



The Odyssey of Bobby Joad

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THE ODYSSEY OF BOBBY JOAD

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BOBBY JOAD stood staring at the bicycles jumbled in the summer sunshine outside the library. Impersonally he remembered none of them was his, but a new English racer standing off to the side did catch his eye. It was the only one with new paint and whole fenders.

When he touched the silver handle bars, they were hot from the sun, and the little bell rang fine.

“Hey, kid! Clear out! Don’t you know you can’t shift it when it’s standing still? Go on, beat it!”

Unconcerned he tucked his book under his arm and walked down the dusty street. It was hot and he wished he were back in the cool library where the lady in the green dress and the fluffed brown hair was so nice. She had offered him a book when he came in and he had looked at all the pictures and returned it to her without a word.

But she wouldn’t let it go at that. She took a yellow book from a shelf and flipped through its pages. “Yes,” she murmured half to herself, “this looks like it will fit.” Then she stamped it very carefully and muttered “My my” when he scrawled his name on the neat new card.

The kids in front of Woods’ Drug Store leaned together under the awning, hiding from the heat and watching the passers by. He crossed the street so he wouldn’t have to hear them. He thought they wouldn’t approve of his yellow book.

At the end of the block of old stores was a park with big shade trees and long, green grass. It looked fresh and cool and since he had nothing better to do, he sat on one of the wrought-iron benches and read his book.

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It was a horse story and the country in it reminded him of the farmland where he had lived till his pa died last winter. He stopped reading and just sat there in the shade thinking how his ma and he had come to the city. It had seemed such a good idea for a woman and a boy. There would be work.

But the thought of his mother washing in their hot little flat made him sick. Even here in the open he could smell the bleach and soap powder and see other people's stiff, starched clothes, hot from his mother's iron, hanging on all the doors. The sound of the front bell was new to him, but the people who rang were always the same faceless creatures wanting more starch or less bleach the next time.

Then when the nameless ones had paid his mother and she had thanked them out the door, the money was always quickly folded into a hungry green coffee jar in the cupboard. He hated that—his mother, scraping her very self into that jar after thanking the curt, impersonal callers for whom she had done so much work, but he hated worse the thin old ladies with fingers like cold pencils who patted his head and pressed nickels into his hand, gurgling about the nice strong little boy he was.

He stood up in disgust and walked around the bench. Across the lawn a squirrel sat in a patch of golden dande-lions. He half-heartedly tossed a stick at it and missed. The brown head looked curiously aside at him and then majestically returned to nibbling a delicacy dropped by summer.

On the bench the breeze was busy thumbing the open pages of the yellow book. He wanted to continue reading, but he was thirsty. Over in the fountain, green with sway-ing moss, the water tasted cool and rusty and splashed in his face. From somewhere behind the bushes the annoying squeak of a seesaw mingled with laughter, and he walked away from it through long patches of shade and light, kicking gravel from the path.

At the chinning bar he did a few pull-ups, but a dirty little blonde girl covered with sand came over and stood staring at him. Embarrassed, he climbed down, wiping the moisture from his red palms before he picked the yellow book from the grass. She tried to follow him, but a bigger girl came away from the sandpile and pulled her back. The little girl didn't like the idea and threw sand in her sister's hair. He didn't stay to watch the outcome.

Farther down the path he rested on a rock listening to the unseen traffic circling the lonely park. The green was almost the same as it had been in the south pasture in Kentucky, but the silence was gone. He stood, and under his dirty blue sneakers the gravel path changed to proper, civic asphalt as he followed its licorice blackness to the edge of the park.

He leaned against an iron fence feeling the hungriness of noon. Somewhere over the city a siren grew and then faded into the muffled pealing of apologetic church bells. In his pocket the slight different roundnesses of a dime and a nickel pointed out a banner draped between two great trees and he thought of a hot dog from a stand that smelled of mustard and popcorn; but closer he could read the faded, red letters splashed on the yellow muslin:

SUPERVISED SUMMER PLAYGROUND
JUNE 20 - AUGUST 25

The circle of shouting under the sign crowded the two boys fighting and rolling on the ground. Curious, he picked his way through the abandoned tables and chairs strewn with boondoggle and half-finished handicraft. He touched a piece of leather marked MC and wondered at the holes punched evenly

around its edge.

The crowd and the fight moved closer and raised in volume. He could see the two boys pummeling each other in the proud blindness stoked by the shrill cries of the dancing children. Both were hurt and wanted a truce but they had face and pride to save. The teen-aged supervisor stood apart watching the uneven match with a wry little smile.

Two angry women from the porches across the street shouted up to him, shaking their fists, but he only ignored them. A dowdy matron in a light blue duster accented with dampness joined them and pulled at the superintendent's arm.

"Lay off, lady. It ain't my job. They're just settling a little problem."

"They're killing each other."

"G'wan home, lady."

"I certainly will, young man. My telephone will be very busy!"

"I bet it always is. Come on, Robby, finish 'im off."

A few moments later when the police arrived, the crowd singled into innocent clusters that soon melted into the stream of traffic flowing around the park.

"They were just having a little fun," the counselor protested.

"Get in the car, bud. Your job's done."

"There's others. It's a big, big city."

"And you're a big, big boy. Get in." The policeman turned to Bobby Joad. "Don't just stand there, kid. Go on home. The playground's closed for the day."

He watched the car disappear down the street and then shut his ears to the three women preening their indignation among the over-turned tables and litter of papers.

He started down the walk and a small group of boys began to follow him. He looked back at them and walked faster. They walked faster. In a second a blast of fear swept him and he was running. They were chasing him, yelling something, anything, "Cop-lover, cop-lover!" he turned down an alleyway and a stone hurtled into a waste can.

* * * *

Down the alley, past the anonymous, red backs of the old buildings, hurdling the barrels of trash, dodging an old man with a half-filled sack, he ran and soon the angry shouts following him were lost in the rumble of the city. He leaned panting against a row of garages faced with scratched gray paint. For him there was only the sound of his breathing and the heady reek of gasoline from the garages. His feet were planted, but his shoulders slid down the wall as he felt his way to the ground.

His head sank between his knees and he hated himself. He knew they would never have chased him if he hadn't excited them by running. He had flushed himself like a quail and the hunters had acted like the hunters they were. He hated himself for running and the memory of his pa shamed him.

On the ground next to him lay the yellow book, its cover ripped half down the seam. He felt for the pages of the unfinished story and threw it skidding across the cinders into a litter of waste cans. Kentucky was far away and the tears flowed ever so easily in the empty alley.

The afternoon sun climbed the garages opposite and lingered softly on the windows of the fine big apartment houses. Somewhere in this strange part of the city a radio played and a window closed, but in the alley there was only the boy.

After a long while he felt a presence near him and dry-eyed he looked up from the crumbled cinders to see a pigtailed girl standing behind a white picket gate.

"Hi," she said, "you been here a long time?"

"No...Have you?"

“Uh-uh. I just came back to swing on the gate.”

“Oh.”

“We don’t have a gate at home.”

“Neither do we,” he said as he rose self-consciously brushing the dirt from his clothes.

“I’m staying with my aunt. She lives in this building. Way up there on the fourth floor. See where I’m pointing?”

“Yeah. I only live on the second.”

“So do I,” she said, “but my mother’s having a baby so I’m staying here.”

“That’s nice.”

“What? Having a baby or staying here?”

He looked at her with a quizzical frown. “I guess...I guess...BOTH!” And then they laughed. He thought for a moment that her hair was the color of Kentucky hay fields when summer is lingering long into October. But right away he forgot the thought.

“I really live on 18th Street,” she said.

“We just moved in on 17th a while back.”

“We’re neighbors!” She scooted a half sloop on the gate.

“What grade will you be in?”

“Fifth.”

“Oh.” She was disappointed.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’ll only be in the fourth.” She swung back on the gate. “Aw, that ain’t so rough.”

“But I got a brother who’ll be in the fifth!”

“Where’s he?”

“Over at my other aunt’s house. Everytime mom goes to the hospital we get loaned out all over,” she laughed.

“Can I come over to your house—when you get home, I mean?”

“Sure. I’ll call my brother on my aunt’s phone tonight and tell him. He’s got a neat club.”

“Are you in it?”

“No. They won’t let me. It’s only for boys.”

“Oh.” He walked across the alley.

“What are you looking for?” She followed him.

“This.” He picked up the dirty yellow book.

“I read that too. Hey, Miss Gramercy won’t like that. It’s all torn ‘n’ everything.”

“I had an accident. My ma will fix it.”

“I bet she can’t.”

“Well,” he was hesitant, “maybe not alone, but I can help her.” He started down the alley. “Which way to the street?”

“Turn right down aways.”

“Thanks.”

“Bye.” She circled once more on the gate.

“Hey! What’s your name?” he called.

“Beth!” she shouted down the alley. “What’s yours?” “Bobby!”

“See you, Bobby!”

The creak in the gate was the same pitch as the tune he whistled as he shuffled over the cinders; down aways he turned right.