

## **Pigs Might Fly**

Of course the children noticed it first.

At morning recess, most of the older boys were out on the ball diamond jawing at each other, spitting in imitation of even older boys and every now and then playing ball. Little Robbie Willett, as usual, was on the point of striking out. Wonder of wonders, he actually swung, bringing the Louisville Slugger into contact with the baseball, almost creating a hit. The ball spun off the bat and arced foul, landing with a thud and rolling toward where another boy sat upon the grass, staring across the skyline toward the bay.

“Jesus, you’ve done it now!” sneered ‘Soupy’ Campbell. “If he doesn’t give it back, you’re to blame, ya wimp. Go get it!”

“Not me,” replied the hapless Robbie Willett, “Last time he gave me a bloody nose!”

“You’ll get another bloody nose and a coupla black eyes if you don’t get it back. How’s that?” replied the convincing Mr. Campbell.

Judging that this present danger was worse than a possible future one, the youngster edged toward where the larger boy in the ripped jeans and smudged t-shirt sat. As he did, the boy picked up the ball and looked up at the younger boy. He tossed the ball into the air, but then, to everyone’s surprise, he held out his arm and offered it, shook it once and said, “Here you go, Willett.” Then he turned back to staring off into the distance.

Little Robbie was so surprised that he hesitated. The other boy just held out the ball, indicating that he should take it. Robbie grabbed it and hustled back to the game.

“What’ud he say?” someone asked.

“Just said, ‘Here you go’ . “Just as nice as anything.”

“Sure don’t sound like Brian,” Campbell said, frowning. “Must be sick or something. Just wait. Day or two he’ll be back, meaner’n ever.”

Yet, the rest of the week passed and nothing changed. Every noon and recess the boy they all feared, Brian Biggs, spent his time out of class, mostly staring out across the clouds watching the gulls gliding in the sky. The schoolyard had never experienced a quieter time, except perhaps on those rare days when Brian Biggs had been sick or suspended or had just plain played hookie. Those days had seemed like this - a kind of holiday.

The next week, the school became so peaceful and quiet that even the teachers noticed the difference. An eerie calm settled into the hallways. The classrooms hummed with activity. Looking up from her desk one day, Brian's teacher was amazed to see everyone at their seat, heads down and working on the math she had assigned. Even Brian was staring down at the top of his desk, actually reading! The most amazing thing was that he seemed to be reading, not doing the math she noted, but actually reading. She watched him patiently sounding out the words in what seemed to be an actual book!

In the staff room at recess, the other teachers, too, were surprised at the peace and quiet that had descended upon the school.

"You say he was actually reading?" Mr. Warden, the principal asked. "I didn't think he could!" He looked around at the others with a grin.

"Well, he certainly didn't learn how when I had him. Why, he very nearly drove me to an early retirement during my year with him," said an older teacher. "The little ruffian!" she added, before turning back to her knitting.

"What was he reading, anyway?" someone asked.

"I'm not exactly sure," replied Brian's teacher, "but whatever it was, it held his interest more than anything has so far this year."

"Well," the principal said, "whatever it is, you keep him at it. We have all appreciated the peace around here. Do us all a favour and keep up the good work!"

The teacher was young enough, naive enough, inexperienced and impressionable enough to do as she was told, convinced that it was her influence that had changed things for the better. A new confidence entered her lessons, the children were happier and Brian was quiet over the next weeks as they all held their breath.

Perhaps the last person to notice the change was Brian's father. Elwood Biggs rarely spoke to his son. People said Biggs would rather talk to his pigs than to humans. Rumour had it that he beat the boy when drink got the better of him. He hadn't always been that way, but only since Brian's mother had fled the farm.

Now Brian and his father lived together on a hardscrabble farm buried deep in the wildest part of the township. The poor, rocky fields were only good for sheep, goats and, in the Biggs' case, a herd of hardy, Yorkshire pigs and a scraggle of chickens. Yet, the land was right for Brian. There were forests and meadows for him to explore, streams to wade and plenty of game to chase. So, once his chores were done, Brian would escape to this rough, useless land where he could run and flail out his daily frustrations from school and at home. On nights when the weather turned foul, he joined his father, who drank his beer and the two of them stared transfixed at the blue light of the television until they fell asleep and groped their way to their beds. One night, though, all of this changed.

After chores that night, Brian disappeared as usual. Biggs locked the barn and set off toward the house. Looking up, he saw lights on in Brian's room. Wasting hydro, he thought, leaving lights on like that. When Brian did not come in from outside, he thumped upstairs to turn them off, resolved to at least scold his son for the unnecessary expense, but when he entered the room, Brian was there.

Biggs couldn't remember when he had last ventured into his son's bedroom. Brian had fallen asleep. A large book lay on the bed under his son's hand. What's this, he thought, Brian don't read. He turned off the light and stood a moment watching the boy sleep. It had been a long time since he had seen his son look so vulnerable, so at peace. Hell, he said to himself, you're gettin' soft, but he closed the door gently.

The next evening, Brian skipped through his chores leaving half of them poorly done. Biggs found him crouched against the wall of the driveshed.

"What's that you're foolin' with there, boy?" he asked. Brian had hidden something behind his back as his father approached.

"Nothin'. Jus' some paper's all," was the sullen reply.

“Lemme see.”

Brian held out a crumpled and folded swatch of notepaper. The paper had been creased and crumpled many times but there was nothing on either side.

“What’ve you been up to, sneakin’ around out here?” Biggs demanded.

Brian hesitated, no knowing whether to lie or tell his father the truth. He bent and pried loose a board. From inside the shed’s foundation he drew out a cardboard box and stepped back so his father could see it.

The carton overflowed with every kind of paper folded in different ways. Newspaper was shaped into wings. Notepaper abounded in aerodynamic forms. Heavier card paper was made lighter with airy designs. All of it was based upon an obsession with flight, with a passion for soaring escape from gravity. There were gliders, darts and multi-winged flyers bearing both jet and bird designs. Brian had created them, breathing lightness, flight and life into them.

“What the hell? Paper planes! For Christ’s sake,” Biggs railed. “Waste of time! How about your chores, boy?”

“I forgot ... I had a new idea for ...”

“Forgot! Them pigs is how we make a living. You don’t just forget ‘em to run off an’ fiddle with paper! Now get in that barn an’ do ‘em right. These, I’ll burn!”

“You can take care of your own fuckin’ pigs then,” Brian shouted, tears already coming to his eyes. He ran off across the fields.

Grumbling to himself, Biggs stood watching him before picking up the box and carrying it into the barn. While he cleaned out the sties and mixed the slop, he argued with himself about what he had seen. Mumbling curses, he finished the chores and was about to leave when he remembered the planes. He stood still in the barn’s half light, amid the grunt and wallow of the pigs and wondered what to do with his son.

“Shoulda done them chores. Like his mother, that one. All ideas and trouble. Now what am I supposed to do with these, eh?” he asked a fat sow who stared at him, muzzle filthy with slop. “You think I been too hard on him, do ya?”

You figure a boy's a boy. Must admit he's better'n most at this here."

He stared around at the interior of the barn. "Ya gotta admit he's a pile of trouble at that school but deep down ... So, what's to be done, pig? Eh? What's to be done?"

He picked up a paper plane and tossed it across the interior. He saw it glide across the space, flitting in and out of the sun's dying rays filtering through slats in the barnboard.

When he left the barn, he carried the box out to the driveshed and replaced it inside the foundation.

Brian returned very late. Biggs was already in bed, listening to his son come in. He heard him undress and get into bed. Does he ever brush his teeth or say his prayers, he wondered.

Brian was up early the next morning, but had gone outside by the time his father went down to make the coffee. The boy came in while he was fixing it, poured himself some Cheerios and sat at the table. Looking sheepish, he stirred his cereal, working up the courage to speak.

"Uh, thanks ... for the planes I mean," he said finally.

"Uh-huh," said Biggs, "they're your planes. Man's entitled to his own property, I guess."

Silence descended on the table. They both struggled with what to say. Biggs spoke first. I ... uh, used to make gliders like them of yours. Used to get holy hell for tossin' 'em at school. But I never seen as many as the different ones you made. Where'd the ideas come from?"

"Books 'n' stuff. I kinda changed 'em to make 'em fly better."

"Well, 's long as you do your chores an' keep your nose clean, I guess it's not my business to interfere. What you do after you're finished 's no business of mine."

Brian nodded and went back to his cereal. They finished breakfast and Brian went off to catch the school bus. Biggs sat thinking at the table and then

went off to check on the pigs. After that, he shaved and drove the rusty, Ford pickup into Chatsworth. He ignored the surprised stares that greeted him there. Most thought it common knowledge that hell would freeze over before Elwood Biggs showed his face in town before noon or sober.

He stopped off at the barber shop for a haircut and, for the first time since his wife had left him, ate at the coffee shop on the corner. He made polite conversation with the waitress and even left a tip. He stopped in at the Vietnamese grocery store, talked sports with the owner, bought a couple of sirloin steaks and had him show him where the magazines were. By the time he had run those errands he decided to drive to the school out on the highway. He sat in the parking lot and thumbed through the magazine, stopping a couple of times to read parts.

Before the buses arrived he saw a woman show up with a baby in a car seat. She grabbed the baby and stomped off into the school. A moment later she emerged, pushing a boy of about Brian's age ahead of her. The kid was crying and had a swollen, bloody lip. There was a large white bandage wrapped around his mouth. All the way out she was scolding him and even pointed her finger at him and jabbed him in the chest as they reached the car.

A secretary came out of the door, saw his pickup there and went back inside. Uh-oh, he thought. I wonder ...

He did not have to wonder very long. The principal came out and beckoned for him to come inside. Dammit, he thought.

"Could you come into the office a minute, Mr. Biggs?" said Warden. "Just a brief chat. And I want you to take Brian home."

Brian was seated in a chair by the office door. When he saw his father, he hung his head and stared at his feet.

"What now?" said Biggs, once the door to the principal's office closed.

"I'll be honest with you, Mr. Biggs," the principal said, his face assuming a grave expression. "We thought Brian was going to be a lost cause up until about three weeks ago - you know, drop out at sixteen, leave home, end up in trouble - but all of a sudden we noticed a change. Started behaving himself, no trouble on the yard. Hadn't seen him in here the whole time. He was even doing more in

class. Now don't get me wrong, we're not talking Einstein here, but he seemed to care about things. I'd hate to have today's 'incident' get in his way."

"What happened today?" Biggs said, sighing.

"On the yard at recess today, Brian and Henry Campbell got into another scrap. This one, however, was different than in the past. From what I was able to find out, it was young Henry who taunted Brian, something about his mother. Seems that since Brian has been so quiet this last month, Henry decided to take over the mantle of school 'tough guy'. I guess he decided that Brian was to be his first target."

"So Brian was just protecting himself?"

"I think you missed the point, Mr. Biggs. Henry is on his way to the hospital right now. I think Brian might have broken his jaw. He's looking at about six weeks recovery time if it is broken, sipping food through a straw.

Of course I have to suspend him for two weeks. After that, I'd like to think that maybe we can get him back on track. Maybe you can get through to him ... this time." His voice had risen as he spoke.

Biggs stood up and glared at the principal. "Sounds to me like you figger I'm to blame for this! Like I'm the one to clean up Brian's mess ..."

"That's not what I meant."

"Well Mister, I don't appreciate you tellin' me how to handle my kid. From the sounds of it, that other kid was to blame. Got just what he deserved. My boy did just what I woulda done! So you can keep your schoolteacher nose outa it!" With that, Biggs hurried out of the door.

As he did, the principal called after him. "Mr. Biggs please ..." but Brian's father didn't even turn around.

"Get out to the truck!" he snarled at Brian.

Both of them were silent on the way home. Brian had a sullen look on his face as he stared at his reddened knuckles. His father's face was tight with anger and disappointment.

“Get outa my sight, boy,” he hissed as they entered the kitchen. Brian shut himself away in his bedroom.

Biggs cooked himself some weiners and beans before grabbing a bottle of whiskey and setting off for the barn. He slugged it straight from the bottle as he shifted manure and straw, mixed slop and finished Brian’s chores. By the time he had finished some repairs that could have waited, the whiskey was half gone and a dark, brooding mood was on him. Twilight approached as he trudged back to the house and slumped in an easy chair before the tv. When he finally drained the bottle and wove up the stairs, he went into Brian’s room.

Brian peered up at him from where he sat on the edge of the bed, waiting to see what his father would say. He set aside the plane he was working on.

“Still screwin’ around with them, are ya? Like nothin’ happened, eh?” Biggs was breathing heavily and had to lean on the wall to balance himself. He was having difficulty focussing on his son. “Why the hell couldn’t you’ve just walked away, huh? Fightin’, swearin’ and makin’ problems for everybody. That’s all you’re good for!”

“He started it, him an’ a buncha his friends. Got what was comin’ to him. Shoulda left me alone steada callin’ me names.” Brian said with a surly look.

“That’s all you think about it, ain’t it. Yourself. You never think about what people think a me? Ever think about what I feel like to always have to account for my son an’ his ... moods? You know what they think of me? Like I’m not fit to have a kid. They figure you’d be all right if it wasn’t for me!” He slumped down on a chair to get his breath and to stop the room from spinning. “Know what I did today? Went into town feelin’ great. Even bought you this here plane magazine ‘cause you like ‘em. Figgered you was maybe comin’ around. But no, you had to screw things up ... again! I’m sick and tired of you messin’ up my life!”

With this he hurled the magazine at Brian almost falling over with the effort. Brian ducked and it hit the wall and slid down behind the bed.

“Things woulda been okay if it wasn’t for you and that slut mother of yours runnin’ off. The pair of you have been nothin but trouble. Be glad to see the backside of you when you’re sixteen. Lazy, good-for-nothing, little bastard!”

The whiskey took hold of him then. He lurched to his feet. Before Brian could defend himself, Biggs grabbed his shirt and slapped the boy across the face. Brian fell back on the bed. Biggs picked up the plane Brian had been working on and ripped it to pieces, hurling the torn and crumpled pieces at his son.

Brian exploded from the bed. He pounded at his father with all of the youthful rage he could summon. "What would you know about it ... you ... you old drunk!" Brian screamed at his father, his eyes wide with fury. "You ain't never been no father to me, so why d'you think you can start now? Quit blamin' me for your own troubles. Mom left 'cause she couldn't stand you!"

In his drunken state, it was all Biggs could do to hold his son back. Brian kept yelling and swinging wildly at him. Finally, as Brian stopped and slumped onto the bed, his father staggered from the room, stung by his son's words. He stumbled down the stairs, made it as far as the couch, collapsed onto it and stared half asleep at the empty screen.

Brian eventually stopped crying and lay still with his head lolling over the side of the bed and his arm dangling off the mattress. His face stung. He looked around and stared at the scraps of the plane on the bedspread. He thought about the future. At least I have a future, he thought, suddenly. He and my teachers have no idea what I'm going to do, what I dream of doing.

He reached down the side of the bed and found the magazine. He set it aside for later, put on his pyjamas and crept downstairs. He stood over his father a moment before he draped a blanket over him and turned off the light.

On the way back upstairs, a new idea for a better design came to him. He lay on his bed and closed his eyes, imagining it, larger and better than anything he had ever tried before. He knew it would fly. He would take it out to the highest hill in the back pasture and the wind would carry it up as light as a gull. He pictured it floating graceful and white, gliding forever away from the farm in the hills north of town.