes?" Francie pushed sticky wisps of straight straw-colored hair from her face.

"The Morey girls' bicycle. It's got a basket and a kick stand and everything."

"A bicycle!" Francie lingered over the pleasant word. "How did they get it?"

"Their dad bought it. C'mon, let's go see it." Tom was motioning with his dust-streaked arm.

"We seen it once," Jo Ann puffed, her short, plump legs jerking to keep up with the longer ones of her brother and Francie. In single file, like three tow-headed Indians, they pattered across the dusty road and began running along the edge of the sidewalk. Once Francie stumbled and stepped on the hot cement. She believed Jud Elliott was right when he told her she could fry eggs on the sidewalks these days. The grass was brown and it scratched her feet. Yet on her birthday, the first day her mother had let her go barefoot, it had been soft and cool.

Francie saw it, over Jo Ann's head and between Jake Brown's legs—a long, streamlined bike with balloon tires. If only she could own a bicycle like that!

"Gol-lee!" Jake whistled when Mary Morey showed him the tiny siren on the front wheel. "Gol-lee! Boy-o-boy!"

"How much did it cost?" asked Jimmie Nelson.

Francie held her breath so she could hear Mary.
"Oh, about twenty dollars," Mary answered proudly.
Francie slipped away and walked home.
"Mom." She stood idly by the screen door, rubbing the hole which Mrs. Olson had carefully darned with black yarn.
"What is it, Francie?" her mother asked impatiently. She stopped kneading bread to wipe perspiration from her face with the back of her arm.
"I don't suppose I could have a bicycle, could I?" She examined the threads closely, listening for her mother's reply.
Mrs. Olson plunged her hands into the soft dough again. She spanked it smartly and placed it in the crock. Francie usually giggled when she heard the sharp "splnk, splnk," but this morning she didn't think how funny it was her mother should spank the bread.
"Pour some hot water into the wash bowl for me, Francie." Mrs. Olson rubbed the sticky flour mixture from her hands. "Who has a bicycle?" she asked finally.
"The Morey kids," Francie told her, straddling the kitchen stool. "Mr. Morey bought it in Des Moines."
"Francie, we don't have money enough to buy you a bicycle." Francie squirmed on the stool. She watched the water cloud with soap and flour.
"Why, mother?" Her voice was small and nervous.
Mrs. Olson looked at her quickly and then turned away. She drew a long breath, and when she faced Francie again, her eyelashes were shiny.
"Because the people Daddy does work for don't always pay him, Francie, and when they don't give him money, we don't have any." Mrs. Olson filled the teakettle and put it back on the stove.
"Why doesn't Daddy make them give him the money?"
"People don't have money to pay him, honey. They charge the cars and radios they have fixed, just as we have to ask Mr. Jones to wait awhile before we pay for the groceries. When the farmers whose tractors and plowshares Daddy has fixed get money for their corn, they'll pay us, and we can pay Mr. Jones, and he can pay for the things he buys." Francie couldn't be sure but she thought her mother said, "I hope!" "And the farmers have to have their machines go or they can't raise corn to sell."
Francie turned the water faucet on and off. She was thinking hard. If Mr. Seely, whose tractor she had "helped" Daddy fix last week couldn't pay Daddy, then he didn't have any money to
May, 1945

pay for the butter and vegetables they bought. But—

"Where did all the money go, Mother? Don't we have money in the bank? Don't other people have money in the bank?"

Mrs. Olson tried to smooth furrows from her frowning forehead with a water-roughened hand.

"Francie, people lost their money." Francie stared at her, puzzled. "No, I don't mean they forgot where they put it or dropped it some place," she hurried to explain. "A few years ago people seemed to have lots of money and they kept buying more and more things, believing they could pay for them. Then the stock market crashed, and no one seemed to have any money."

Francie wanted to ask what a stock market was, but her mother was pulling the shade against the terrible heat of the sun.

Just then the telephone rang and Mrs. Olson went to answer it. Francie rubbed her sweaty arm and brushed little rolls of moistened dust off. She put the stool under the sink and walked slowly to the door. She heard it bang listlessly behind her, its gray paint chipping off the heat-cracked boards.

Climbing up on the garage door, she rested her chin in her hands. The heat waves shimmered up from the garden and spread fanwise into the air, losing themselves. The western border of her little world, the long, rolling swells of corn topped near the edge of the sky with a round, dark green snake of trees, invited her to leave the heat and come to the woods beyond.

"If I only had a bicycle, I could. But Mother says there isn't any money." She climbed up on the roof. "Ugly old grasshopper, how did you get up here! Are you the one who ate holes in the rosebush Aunt Julie gave me?"

She dropped flat on her stomach, anchored her toes to a rough spot in the shingling and leaned far down to swing the door shut on the grasshopper. He burst with a snap and lay crushed on the top of the door. Francie looked at him with satisfaction.

"I'll ask Daddy at noon. Maybe he has some money Mother doesn't know about," she said hopefully as she climbed down from the roof.

"Mother," she opened the screen door and entered the kitchen again. "How do the Moreys have money to buy a bicycle when we don't?"

Mrs. Olson took a pan of cookies from the oven. "I don't know, Francie. Mr. Morey teaches at the college and he gets a regular salary every month." Her mother's voice was low and
mumbled, but Francie heard. "Maybe those girls will go without enough to wear and enough to eat this winter. Moreys can't afford bicycles any more than we can."

Francie felt almost like the time when she had fallen out of the Hutchcroft's pine tree and knocked all her breath out.

Just then Mr. Olson opened the door and Francie perched on the stool to watch him splash soap and water over his grease-grimy face. She loved to watch the dark rivulets that dripped off into the dirty water, leaving his face white and clean.

"Daddy," she twisted the corner of the towel around her index finger, "do you suppose you could get me a bicycle? Or maybe make me one?"

Mr. Olson rubbed his face in the linen towel and then looked at Francie's mother.

"You aren't big enough to ride a bicycle, are you?" he teased, but Francie knew his eyes weren't smiling.

"Aren't I?" she looked down at her long, skinny legs, longer than the rest of her, and back at him.

"Well, maybe so," he sighed, stretching out in the long chair with the paper. "But Daddy can't get you a bicycle just now, honey." He rattled the paper noisily.

"Daddy."

"Huhm?"

"Don't you have any money?"

Mr. Olson put down the paper. "I guess I could spare enough for an ice cream cone." He took out his billfold.

"I don't want an ice cream cone, Daddy. I want a bicycle. Mother says you don't have any money 'cause the farmers don't pay you."

He put his strong, brown arms, with little burns where the sparks from the welder had eaten through his coverall, around her thin waist and lifted her to the arm of the chair.

"Well, that's about right, Francie. You see the depression and now the drought . . ." Yes, Francie knew well what he meant by the drought. Every night all the neighbors came out of their back doors when the sun went down and looked at the sky. They didn't smile. The wrinkles in their foreheads squeezed deeper and they said, "Be another scorcher tomorrow." It had been that way last year, but not as bad as it had been two years before, in 1934.

"If it doesn't rain soon, Francie, the farmers may not get a
crop this year either. Then they'll have to borrow more money so they can buy seed in the spring. They'll have to have money to buy coal and food this winter, too."

Francie was silent a moment. "And you can't make me one, Daddy?" Daddy had always been able to make everything. Hadn't he built a crane for Joe Thomson's wrecker and made her a beautiful doll house with real stairs and railing?"

"'Fraid not, sweetheart. I don't have any wheels or parts to build it from. Maybe next year or the year after that you can have a bicycle."

Francie's heart settled somewhere near her stomach. Two large tears crept from the corners of her eyes. She wiped them away. Only sissies cried.

"Lunch is ready," Mrs. Olson called. "Francie, have you washed yet?"

Francie walked listlessly to the bathroom and soaped her palms. She turned the faucet off just when the telephone started its first ring, like pushing a button, Francie thought.

"For you, Francie." Her father held the receiver in his hand.

"This is Mary, Francie," an excited but triumphant voice told her. "We're going on a bicycle hike at eight o'clock and stay overnight at Uncle Morris' near Tuskeego. Can you come? We're only asking a few of the really good kids in town," she added significantly.

"But I don't have a bicycle," Francie answered, feeling the sudden throb of her pulse.

"Oh, that's right." Mary paused politely. "Well, maybe you can borrow one. We'll ride right by your house, so if you can come, be ready."

Francie's heart beat hard as she placed the telephone on its stand.

"Hurry, Francie, we're waiting," Mrs. Olson reminded her.

She slid into her place slowly and gave thanks to God for their food. She wondered when she said "amen" what Daddy would say when he saw spaghetti and meatballs again. This was probably the third time they had had them this week.

Mr. and Mrs. Olson looked at her inquiringly.

"The Morey girls have invited me to go on a bicycle hike," she told them in a small voice, watching the design in her plate run together in a swash of color. The tears dropped on her hands and she picked up her glass of water.

"You understand, don't you, Francie, that Daddy and I would
love to get you a bicycle if we could?” her mother asked gently.

Francie swallowed the water with a gulp and tried to smile. Through the silence Francie was aware of the teakettle sizzling on the stove and the noisy chop, chop when her father bit into a radish.

“We all have to share, Francie, and if we bought you a bicycle, we wouldn’t have enough money to buy coal or to buy you a warm coat this winter,” her father said.

“I’d rather have the bicycle,” Francie murmured, the sobs tearing her words into pitiful little phrases. She rose from the table and ran into her bedroom.

Fifteen minutes later Mrs. Olson opened the door slightly. “It’s time for your piano lesson, Francie.”

Down town the heat was even worse. Francie felt as though ten thousand bakers had opened their oven doors at once. It was a baffling, adamant heat. It stood stiff; it walked beside you; you could shove it away and it wouldn’t budge.

The inside of Mrs. Hamden’s house was dark, but the heat was more oppressive. To make matters worse, Francie began to see spokes in every whole note she played. Notes, spokes, wheels, bicycle. Notes, spokes, wheels, bicycle. One, two, three, rest. One two, three, rest.

When she reached home again, Francie sat down on the threshold of the hallway. It was cooler there and she wanted to be alone. There seemed to be no way she could get a bicycle. Maybe if she asked Daddy again, he might figure out a way to get one later in the summer. Maybe he’d even think she could borrow Junior Thompson’s for tonight.

“Francie, will you set the table now?” Her mother’s never-resting feet paused near the door. Francie put her fingers on the door jamb and pulled herself slowly to her feet.

She finished pouring the iced tea when her father drove the car into the drive.

“Hello, Francie. How was the heat this afternoon?” he questioned, patting the top of her head.

“O.K., I guess. I didn’t notice it much.

“Well, I sure did!” Mr. Olson dashed cold water over his face. “Got something cool for supper, Martha?”

“Potato salad and iced tea,” Mrs. Olson replied.

The sun streamed harshly through the windows of the north porch when the Olsons sat down at the supper table. Francie felt
May, 1945

it burn on the back of her neck, but she felt too tired to get up and pull the shade down. She felt more tired than she had for a long, long time, but she wasn’t sleepy.

"Don’t you feel well, Francie?" Francie could feel her mother’s anxious eyes on her bent head.

"I’m all right. I was just wishing." She was silent again. A grasshopper flew into the window box and clung against the screen but she ignored it.

"Daddy, could I borrow Junior Thompson’s bike?" She looked at the potato salad on her plate and picked a piece of parsley out of the center.

"To go on the hike, Francie?"
She nodded dumbly.

"And what would happen if you damaged the bicycle?"
Francie didn’t answer.

"Junior broke the axle, so even if you did ask to borrow it, it wouldn’t run."

Francie’s chin almost touched her thin chest. She lifted her head wearily.

"I’m sorry, Francie. It’s just impossible right now." Francie sensed something in her father’s voice she had not heard before, a something that she felt when she was frightened. It was all tight and sounded like you could reach out and touch it and then hear it snap in two.

"When we get some of these debts paid off, when some of these farmers get money enough to pay their bills—if they ever do—" Mr. Olson frowned and stared out of the window. Then he turned to her again.

"Some day, Francie, you’ll have a bicycle and lots more things Daddy and Mom can’t give you now. Just be patient."

The supper dishes were done and Francie dragged through the orchard to the big tree in the corner. She rested her head on the rough bark a moment, then, swift as a monkey, swung herself into its arms. She dangled her legs and looked up through the limp leaves at the clear sky. The warm breeze lifted the crackly leaves of the cornplants from the emaciated brown stems and moved on, whispering sorrowfully.

Voices mingled with her mother’s in front of the house. She heard gay “good-byes” and knew they must be off. Quickly, she scrambled to a higher branch and sat, waiting quietly.

The soft rubber tires rolled carelessly on the gravel. Francie
heard a sharp little ping as a stone rattled into the ditch. They had passed her tree now and were gone. Laughter and soft chattering of bicycles blended with the other twilight noises.

The sun was red with a passionate hate, an unfriendly globe that scorned all living things. Helplessly, she beat her fists on the warm bark of the tree and watched it disappear slowly. The sky was blank, unchanged but for the fading ruddiness.

Tears hastened to her eyes, spilled over her lashes and scurried down her face. Only sissies cried, but—Her thin body shaking silently, she leaned back against the trunk and sobbed. And the sun was a blurry pool of red—red like a can of paint.

The Presentation

(For Russell R. Schultz)

Keith Shillington, R. T. 3c

Here am I—
The article
Of fine coordination—

(The sculptor's swish of curtains
The little ahs and ohs
The flutter of dissection with the slivered tongue)

Note the copper skull
Its pressure dome of echoed pressures
Pumping through the eyes, the mouth, the ears,
Spurting the sight, the word, the hearing,
The sum of thought into its blotter world.

Note the spider hand
Dropped on its web of nerve and tendon
Clutching wildly at the passing life
Bearing fire and mouthing parasite of how
For its allotted crust—

Note the loaving body slab,
Its breathless lungs splashed with the captured air.