Things of Value

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Abstract

Me and Rusty found the picture in the attic, in one of Grandma’s big leather-bound chests. I wanted to play dress-up but Rusty said we were pirates looking for buried treasure and he said if I didn’t help him look I’d have to walk the plank. I said what does that mean and he said it means you have to go out to the barn and jump out of the hayloft which Rusty thinks is fun but Grandma says it’s dangerous so I said OK I’ll be a pirate and we started opening boxes and trunks...
Me and Rusty found the picture in the attic, in one of Grandma's big leather-bound chests. I wanted to play dress-up but Rusty said we were pirates looking for buried treasure and he said if I didn't help him look I'd have to walk the plank. I said what does that mean and he said it means you have to go out to the barn and jump out of the hayloft which Rusty thinks is fun but Grandma says it's dangerous so I said OK I'll be a pirate and we started opening boxes and trunks.

I was the one that found the picture but Rusty was the one that said the lady in the funny hat was Grandma. I thought he was pretending because Grandma has white hair and cracks in her face and big knuckles and the lady had smooth skin and dark hair that was maybe black except the picture was so old that the black parts were brown and the white parts were yellow. I said Rusty is the man with the straw hat Grandpa and Rusty said no, Grandpa's nose wasn't that big and he didn't smile like that and then Rusty got real quiet and I was sorry because he doesn't like to talk about Grandpa. I don't remember Grandpa but Rusty says he was very nice.

Then Grandma called us for supper and Rusty cheered up because we were going to have his favorite dessert, lemon meringue pie that night. But then we ended up having ice cream instead because Grandma didn't have enough eggs to make the meringue. Grandma said it was weasels after the eggs and when Rusty pouted she smiled and said well weasels have to eat too.

Rusty said he knew about the eggs, though. After supper he told me there was no weasel—old Charlie was stealing the
eggs, and he, Rusty, was going to make him stop. Foul-smelling Charlie, who staggered around the countryside picking up junk and mumbling to himself, was the perfect black hat to Rusty's white one. Rusty said we were going to be like Batman and Robin and catch the bad guy and make him sorry. I asked him how and he said he had a plan. Rusty always had a plan.

That night Rusty asked Grandma to let us sleep in the hayloft. She said Bee you better keep an eye on your big brother he's finally flipped and I thought this was funny and Rusty didn't but then Grandma said OK you kids can sleep out there if you want to and Rusty didn't even hit me for laughing.

We made our beds just above the chicken cages so we could hear the hens squawking when old Charlie came in—Rusty said animals always know when bad guys are around. Charlie didn't come the first night, or the second, but Rusty said we should practice so we'd be ready when he came. He said I had to be Charlie so I went down and set the chickens to fussing and then Rusty, as himself, slid down fast as lightning and shined his flashlight in my face. I put my hands up and begged for mercy but Rusty backed me up in a corner and made me promise never to steal again and just to make sure I meant it he sat on me until I almost couldn't breathe and then he put straw down my shirt and I said this is no fun and I don't want to play anymore and he said we weren't playing, we were rehearsing.

Finally I got fed up and said that Charlie was never going to show up and maybe Rusty was wrong about the weasels and anyway, Grandma didn't like eggs all that much so why were we doing this in the first place?

"It's not the EGGS," Rusty said. "It's the PRINCIPLE."

"What's that mean?"

"It means you can't go around taking things of value from other people and not get punished."

The very next morning I woke up real early and heard somebody moving around down below. I knew it couldn't be Charlie because there wasn't a sound from the chickens, but I nudged Rusty anyway and he gave a jerk and kicked his flashlight against the wall. There was a crash down below as Rusty scrambled for his flashlight and a low moan as he
clambered down from the loft, flashlight in one hand, my hand in the other.

Old Charlie sat on the floor in front of the chicken cages in a mess of broken eggs, legs splayed out in front of him, one hand on his forehead. When Rusty shined the light in his face Charlie blinked, squinted and mumbled but whatever he was saying, it didn’t sound like he was begging for mercy. He peeked through veiny hands at me and Rusty, allowing a glimpse now and then of a grizzly beard, bloodshot eyes, beak nose and toothless mouth. He wasn’t so fearsome.

“Hey, you thief,” I said.

“Eh?” he replied, uncovering one frantically blinking eye.

“I said you’re a thief, you thief!” I wondered why Rusty wasn’t doing anything. He had turned off his flashlight and was standing in the shadows, like he was pretending he wasn’t there.

Charlie was blinking and shaking his head like a wet puppy. He coughed, wiped his mouth on his sleeve and said, “Ain’t no thief.”

“You are too! You been stealin’ my Grandma’s—”

Rusty shushed me and spoke to Charlie like he was any grown-up he might meet on the street.

“I think you better go now, Mr. Summers.”

I stared at Rusty and wondered if I had missed something. The enemy was sitting right there and Rusty wasn’t doing anything about it. I guessed he was playing some kind of trick on me and I was mad.

“I’m gonna tell Grandma!”

“No! No, don’t do that!” That was Charlie’s voice, not Rusty’s.

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Well — say, I’ll pay you. Yeah, that’s what I’ll do. I ain’t no thief.” Charlie started fumbling in the pockets of his coat, but all he had was a dirty handkerchief and a little bottle, which broke when he dropped it on the floor. “Aw,” Charlie muttered, tried to stand up, failed, sat down again. The puddle on the floor was surely more than what the little bottle could have held and the smell was awful.

“I think you better go, Mr. Summers. Would you, please?”
Charlie huffed and puffed and flailed his arms around until he found the wall. He stood up, swayed and stumbled but didn't fall. He also didn't leave. Rusty was practically dancing with impatience. Charlie sniffled. "Gonna pay you. Don't you be callin' me no thief."

Charlie leaned on the wall. His hands were shaking like Grandma's blender that always does a dance on the counter. He removed the gold band from his left ring finger and held it out to me. "There you go. I ain't no thief."

"We don't want your ring," Rusty said. "What are we going to do with your old ring?"

Charlie handed me the ring and started lurching toward the door. "Magic. That there ring, that's magic. You're one lucky little girl." Then he turned and staggered out of our barn.

I was so excited I wanted to scream. A magic ring? It was like a story Rusty or Grandma would read to me in the evenings. I wanted to try it out right away but Rusty grabbed it and wouldn't give it back. I said he was trying to keep all the magic for himself and it wasn't fair and he said there's no such thing as magic. Then he said if I didn't shut up about it he'd beat me up and that's no threat, that's a promise.

All that day Rusty was impossible. Charlie had cheated us and Rusty wouldn't do anything about it—he kept telling me to drop the subject and he wouldn't even wrestle with me until I reminded him about the principle and then he pinned me to the floor and wouldn't let me up until I started crying. And he didn't tell Grandma about the ring or about Charlie and he locked himself in his room until suppertime.

I was really fed up by this time and I decided if Rusty wasn't going to do anything then it was up to me to make the bad guy sorry. So after supper I told Rusty that I was going to raid Charlie like he'd been raiding Grandma.

"You're not either!"
"I am too!"
"Bee, you can't go anyplace at night by yourself."
"Then you have to go with me."
"I'm not going and neither are you."
"I'll tell Grandma!"
"You better not! I'll —"
"I don't care! GRANDMA!"
Rusty grabbed me and knocked me on the floor and started tickling me and made me yell never mind when Grand­ma yelled did somebody call me but he said OK I'll go with you and we might as well get it over with tonight. I said what if Charlie’s home and Rusty said don’t worry he’ll be at his still and I said what’s a still and Rusty said I’ll tell you later but I guess he forgot.

So we snuck out after dark and trudged along the gravel road in the moonlight, playing commandos and shooting our tommy guns at the night sounds. Rusty was in better spirits than he’d been all day, running up behind me and trying to scare me, touching the back of my neck with a cold, dewy hand.

Charlie’s shack was made of tarpaper and tin and it tilted toward the junkyard beside it. The door was ajar; I walked in behind Rusty and the flashlight.

The little room smelled like the barn used to smell before they sold off the last of Grandpa’s stock. In the dim light of Rusty’s little flashlight the room looked like a garbage heap with walls around it. There was no bed, just a pile of greasy blankets in the corner. The only furniture was a tiny chest of drawers. There didn’t seem to be anything of value to be taken for Grandma’s eggs.

Then I waded through the trash to Charlie’s dresser and saw, of all things, Grandma’s picture, the one me and Rusty found in the attic. I said hey Rusty look Charlie stole Grandma’s picture. Rusty stared at the picture for a long time and I started to get scared that Charlie would come back. Then all of a sudden Rusty grabbed my hand and said c’mon we’re going.

He practically dragged me back to Grandma’s; he was feeling difficult again. I said I wanted to go to the barn and get my pillow but Rusty said if I didn’t get in the house right NOW he’d spank me so hard I wouldn’t recognize my backside. Then he chased me to the door and said I’d better not wake up Grandma or we’d both be in for it.

The next morning at breakfast Rusty told Grandma that one of the hens had gotten away and Grandma said that’s all right we had too many eggs anyway. He wouldn’t tell me how one had gotten loose and the others didn’t and he wouldn’t tell me why my pillowcase wasn’t in the barn. I asked him if
Charlie had raided us again and he said mind your own business, Bee.

The summer passed quickly and I didn't waste much more time wondering about magic rings and nasty old thieves until one day when Rusty and me went into town for ice cream. We were sitting on a park bench when old Charlie staggered by—and I saw that he was wearing a plain gold band on his left hand.

"Rusty! How'd he get that back?"

Rusty pretended not to hear me but I pestered him into an answer.

"I guess maybe I was wrong about that ring, Bee. I guess it's magic after all but it's the kind that only works for its owner. That kind of ring always gets back where it belongs."

"How come?"

"Because that's where it's most valuable."

Then he said that when we got home we could play pirates and this time HE'D walk the plank.