

## The Small Boy

He was a small boy, as small boys go even smaller than most. But he was also long past the time when he'd discovered he was smarter than most of the big boys, and since that consequential moment he'd become adept at utilizing his thinking skills to enhance his rather diminutive stature.

Still, when it came to most of the games the other boys enjoyed, he found himself to be at a disadvantage. Sooner or later, the rewards of these youthful contests were to the quickest ... the strongest ... or, he reflected with a momentary hint of wishfulness, the largest.

So, after once again having been selected to be the scorekeeper, he found himself walking home from school rather late in the afternoon. Alone. It didn't bother him ... not much. He was used to it and, besides, he'd always found there was plenty to think about as he strolled a somewhat roundabout path towards the tiny house where he and his mother lived. And, he smiled to himself, the other boys had been appreciative of the fact that he had done such a good job of keeping track of the runs and innings in their rather chaotic game. They were, as usual, if somewhat mystified, still impressed that in his head he could do such computation so accurately ... they who all seemed to have such a difficult time trying to comprehend the long division they were learning in Miss Quinn's fifth-grade class.

He turned into an alley which from long experience he'd learned to be the most interesting route from the school playground to his street. He had a momentary recollection of the "bad things" that were the reason his mother had given when she told him to walk home along the sidewalk. "You don't want to hear about what happens in those alleys, Tiny, take my word for it ... just don't walk that way, okay?"

Of course, he'd followed her directions ... for at least a week or so. After that ... well, he thought to himself, if he walked fast it was a quicker route. And, in all his traversing the narrow corridor between the backyards, he'd never encountered anything really bad ... unless, that is, you counted the sweet sickly odor from overfull garbage cans which had been put out too late to be picked up on a really hot day. Maybe that was what his mother had been talking about? He figured that must be it, since, once he'd observed her for awhile, it was clear that she had little tolerance for strong smells of any kind. In fact, and he found this oddly interesting, she didn't ever seem to wear any perfume, unlike most of the other women he encountered in his daily life. How strange, he thought, maybe he'd inherited his sense of smell from his mother? Even Miss Quinn, who was clearly the smartest and most beautiful woman in the world ... not that he was about to ever let anyone find out his opinion of her ... even she had a tendency, in a nice sort of way, to announce her presence to his nose long before she ever entered the classroom. Yes, that would explain why, as perfect as his teacher was, he always thought she'd be even more perfect if she smelled less like the girls from the junior high across the schoolyard and more like his mother.

There was a new swimming pool in one of the backyards about halfway down the alley. He'd noticed them preparing its base during the past few days, fascinated at how the Mexican man had so meticulously spread and smoothed the huge sand circle. Now the sides were up and the liner had been installed. To get a better view, he stepped up onto a trash can, holding securely to the fence so that he wouldn't fall and rip the new red shirt his grandmother had sewed him for his birthday.

A large vacuum cleaner, similar to the one at the garage where his mother took their old car to be repaired, was hooked with a sturdy hose to a shiny metal flange on the blue-speckled turquoise liner. For a few seconds he was stumped, not able to perceive the purpose of the loudly wailing machine. But it was only a short moment, well worth the flash of pleasure that was his reward when he determined that the loudly wailing cannister was sucking all the air out from under the liner, forcing the vinyl to pull smooth

and tight against the aluminum walls of the pool. A new idea! Neat! Even more exciting to him, however, was the question that flashed in his mind, "Who had been the first to think of doing this?" That person, he mused, that was one smart person.

Miss Quinn said that he was smart. Not just in Math, where he had successfully completed the textbook before the first quarter of the school year had ended. No, she said he had ... what was it she'd called it ... yes, that was it, "William, you've got quick intelligence." He'd liked that, as he did everything she said. Especially that she called him William. Not Billy. Not Bill. And, especially, not Tiny. William. It was an important name when she sang it to him, and he remembered how she'd told him, "Someday soon, William, you'll be learning about some of the really great men with whom you share that name."

He stopped for a moment, puzzled. Something was ...

... he couldn't quite place it, but something was out of place in the alley. Not a can or fence or gate, no, nothing so obvious. But something wasn't as it ...

... quite as it should be. He turned his head from side to side, carefully scanning the scene around him. Using another skill he'd discovered he possessed, he began to very deliberately tune out the various sounds which from a variety of sources blended into a soft background noise unique to alley. First went the soft hum of the vacuum motor, almost a half block behind him. Then the rushing sound of the traffic on the boulevards at each end of his path. The barking of a dog. The flapping of sheets hanging to dry in the bright sun. A table saw ... almost two blocks away old Mr. Peters building another cabinet. A radio. There, there it was again ... very soft ... very, very soft ...

... a pitifully weak crying ... no ... no, not crying ...

... mewling.

It was a cat. Not a cat ... a kitten. He could hear it clearly. It called to him. Summoned him. Begged him.

Slowly rotating his head from side to side, as he'd seen an Indian do in the movie they'd watched in history class, he searched for the source of the sound.

Feeling his way with his ears, he slowly inched towards a rustic fence that formed the angle where the alley turned to avoid an old house. From its size and style, two stories tall in a sea of single floor ranch houses, decrepit weathered siding, and the odd bend in an otherwise straight alley, it was obvious that the structure was much older than the neighborhood in which it sat. Now examining it with his eyes, he recalled how he'd heard the big boys telling stories. "One of the first to be built north of the river ... bodies in the basement ... bloody footprints ... no witnesses would testify against him, so they had to let him go .. he hasn't come out in seventy years ... haunted." He didn't believe any of that non-sense, of course, his best reason for not doing so being that all the others accepted it as the truth. Still, as he noticed the crudely boarded windows and a "No Trespassing" signed tacked to a tilted fence post, he thought it sure looked the part.

The kitten's cry was coming from under the porch. Lowering himself to a point where he could peer under the fence, he spotted a flash of yellow squirming beneath the rotted floorboards closest to him. What ... how ...

... he wiggled between two sections of broken fencing and softly tiptoed to the side of the old house. From his new vantage point he could easily see a tiny animal trapped underneath the edge of the porch. It was stuck between one of the porch's clapboards and a support beam, the fragile pine board appearing to have moved slightly when the kitten touched it. Barely a fraction of an inch ... any more than that and the little creature would have been strangled ... but, still, just enough to hold it in place as securely as if it were a cleverly designed trap.

How to get it out? Looking up, he noticed attached to the side of the building a sign similar in style to the one on the fence. "Board of Health - Building Condemned - Keep Out," he read, immediately wishing that he was both less literate and observant. "You don't want to hear about what happens in those alleys, Billy, take my word for it ... just don't walk that way, okay?"

He swore to himself. Not the whole word ... he knew better than that. Just the letter 'D.' That was all he needed. He knew she could hear everything he said, she'd proved that often enough. And sometimes he wondered if she'd planted a tape recorder in his head, that could be the only explanation for the way her voice came to him so clearly. Thinking of his swear, he hoped she hadn't included a microphone.

He could pull on the loose board and then ...

... no, if he did that the kitten might move in the wrong direction. If the piece of wood snapped back into place ...

... that was surely a picture he didn't want to even imagine. He'd have to think of something else. There was a gap between the stairs and the porch. He slid over to investigate the dark opening.

Yes ... yes, he could fit. Wiping away a sticky curtain of spider webs, he stuck his head into the musty void.

At first he could see nothing but his own outline against the damp earth, but soon, as his eyes adjusted to the dark, he was able to look around and get a better image of the crawl space beneath the porch.

All the wood was rotted and there was little but flaking plaster and an occasional rusted nail holding the cross beams in place. It was clear to him that, if not immediately, then very soon gravity was to achieve a final victory over the decrepit structure.

Again the sound of the kitten caught his ear, and he directed his attention towards the far end of the porch. Surrounded by delicate spears of golden sunlight, the tiny creature looked at him. As their eyes met, the kitten ceased its mewling and stared at him with more trust than he thought he could accept. It peered through his own eyes directly into a place deep within him where he, too, had found himself trapped.

Carefully avoiding contact with any of the sagging wooden supports, he slowly crawled to a spot where he could reach the little kitten. With a series of calculated contortions he was able to sit upright, although the effort cost him a scrape across the back of his neck. From how little the wounding hurt he knew it would become much more painful in the days ahead. He looked down at the board which held the kitten in place, painstakingly inspecting its entire length as well as the slats around it.

There ... it was clear that all he had to do was wedge his foot into the damp soil and push the board very gently while he ...

... with a quick scoop of his hand the tiny animal was in his grasp. As he allowed the board to spring back to its original position he had to look down to verify that he'd safely recovered the animal, its weight so slight and fur so soft as to give his sense of touch little proof he'd been successful.

Unbuttoning his shirt with his free hand, for once thankful that his grandmother loved to use really big buttons, he tucked the trembling creature against his chest and refastened the shirt. Only then did he turn and begin to find his way out from under the porch.

Perhaps it was the sun glaring directly into his eyes from the opening next to the stairs in front of him, or it could have been the distraction of the throbbing pain he was beginning to feel from the cut on his neck ... he wasn't to get any time to worry about the cause, anyhow, when he inadvertently ran his shoulder squarely into the rotten beam which was the last to cross his path from the crawl space.

Without any noise whatsoever, making the process much more frightening, the ancient piece of lumber split across its width and crumbled quietly to rest within inches of the gently squirming lump beneath his shirt. He held his breath for a moment ... not out of fear, but simply in total concentration as he waited to see what would happen next.

The shafts of sunlight filled with dust, appearing like stalagmites and stalagmites caught in the flickering gleam of a miner's lamp. With the back of his hand he wiped away the sweat that was beginning to burn his eyes, and then began to once again inch his way forward the last few feet to the bright safety of the yard ...

... and froze again as the entire length of the porch along the house came crashing to the ground! This time his ears were deafened by the noise, and the movement of the ground beneath his knees warned him that he'd only seconds before the entire structure completely folded like a hastily built house of cards.

Cradling the kitten with one arm, he dropped to his stomach and begin to wiggle his way over the broken beam in front of him and then under the already shifting floorboards above. Paying no attention to anything but the flow of fresh air across his face that promised escape, he swiftly pulled himself through the rapidly narrowing gap between the stairs and the porch. Behind him he could feel the porch beginning to press against his heels. With a final desperate lunge, he shot out of the opening and rolled onto the long untended grass in the yard.

Flopping onto his back, his sense of relief was cut short by the explosion of dirt and debris that was the porch's death rattle. Unable to see through the cloud of dust, and, having lost all sense of direction, he could only lie perfectly still and hope that the roof of the porch wasn't about to descend upon him and squash him like one of the many worms he often found dried flat on the busy sidewalk in front of his house.

Finally, when all was silent and he sensed that, at least for the immediate moment, nothing else was going to fall, he opened his eyes.

Framed by the tree branches that reached across his field of view, the sky was a deeper blue than he'd could remember ever seeing. Standing up, he deeply inhaled fresh air for which he knew instinctively he'd forever have a greater appreciation. Feeling a movement against his belly, he reached down and unfastened his shirt, pulling the kitten from the safety of the cocoon in which it had ridden out the disaster.

Holding it up in front of him, he could see that it was unharmed. Teasing it with the tip of his finger, a playful response informed him that the animal probably had little comprehension of what had happened. Looking back at the ruin of the porch, he whispered to the kitten, "We better get going ... I don't think it'll make a difference if nobody knows either of us was here, okay?"

With that, and the mewling affirmation of the furry ball in his hand, he slipped through the fence and resumed his stroll down the alley. When he'd gone a dozen paces or so the kitten began to cry loudly. Almost immediately he heard an answering call from the yard next to him. Looking over a whitewashed picket fence, he saw a large cat pacing parallel to his walk, staring up at him with what appeared to be a rather unfriendly expression.

"Hello ..." he stretched over the fence and deposited the kitten in the neatly trimmed yard, "... I think this belongs to you." The cat leapt to the side of what was obviously its offspring and began to lick clean the kitten's eyes.

He watched the two for several minutes, during which time the two took absolutely no attention of his presence. "Well ... I guess everything's okay. I think you best stay out from under what's left of that porch, little kitten ... and maybe you ought to pay a bit closer attention to your baby, Mrs. Cat!"

With that, and a final glance back at the dust cloud that still delineated the scene of his adventure, he resumed the journey to his house.

It was only a short time later, after dusting himself off and with his fingers carefully combing his hair back into place, that he pulled open the screen door to the kitchen in his house. As usual, despite the great quantities of 3-in-1 oil he'd applied over the years, the door's old hinges announced his entrance with a raucous scream.

"Is that you, Tiny?"

"Yes," as usual wondering to himself, how would a robber answer the question?

As he removed his shoes the greasy creosote stains across dark canvas reminded him of just how dangerous the events under the old porch had been. Before he could muse upon this still fresh memory, however, he was enveloped in the aroma of spaghetti sauce and a moist warmth he knew would lead him to warm bread loaves hiding atop the stove in a straw basket under an old kitchen towel reserved for that purpose only.

"Tiny, could you set an extra place at the table and ..." his mother's eyes widened as she turned and looked at him standing in the doorway, "What happened to your new shirt!? My goodness, how did it get ripped like that?" She stepped closer to him, still fussing, "You didn't get in a fight, did you? I told you to stay away from the Stevens kid, he's no good and all he'll do is ..."

He followed her gaze to his shoulder, for the first time becoming aware of what she was looking at. He could see the rust marks where a nail that had been sticking out from one of the beams beneath the porch had shredded the red fabric from his collar all the way down to the flap of the shirt's pocket. His mother's voice faded to an almost inaudible drone as he stared at the jagged rip that led to the spot slightly to the left of the center of his chest, and he suddenly pictured what would have happened had the collapse of the porch twisted the beam an inch or so more in the direction of his heart.

"Well ... what happened? What did ... Tiny ... are you all right, Tiny?"

He brought himself back to the kitchen, gazing into infinite depth of his mother's concern as she reached out and softly caressed his shoulder, "I'm okay, Ma, I ... I must've brushed up against a nail or something someplace. Honest, I'm okay."

She looked into his eyes, conscious that this was not the time for interrogation and from long experience well aware that inevitably his innate honesty would make such unnecessary.

"Hmmm ... all right. I guess your Gram'll be able to mend it. Go wash up then set the table ..." "Three places, Ma?"

"Um, oh, yes. Your dad's coming for dinner. I ..."

"Really? Did he ..."

"I had to call him this afternoon so to ask him about your dental insurance. We had a nice conversation and, well, I just thought it would be kind of nice if we all had supper together ... that's all."

The smile never wavered from his face, not a fraction of an inch, but she understood him well enough to know that such was an indicator of other than happiness. "Don't over think it, Tiny. We'll have supper. Maybe he'll stay awhile and you can show him the model you're making for your history project. That's all ... okay?"

He rubbed his neck, then, conscious of the cause of his sudden discomfort, pulled up his collar and responded, "Yes, Ma. I'll set the dishes. Should I ..."

"Yes, Tiny," she sighed, "You can take that chair of his out of the closet and put it back at the head of the table ... but just for tonight."

"That was great." Leaning back in his chair, his father's head came to rest exactly in the center of a small dark spot on the dining room wall, "I wish I could tell you how much better your spaghetti is than the stuff they serve down at the diner."

The sound of dishes clattering was instrumentation to his mother's voice, "Well, they claim they serve home cooking but I suspect that mostly they just wear out a lot of can openers."

She stepped into the archway separating the two rooms, a huge gleaming pot in one hand and fluffy dish towel in the other, "You know, you don't have to eat there all the time. If ..."

Time began to slow for the small boy and, looking at his mother and father face one another, it seemed as if he were holding a place on the last page of a book while at the same time rereading a chapter he'd finished long before.

"Don't give me 'Ifs'!" screamed his father, face suddenly pale, calloused fingers nervously twisting the lace edge of the tablecloth. "You know I can't ..."

His eyes followed his mother, watching her shoulders slump as she stepped out of sight back into the kitchen. He looked over at his father, who had stopped speaking and was vacantly staring at the spreading stain of water spilled from his overturned glass.

In slow motion the boy arose from his chair, one second seated then, in the very next instance, standing next to the head of the table. He reached out and put his hand on his father's shoulder.

"Don't yell at her."

The man turned his head, suddenly aware of the boy beside him. "What ... are you giving me orders, too? Who the hell do you think ..."

His voice trailed off, as he suddenly noticing that the boy didn't blink, but continued to stare into his eyes.

"Just don't yell at her, Dad, don't ever yell at her again. Not ever."

With that the boy turned and returned to his place at the side of the table, deliberately focusing his attention on a last piece of garlic bread remaining in the wicker basket.

The man watched the boy for minute, looked over towards the kitchen from where amidst the suddenly loud clatter of dishes he could hear the muffled sound of crying, and then returned his gaze to his son.

"Tiny ..."

The boy pretended not to notice him, but he could see the slight movement of the boy's head that proved the bread he was examining wasn't really the center of his attention.

"Tiny?"

He raised his eyes, the first thing he noticed being the dark circles under his father's eyes, how tired he looked, "Yes."

"I haven't had a ... I haven't had a drink today."

"Really."

"I haven't had one ... well, I've been drinking only water ... and a helluva lot of coffee ... for a quite some time now. Almost six months of todays."

"That's ... that's good, Dad."

The father looked over at his son, noticing for the first time a slight bruise beginning to discolor the boy's cheek and a piece of flesh colored bandage sticking out from beneath the collar of his shirt. The boy sat with his elbows propped upon the table top and he knew, without looking, that the telephone directory was on a cabinet shelf in the living room, no longer to be found squared upon the seat of the his son's chair.

"William?"

The boy's eyes widened, and the corners of his mouth lifted slightly, "Yes?"

"I won't yell at her."

"Okay, Dad."

"No ... listen to me. I won't ever yell at her. That's a promise to you, William. Never again."

The boy looked at his father, and his father back at him, each taking the measure of the other as is the habit men must often practice. Without a word, both knew their agreement to be as binding as even the obligation of the most carefully negotiated and notarized contract.

From within the kitchen came a clear, quiet voice, "Would either of you like desert?" And both knew, as both knew always to be the case, that she'd overheard everything they said.

After he had fallen asleep that night, as she had done every night of his life, she entered her small boy's room and very tenderly neatly tucked the sheet and blankets under his mattress. She leaned over and kissed him on his forehead, in the darkened room taking great care to avoid touching the bruise on his cheek. Then, after opening the window a few inches to let in a bit of the cool night breeze, she quietly left the room. Closing the door behind her, she heard him softly call to her.

"Yes, Tiny?"

"Could you say goodnight again to Dad for me when he leaves, please?"

"Yes, Tiny, I'll do that."

"And ... Mom ..."

"Yes, son?"

"I think we can leave his chair at the table ... okay?"

"Okay, Tiny."

"G'night, Mom."

"Goodnight, Tiny."

That night the small boy slept soundly, dreaming not of a day when he'd be taller, but, instead, simply of the days ahead.