Scaredy-Cat

Austin H. Phelps Jr.*
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Abstract

"Now you run out and play. You can’t mope around the house all day.” His mother shooed him out the door...
"Now you run out and play. You can't mope around the house all day." His mother shooed him out the door. "Haven't you made any friends here yet? We've been here a whole week."

Barry let himself be pushed outdoors and aimlessly kicked across the street.

"Gee whiz," he thought, "what was there to do! An old factory across the street and a train station. There wasn't anywhere to play like where they used to live. Why'd they have to live in this old place, anyway?"

He started placing nails on the railroad track so they could be crushed flat by the long freight trains. Out of the corner of his eye he saw another boy approaching, but studiously went on adjusting the nails, The other boy would have to speak first—he belonged and Barry didn't.

"Hi," said the boy when he was close enough, "What you doin'?"

"Puttin' nails on the track."

"Rocks go better. They spark. Course, if they see you they'll chase you. Cops got my name for that three times already." He said it proudly. "Want to put some rocks on?" he continued.

"Sure, I guess so. What do they do when they catch you?"

"Oh, just take your name down. If you bawl they won't even do that sometimes. You're the new kid, aren't you? What's your name? Mine's Duane and I'm twelve. How old are you?"

"Barry. Barry Fox. I'm–I'm almost twelve."

"Well, let's get some rocks," said Duane in a friendlier tone now that his superiority was established. "We'll put them over—oh-oh, look like you aren't doin' nothin.' We'll go over to the paper mill."

"Hadn't we better run?" Barry asked, looking back. "He's comin' right this way."

"Naw. He can't do nothin' if we didn't do nothin'."

They walked quickly down the track and cut across to the huge dark paper mill that so thoroughly dominated that end of
town. They heard voices as they came to the loading dock and
Duane started to run.

"Let's go. They're playing tag."

"Will they let me play?" panted Barry.

Five boys, all about the same age as Duane, were loudly
clambering over the bales, climbing to a shed roof, jumping
to the box cars at the end of the dock, and then back to the
bales again. They stopped as Duane and Barry climbed up.

"Want to play, Duane? Fred's it. Who you got with you?

"This is the kid that moved in last week—Barry. He wants
to play, too."

"He don't look like much. Can he run?"

"Sure he can! You should have seen him go when a yard cop
chased us just now. C'mon. Fred'll be it all day, I bet."

"Ya? I'll get you first," Fred answered. "We better tell this
new guy the rules. You can't go down on the ground. Only the
bales, the freight cars, and that shed roof over there. Jumpin'
off anything is O.K."

"And no taggin' back 'til you count ten," put in another.

"Ya. And if the cops come, the same person's it when we
come back. Let's go."

Everybody scattered and the game was on. Barry ran with
the others, feeling for the first time that he belonged here.

Up over the bales, through special 'tunnels,' between the
bales, up to the roof, and then back. For the first time he forgot
about where they used to live—the people he used to know.
Run, dodge, duck, hide, and run again. He belonged.

Barry was tagged and he stopped to catch his breath. Then,
laughing, he was after the others—one of them now.

The other boys all got to the top of one freight car and
Duane was taunting him. Cautiously, for he was a little afraid
of heights, he climbed up to the shed roof, crawled over to the
freight car top and chased down to the others. When he got
close they all leaped way out and landed on the edge of a pile
of bales twelve feet down from the car roof.

Barry stopped short. He couldn't jump that far. He knew
he couldn't. He looked over the edge and the other boys looked
back at him. If he missed, he thought, he'd hit the edge of the
dock instead of the bales—and maybe break a leg or something.
He couldn't jump that far.

"What's the matter?" one of them called.
"C'mon! Jump! You'll never catch anybody like that."
Barry said nothing. He swallowed and checked the distance with his eye. His left knee shook and he hoped they didn't see.
"Jump!" they called again.
Barry tensed and made a start—something cold and hard squeezed into his stomach. His hands were sweaty. He stopped and his knee shook harder.
"Aw! He's afraid," yelled one of the bigger boys. "I knew we shouldn't have let him play."
"You afraid?" Duane called.
"Scaredy-cat—scaredy-cat. He's scared," the others chanted.
'I am not—I am not—I am not!" Barry yelled, feeling alone and a stranger again.
"Well. Jump then," they called back. "You are, too, scared!"
The cold hard thing in Barry's stomach pressed harder and his middle felt weak. But there was another worse feeling. The one he'd had all week—before he knew anyone. His stomach held back and his loneliness pushed. He had to try to jump. He had to.
Barry swallowed what felt like a mouthful of cotton, tensed, took a short run, and leaped. The last thing he saw was the edge of the loading dock rushing up.
—Austin H. Phelps, Jr., ME.Jr.

Christmas Loneliness

The streets are wet;
Sparkling neon signs
Glisten in pools of melted snow.
The evening crowds surge along the streets,
Window-shopping, stumbling,
Looking into every crack and crevice
To find something, nothing.
Overheated interiors beckon,
From behind the window's cold unfriendly glare;
Beckon to us to shop or browse.
Only 15 more days to Christmas—
Buy today, buy now.
It is getting colder now.
The large white flakes settle