Boys Will Be Boys

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Joey was my best friend. That changed over the years, but at that time he was. He, like so many times before, was staying over.

We were just about done with supper when we saw the signs. Joey’s and my eyes met with a look of oh, no; we both knew Dad’s stories took awhile.

Don’t get me wrong. We both liked Dad’s stories, but there is a time and place for everything. This was the place but not the time.

Joey and I had big plans for the night, a mouse hunt in the barn. We would turn over the hay bales near or at the bottom of the stack, the ones that had been sitting there for a while. About every fifth bale would produce a small nest of three or four mice. When we discovered a nest we would jump. About the time we were in mid-flight the mice could see, by huge forms dropping on them, that their cover was blown, and then the fun began. The mice would scatter and we would be in hot, haphazard, pursuit. Even the cats wouldn’t get close to the action when Joey and I were chasing mice.

Dad pushed his plate out of the way and leaned back. He started the same way he always starts.

“You know boys, when I was about your age...”

Dad was never thirteen and going on a mouse hunt.

“... I had a really enjoyable experience...”

No! not an ‘insight to a better life’ story. Joey’s head slumped so that he was looking right at what was left of his meal. I turned to stare out the window.

“Good, a light skiff of snow, better tracking,” I thought. Even though we would be in the barn, it can never hurt to have a light skiff of snow around.

“... I was headed out to the woodshed to get the night’s share of fuel...”

Both of us switched. Joey watched the day’s light fading and I watched my uneaten peas.

“... the old truck was warm so it started right away...”

I knew from past stories that Dad used a truck to get the wood, because back when he was a kid the woodshed was behind the barn. It had since been moved closer, so all I got to use was a wheel barrel, but, as Dad continually reminded me, I was thankful to have that.

“... as I was about to get out of the truck I saw something move just to the right of the shed, so I stayed put... Do you know what it was?” he asked.

Oh, no! a question. I snapped back to reality.

“What, Dad?” I asked

“Do you know what moved?”

“A killer with a bad attitude!” blurted Joey.

“No, no,” Dad said, giving Joey a nasty look.

“It was a deer.”

A deer! Great... we only see a dozen a day on the way to town.

“... Only this time I sat in the truck and watched the animal as it the tall grass alongside the shed...”

Joey threw himself against the back of his chair, flung his head and began staring at the ceiling. I glared at the rapidly hardening pile of mashed potatoes in the middle of the table. How much longer...?

“... It was a doe. She moved with real grace and beauty...”

Don’t get the idea my dad is some kind of earth muffin, he’s no bleeding heart. He gets a couple of deer each season. However, he gets in these moods and the resulting ‘moral’ story can be almost sickening. To overzealous mouse hunters, anyway.

“... I sat and watched her sniff the path leading up to the shed and then the door handle. She must have smelled my scent from the day before, because she turned and walked back into the woods...”

Joey and I sat up. The end was close and soon some mice would be hating life.

“... Well, I got the wood and went back with a good feeling...”

We knew this was the end because Dad started clearing his dinner area. Joey and I were half way to the kitchen with our plates when we heard...
"... boys ..." We froze, clenching our teeth, as my dad addressed out backs.

"... could you do me a favor and get the IH out of the west field ... drive it into the barn for the night ... Thanks."

There was no point in arguing. Dad would just bring up the fact that he "went out of his way" by taking us into town this morning. We silently got dressed for the cold; Joey knew it would be improper to say anything about not being able to go hunting in the house.

"I guess he did take us to town this morning," moaned Joey, a hint of bitterness in his voice, as we stepped off the porch.

"Yeah," I added.

My father has this uncanny ability of knowing when I've been having too much fun, and lately Joey and I have. In the last couple of days we had built forts, destroyed whole cities, and slaughtered entire armies. I suppose it was about time we were made to feel like we were earning our keep.

Half way across the roughly plowed field we decided it would have been much easier and less injurious to have gone the long way on the road. The frozen earth didn't give, so it pitched us side to side and to and fro as we walked. Just as I was about to add something to the subject as hand I tripped over an unusually large dos and fell.

"Damn, look what I did to my suit," I said as I got to my feet. We both looked at the white insulation that was now bleeding from the knee of my snowmobile suit.

We should have taken the road, but at our age the cognitive process of decision making involves a lot of trial and error. We continued on.

The apple orchard and then the tractor came into view as we topped the slope. It was parked next to the apple trees right where Dad finished.

"I hope 'Red Bruiser' wants to start," Joey said, referring to the big cabover tractor. My dad has a habit of naming his vehicles and larger peices of farm equipment. Joey and I thought this was corny, but we both ended up using the same dumb little names. Good, I thought as we got closer, Dad already unhooked the plow. I hate undoing the nut on the big bolt which serves as the link pin, because I have to get on my knees, take off my gloves, reach under the tractor hitch, and turn the cold chunk of metal.

We jumped into the cab and closed the door, stopping much of the cold we felt from the north breeze.

Joey hit the electric main, and with static in his voice, said "All gauges responding, sir!"

"Stand by for contact, lieutenant," I said, my hand cupped over my mouth like a mike.

I was about to punch the starter but stopped because Joey had stopped playing our game and was now looking out the left side window. He had that 'cat about to pounce' look frozen on his face. I followed his line of sight and saw the deer also.

We watched as the young doe ate the tall grass at the base of the closest apple tree. She wasn't more than thirty feet away. I couldn't remember if I had ever been this close to a live deer before.

"Wow, just like your dad's story," whispered Joey out of the side of his mouth.

"Yeah, she must have just lost her spots."

We sat and watched for a good five seconds before both of our hands slammed down on the tractor's horn. She responded before her brain even knew what was going on. Her back legs collapsed out from under her and she staggered a few feet sideways using only front wheel drive. She regained her composure and ran off, still unaware of what had just tried to kill her. I was doubled over in the captain's chair unable to breathe. Joey continued to reenact the doe's legs giving out, sending me into renewed spasms of laughter.

We continued howling until it became safe to start the tractor. All the way back we continued to break out in almost uncontrollable fits of hysteric.

It wasn't until years later, with kids of my own, that I asked my dad if the old truck he used to get wood with had a working horn.

"Yes, it did," he recalled instantly, remembering an obviously obscure and unimportant fact of childhood. It was then I realized that Dad had once been young, and a mouse hunter ... like me.