

PURE TRASH

Short story EXCERPT:

By Bette A. Stevens

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Saturday morning. I could see a patch of sunshiny, bright blue sky peeking out through the torn curtain as I yawned good morning to my little brother. Willie was six. I was nine. No school, I thought, as I smiled and plotted our course for the day. Sometimes I wished Saturdays would last forever.

“Good morning sleepyhead,” Mum said. She smiled at me as I stretched my way into the kitchen. “Get yourself dressed, Shawn. Run out and split some firewood and bring it on in. I’ll fix you some hotcakes.”

I slipped on my overalls, grabbed the ax from behind Mum’s rocking chair and headed straight for the outhouse. Sometimes I wished we had an indoor bathroom and hot and cold running water like most folks did. I had to *go* bad. Didn’t know if I’d make it. Whoopee, I managed to hit that darned two-holer just in time. I always liked to use the hole where Dad sat. It was warm from the morning sun shining through the crack in the door. I whistled as I thought about what a great day this was going to be. Willie and me were going to ride our bikes into town, and I was sure we’d find some empty bottles, maybe enough to buy some soda pop. Willie loved his *Coca-Cola*. The birds chattered back and forth in the maple branches that hung down over the old two-holer as I sat and thought. Sun streaked across my lap. It was going to be a great day.

I split the wood just the way Mum liked it done. Stacked it in the kitchen near the cook stove, grabbed the pails and headed out to the well to haul in water for the day. Mum had laundry to do and baths to get ready for us tonight. Yes, it was going to be a great day all right.

Chores were all done and Mum’s hotcakes were waiting for me by the time I finished up outside and sat down at the table. Willie finished his breakfast in a flash and ran off to watch TV with Dad.

“Gee, Mum, can we go now?” I asked, as I gulped down the last forkful of hotcakes smothered with maple syrup that Mum boiled down from this winter’s sap.

“Now, Shawn, you be careful. Willie hasn’t gone out on the roads much, so you let him ride ahead of you. Keep a good eye on him. You hear?”

“Sure, Mum,” I said as I headed for the living room to get Willie.

Dad sat in the big brown chair, feet propped up on the worn hassock. Beer bottle in hand, all he heard or saw was his TV. It was Saturday, and Dad loved his baseball. Though I knew he’d find

time to take us boys to do some fishin' later—after he got good and drunk he'd be able to hold his mouth just right. Dad always said that you *had* to 'hold your mouth just right' or the fish wouldn't bite. He'd have enough beer in him by the time we got back so he'd be ready to catch his limit. The games should be over by then. We'd run down to the brook, walk out into the cool swirling water and catch some trout or brookies for supper. Yes, it would be a great day all right.

"Come on, Willie," I said. "Let's go!"

Willie nearly knocked me down as the two of us raced for the door. Mum reminded us to be careful. "Yes 'um," I hollered back. We jumped on our bikes and pedaled hard up the driveway.

Mum said it was three miles to town. I kept my eyes on Willie as we pumped up the first hill. We coasted down the other side with the cool wind brushing our faces, ready to head up the next hill.

"Pull over, Willie," I hollered when we got to the top of Andover.

Andover was the biggest hill we'd have to climb. We both stood up on our pedals as we started the climb. The turnout in the pines at the top of the hill was the perfect spot to find empty cans and bottles on either side of the ridge. I never did understand why anyone would just throw those bottles out like trash. But I was sure glad they did. Stark's General Store paid cash, two cents each, and we thought we were rich every time the clerk handed us our reward in real money.

Pedaling up the half-mile hill was a lot of work, but it was worth it, and not for just the empties. Flying down the other side gave me the best feeling in the whole wide world. I guess that's how that old chicken hawk feels when he soars above the pines at the edge of the field out back of the house.

Once we reached the peak, we plopped our bikes on the ground and threw ourselves onto the soft, damp bed of leaves at the edge of the woods. It was so peaceful. My mind wandered into the sky and I dreamed about the ride down the other side and the 10 cent *Orange Crush* I'd buy at Stark's General Store.

"Hey, Willie," I finally asked, "did ya bring the slingshot?"

"Sure did, Shawn. Whatcha wanna shoot today?"

Willie's brown eyes looked as big as Mum's pan fried donuts and his smile pretty nearly filled his round face as he jumped right up from his leafy bed and hovered over me like a bear.

I helped Willie make that slingshot out of rubber bands I'd sliced from one of the old inner tubes piled out by Dad's rusty Ford Roadster. That Ford had headlights on top of the fenders and the "old jalopy," as Mum called it, was just rottin' away out back of the two-holer. We broke a crotched limb out of the choke cherry bush to use for the handle. I tied the rubber band and the handle together with string from one of the flowered chicken feed sacks that Mum used to make her house dresses. That string was real strong and I was good at tying knots. Willie was proud as a peacock when it came to showing off that slingshot.

“How about we find some old tin cans and pile them up like a tower?” I asked Willie. “Better yet, let’s both make towers and see whose gets knocked down first.”

“Yes, siree!” Willie hooted as he made a mad dash to grab as many of the rusty cans as his chubby arms could hug together at one time.

We played on that hill, building at least a hundred towers. All shapes and sizes, some looking like castles. Every now and then we’d take a shot at a passing squirrel or chipper. It was a great day, all right. We found more empties than ever. This was the first sunny day in a long time.

The sun was high over the trees across the road before we piled the last of our empty bottles into the huge chicken-wire basket I’d made for my bike last fall. Willie’s bike had a regular basket, but it didn’t hold much. We ran back to grab a few more and stuffed as many as we could into our overall pockets. I shoved the last two down the front of my shirt and tucked it in good and tight.

We were off! What a feeling. Flying into the wind, I could see Willie’s hair whirling in a hundred different directions while my own whipped around my ears and face. Mum would sure take the scissors to the two of us tonight. Then we’d hop into the big metal washtub filled with steaming water from her cook stove. That bath would feel good, too.

Brakes, bike tires and a cloud of dust announced our arrival in the gravelly sand covering Stark’s parking lot. I was feeling like David right after he conquered the giant Goliath. That’s when I looked up and spotted Mr. Wentworth pointing over at Willie and me from his brand-spankin’ new 1955 Ford pickup. That red truck shined just like the candied apples Mum made for us kids in the fall. I could hear his deep-throated laugh as he stared at us boys from across the lot.

“There’s Eddy Daniels’s boys, regular chips off the old block,” I heard him telling old Tom Matthews, the town barber.

As the men laughed and talked, Mr. Wentworth’s steel-like eyes never lost sight of Willie and me.

Sometimes I hated coming to town. Like I hated going to school. Folks like the Wentworths always made me feel like a nobody. The minute I’d spot them, I could feel my breath stop. My hands, my teeth and my stomach all got sucked in together. I wanted to throw up. I hated that feeling.

Just thinking about those people made me feel sick. Folks like that always got a big kick out of making fun of Eddy Daniels’s kids. They always teased us about Dad’s drinking.

Mr. Wentworth hollered over to me. “Hey boy! Your pop too poor to buy you a real basket for that bike? He sure had plenty of cash for beer last night.”

I hated it.

When he said that, I couldn't help but think about how Mum had bawled her eyes out when Dad brought home that brand-spankin' new *Zenith* TV. She said that if he'd had money to buy a television, he'd better find the money to start fixin' up the house. I hated them fighting, too.

Mr. Wentworth's eyes glared straight through me, and he grinned like he knew how it made me feel.

I forced my eyes to look at the ground in front of my shoes, while the men joked and laughed. My hands clenched and unclenched. I pretended not to hear them. Willie was still looking straight at them with an open-mouthed grin on his face. I could tell he was ready to holler right back at them. Willie was a talker. Mum calls him "The Social Bugger."

Carefully, I unhooked my basket, shot a quick glance at Willie and whispered, "Hush. You just grab your bottles and follow me."

We headed straight for the twelve wooden steps leading up to Stark's General Store.

Mr. Stark himself was behind the counter today. I always liked to see him. He was smiling back as if he was glad to see us, too. Empty bottles and all. Most of the clerks hated to see empties. They'd roll their eyes and shake their heads as if to say, "Not you two, again." But not Mr. Stark. He was a different sort. His silver and black speckled hair had waves that curled around his face. His haircut sort of fit right in with his smile. Bright blue eyes sparkled and danced inside those wire-framed spectacles that looked way too small for his big round face.

"Hi, boys! Looks like you two young'uns are in for some extra treats with all those empty bottles." Mr. Stark smiled at Willie and me as he counted them up. "Forty-eight cents," he said, reaching into the cash drawer for the four dimes and eight pennies that he pressed into my hand as he winked and smiled.

I was sure that Mr. Stark knew I'd divide the money between us. The other clerks would have tossed a quarter, two dimes and three pennies right down on the counter. But not Mr. Stark. He closed my fingers around the coins with his huge hand. It felt like a big friendly hug. I knew why I liked him a lot.

"Thank you, sir!" I smiled back at Mr. Stark and then down at Willie. Willie and me headed straight back out the door. We sat on the steps and began our storefront ritual. We had all the time in the world today. We were as free as the birds and the bees. We had our bikes and plenty of money to boot.

"What a day, Willie! We've got enough for ice cream, some soda pop and probably a bunch of penny candies, too," I said. Then I handed Willie his share.

"Dang it, Shawn. You mean I get to hold on to my own money today?" Willie shook his head and quizzed me as I handed him his share of the cash.

"You sure do, Willie. I think you're getting big enough now to do some figurin' on your own. Just give a holler if you need any help."

We grinned at each other. It was like we were sharing one of the world's best kept secrets. Then, we marched right back up over those twelve steps and headed straight inside Stark's to pick out our treasures.

I sure wasn't in any kind of a hurry. Stark's carried just about everything anybody could think of. I liked to wander around and look over the fishing gear. Today I had plenty of time to check out lots of other neat stuff, too. I knew Willie would head straight for the ice cream freezer.

I headed around the store to get a peek at all the stuff I'd never had time to take a real close look at before. Sporting goods. I loved to go fishin'. The glass case came nearly up to my shoulders and ran the length of the back wall, except for the space where a clerk could get in behind. The bottom shelves held knives of different shapes and any size you could imagine. Some of the knives were simple, others downright fancy. There were smooth leather covers and holders for those blades that likely cost more money than I'd ever see at one time. On the next shelf were handguns. One was so small it looked just liked a cap gun and there were lots of other pistols. Rifles and shotguns, too. There were even fancy leather holsters just like the ones *Roy Rogers*, *The Lone Ranger* and all the cowboys wore on TV and in the movies.

On the back wall above the glass case hung bows and arrows, and gun racks filled with rifles and shotguns. There were jackets, vests, fishing gear and even bags to carry your trout back home in. Best of all were the fishing poles. How I longed for a real pole. One with a spinning reel and some store-bought hooks. Oh sure, I'd still use worms. They worked real good. Didn't need all those fancy doo-dads made with feathers to get fish to bite. Didn't need a store-bought pole either. But, oh, how I wanted one. "Someday, I'll have me one just like that," I told myself, spellbound by the shiny green pole and black reel that hung high over the glass counter. Someday.

"Yes. Someday, I think I'll get me a store, just like Mr. Stark's. I'll work at the counter every Saturday when all the kids come in," I thought dreamily, smiling up at that perfect, shiny green pole.

"Hey, Shawn, whatcha get?" Willie asked right after he rammed his shoulder up against my arm.

I jumped right out of my daydream and shook my head. Then, I turned around to meet Willie's ear-to-ear grin.

"You owe Mr. Stark five cents for my *Good 'n Plenties*, Shawn. I already opened 'em up. Can't put 'em back on the shelf *now*."

Willie's hands were full. One held his soda pop and a small brown bag that I knew was chock full of his favorite candies. The other held his ice cream. Willie was more than ready to devour it all right on the spot.

"I'll take care of it, Willie," I said. "I'll meet you out front in a couple minutes. I've got to get my stuff and settle up with Mr. Stark."

Sure, Willie spent more than his twenty-four cents, but that was OK. Willie loved his sweets.

Willie sat on the step licking the sticky remains from his lips and fingers by the time I'd finished up inside. The only thing left of that ice cream was an empty wooden stick. His face said it all. When it came to ice cream, chocolate was Willie's favorite.

"Hey, Shawn, what we gonna do when we leave Starks's? Whatcha say we stop over to the school playground before we head back home? Can we? Can we, *please?*"

Willie's endless words only stopped every now and then so he could pop a cherry-coated *Tootsie Pop* onto the tip of his tongue and snatch it in for a lick or two.

"You promised we'd have all day, Shawn. I want to swing right over top of those bars and then hang upside down on the tip top of the jungle gym. I ain't s'posed to do that at recess, Shawn. This might be the only chance I got. *Please?*"

"We'll see, Willie," I told him as I licked the last smooth bite of ice cream from my stick.

I still had money in my pocket. "Come on, Willie. Let's go back inside and get a soda pop. We can share an *Orange Crush* right out here, turn in our empties and grab some more candy before we head out."

Willie's eyes lit up like fire crackers.

"So long, Shawn and Willie. Now, don't you boys eat all of those sweets at once," Mr. Stark said as he smiled at us after we turned in our bottles and headed out the door cramming licorice sticks and bubble gum into our pockets. "See you boys at church tomorrow morning."

"See ya tomorrow, Mr. Stark," I called back and smiled.

"Can we head over to the playground, Shawn? *Right now?* Please, please, *purty please?*" Willie begged.

I finally said, "Sure, Willie, let's go!"

END OF EXCERPT

Dear Reader:

Thank you for taking the time to read this excerpt from PURE TRASH. I would love to hear what you think about this short story so far... I am currently (2014) working on my first novel; PURE TRASH is a prequel to this coming of age novel.

Happy reading,

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