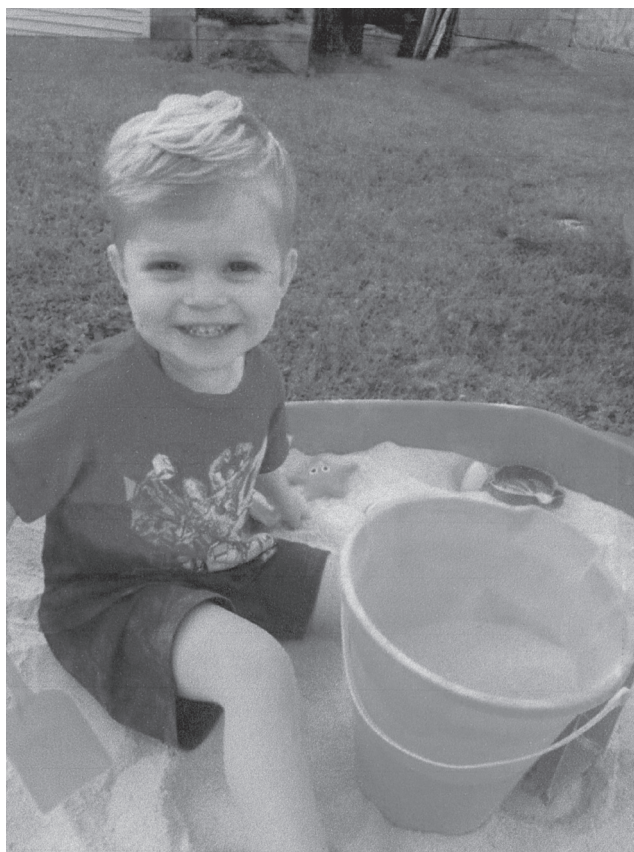




JOHN SELAND

HONEY CHIL'



HONEY CHIL'

JOHN SELAND

Contents

A Piece of Gold	3
Here's for You	8
Just a Lot of Talk.....	16
The Fight.....	24
Honey Chil'	31
The Stoning.....	41
Uncle George	53
The Tunnel	65
A Very Special Kind of Lady	74
Ronnie	84
An Empty Show	99
Mrs. G.	107

A Piece of Gold

Mommy bent her head down as she leaned over the sink. She had her sleeves rolled up and was washing something. Everybody else was still sleeping, wrapped up tightly in their blankets. Where was daddy? I whipped off the blanket, slid from the cot and put my feet into my sneakers. Mommy didn't notice me standing behind her, watching. Then I turned around and jumped off the landing to the sandy ground, standing for a while to rub the sleep out of my eyes.

For no special reason, I started walking down towards the pond. Now and then a frog would give a hop to get out of the way. Scaredy-cats! Grasshoppers were already out in numbers, some just little guys, but there were big greeny ones, too, with long spidery legs. Their antennae waved up and down as they sat on thin blades of grass, as if they were saying hello to one another. I tried to catch a few, but every time, bing!—off they'd go fluttering through the air.

Coming up to the dock, I tiptoed gently out towards the end, trying as best I could not to make any noise.

Crouching down over the far end, I slowly peered underneath. Not far away, a couple of bluegills were lying still and quiet in the shade just off to one side, fanning and fanning the water. Could I swoop down and catch one?

Just then, someone called from behind. 'Jackie! Breakfast time!'

I scampered back along the dock up to where Rebecca was standing. She took my hand and we made our way back to the tent.

Mommy had everything all ready. A big colorful bowl of freshly picked blueberries sat solidly in the middle of the table. I took a little porridge, scooped some of the berries on top and added some milk and sugar. Every now and then, daddy would take a sip of coffee, gripping the cup with his big gnarled hands. The steam made nice smoky lines rising up from the hot coffee. Once in a while he'd pare his nails, or give his teeth a suck, or nonchalantly look out to the woods or down towards the pond. After a while, he said, in the deep, slow voice that I loved, 'Listen, fellows! I'm going to buy something this morning. How 'bout it? You two guys want to come along?'

'Sure, daddy!' I said, 'we'll come!'

'Okey-doke! You help mommy clean up the dishes, and I'll take you with me. Soon as you're done, off we go!'

We rode through the countryside for about half an hour, then daddy brought the car to a stop and parked at the side of the road. A small house stood on the far end of a

yard full of freshly cut lumber. Daddy said he'd just be away for a while, so we decided to look around a little, near the car.

After a few minutes, Rebecca got an idea. 'Listen! While daddy's getting the wood, here's what we'll do. We'll play tag. First, you're *it*. You've got to catch me and touch me. Then I'll be *it*. Understand?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I understand.'

Rebecca started out, running on top of a pile of timber, stacked about eight or nine feet up from the ground. The wood had already been cut flat, so it was easy going. When she gave me a signal, I started, running as fast as I could to catch her. After a while, some fifteen or twenty feet behind her, I saw her slow down, then jump from one place to another. I came up quickly, but stopped when I saw the gap between the lumber.

'Come on!' she said, beckoning from the other side. 'Don't be afraid! Jump!'

Backing up a few feet, I came up running hard and jumped. Everything happened very quickly after that, and I'm not sure of the details. I knew, though, that I hadn't jumped far enough. I was lying on the ground, Rebecca bending over me.

'Oh, Jackie!' she said in a frightened voice. 'You're hurt! Stay here—I'll get daddy!'

When I put my hand to my head and saw it full of blood, I knew that I was cut badly. There was nothing

else to do but wait. Then daddy came. He lifted me up and carried me as quickly as he could to the car.

Daddy raced the car down an old dirt road as fast as he could, frantically looking for a farmhouse or any place where someone could help and find a doctor. Rebecca and I sat in the back of the car, not saying a word. I could feel the blood seeping down my face and neck. I was afraid. We were all afraid.

When we came to a small house close to the road, daddy stopped the car and lifted me up again. The next thing I knew, we were being ushered into a certain room in the house by an elderly man wearing a long white coat.

'I've never done this before,' he said. 'But there's no time. Quick! Set him on the chair!'

The room looked just like the office of the dentist mommy once took me to, with a big light overhead and different kinds of little tools on a tray. It even had the same kind of smell. The man approached and smiled.

'Little boy,' he said, 'what's your name?'

'Jackie,' I said.

'Okay, Jackie. Now, you have a little cut on your head and I'm going to fix it. It may take some time.' Then, opening a drawer, he took out a pack of gum. 'Do you see this gum? If you stay still and don't cry, when I'm finished, I'll give it to you. How 'bout that?'

It being wartime, I couldn't remember the last time it was I'd had gum. 'Okay, I will,' I said, mixing up my

grammar.

God only knows what went on after that, with all the pulling and pressing and squeezing. But at one point, when I felt like crying, I happened to catch daddy looking straight at me. I don't know—he didn't say anything out loud—and yet it was as if I could hear him saying, 'Do it! You can do it! Just a little more! Do it! Do it!' And, of course, every now and then I'd see the pack of chewing gum sitting there on the tray.

Finally, the man stopped. He stood up straight, and then put one of the tools on the table. His face was wet—even parts of his white coat were wet, and there were blood stains on the sleeves.

"It's over! God, by God!" he said, turning to my father.

Then he looked at me again. Seeing me staring at the gum, he said, 'Oh, yes. Sorry! I almost forgot.' Then he put the package of gum in my hand. I could feel him pressing my hand firmly with both hands as he did so.

Daddy came and lifted me gently down from the chair. He spoke for a few minutes with the man, then he carried me back to the car, my head swathed in bandages. As he drove the car back slowly towards the camp, I held the package of gum tightly in my hands as if it were a piece of gold.

Here's for You

Every place, I suppose, has something that makes it unique, something that stands out and makes it different. The same is true of Scranton. What I'm referring to particularly is a time a little over a hundred years ago. The city at that time was right smack in the center of the coal fields running through the Allegheny Mountains, from Kentucky, up through West Virginia and into northeastern Pennsylvania. Besides that, there were the railroads. Located right in the middle of the big cities—east and west (New York and Chicago), and south and north (Philadelphia and Montreal)—Scranton was a hubbub of activity, and in its heyday a good four lines ran through the city. But those were the good old days. In the 1950s, after superhighways were built across the states, the railroads declined. So, too, did the coal industry, with new ways, like oil and electricity, to run the factories and heat homes. On top of all that, cheaper cloth being provided by countries in Asia closed the local lace mills. Not everything went down, of course, and, ironically, the changes led to some improvements. It became a nice

place to live in—smaller and quieter, the "Friendly City."

When I was a boy growing up in the forties, my family was probably typical of many others. We were middle class, I suppose. Because of the economic situation, there wasn't much money flowing around. People counted their pennies.

My father was one of the lucky ones—he had a good steady job working for the A&P chain of grocery stores. 'In forty-two years,' he used to boast, 'I never missed a day, even if I was sick.' It wasn't the whole truth, exactly. Sometimes he'd be bothered by ulcers and would leave work early. But by and large, what he said was true—he never missed a day.

And so, as might be imagined, every year when Christmas rolled around, mom and dad had to figure things out pretty carefully. We were seven children, but it was an unwritten law that everybody had to receive a present—not only one, actually, but because we would offer presents to each other, we were able to receive many gifts. Be as it may, I'd like to tell you about one particular Christmas that I remember with special vividness.

Around the beginning of December, mom and dad had decided that, with Christmas barely three weeks away, it was time to do some shopping. And so, early one afternoon, we hopped on a bus and took a trip to town.

Once downtown, dad turned to me and said, 'Now, go with your mother! She's got a few things to buy and you

can help her carry the packages.' It was only later that I figured out just where he was going—to the bank to pick up some money.

I still remember the first place we headed for, the Globe Store, down in the basement. As we came down the stairs, I could see a large group of children waiting in line to talk to Santa. Finally, after what seemed to be infinity, it came my turn. I walked up to Santa, who gave me a big smile and lifted me up so that I could sit on his lap.

'Well, hello, youngster!' he said. 'And what might be your name?'

'My name is Jackie,' I replied, feeling quite in the limelight sitting up there on his lap.

"Jackie! That's a nice name. Now tell me, Jackie, what is it you would like for Christmas?"

"A red wagon," I said, not in the least thinking that such a present would be beyond someone as big and strong and friendly as Santa.

'Oh, I see,' he said. Then, looking out at the mothers, he said in a loud voice, 'Jackie wants a red wagon, does he? Well, let's see what we can do about that. Thank you for coming, Jackie! And remember, be good! Santa likes children who are good.'

In a flash, I was back at my mother's side.

'Did you hear what Santa said?' she reminded me. 'He said to be good. Did you promise Santa to be a good

boy?'

"Oh, I forgot, I said. 'I'll go and tell him.'

'No, that won't be necessary,' she said. 'Santa knows everything. If you're good, he'll know.'

You can imagine how good I was from that time on. Not only I; we were all good. Cleaning the snow off the sidewalks, washing the supper dishes, shoveling coal into the furnace and taking out the ashes—you name it, we were right there, for always at the back of our minds were the words, 'Remember, Santa knows everything! If you're good, he'll know.'

Anyway, time passed quickly, though I think for a child it could never pass quickly enough. Midnight Mass at Nativity Church was glorious, with the full choir and the church packed to overflowing. You couldn't get in after eleven-thirty, that's for sure. I liked the procession into the church, too. There were dozens of altar boys, and each of us had a big tall candle. 'Hold it straight!' Sister Helen'd tell us. 'You don't want wax all over your surplice.'

I was never too keen on the sermons for Midnight Mass, unless they were by Father Fallon. Those of the other priests went right over my head, but he had a way of making things more simple so that even the children could understand. And, wouldn't you know, that Christmas Eve was Father Fallon's turn. I'll never forget what he said.

'Once upon a time there was a young man hiking

through the woods. After walking for some time, he came upon a very large field. And, lo and behold, there on the other side of the field was a magnificent cliff, a hundred feet high. Ah, thought the man, I wonder how good the echo is? Let's give it a try! Then he called out in a loud voice, "I hate you!" Soon, just as expected, back came the echo. "I hate you!" Then the man continued on his hike.

The next day, he decided to walk along the same path. Seeing the cliff again, he thought of giving it another try. But this time he called out in a loud and clear voice, "I love you!"

I can't remember exactly what Father Fallon said after that. Actually, now that I think of it, I don't think he said anything. He just bowed a little to the people and went and took a seat. You could hear if a pin dropped, it was that quiet.

When it was time for the Offertory, I was glad to move around a bit. We fetched the cruets and handed them to the priest so he could pour the water and wine into the chalice. That was good. And so, too, was the 'Holy, Holy, Holy,' since we could ring the bells. But then there was the long wait till the *Agnes Dei*. I had all I could do to keep from dropping to the floor, I was so sleepy. But once we made it to the Communion, then it was really great. Each one of us would go with a priest and hold the paten under people's chins. Sometimes it was hard for the priest to get the host in—some of the people wouldn't stick out

their tongues far enough, so he'd have to pitch it in somehow. (The priests had a lot of practice doing that kind of thing, so they almost never failed.) Or some of the people would stick their tongues way out and lick the priest's fingers. I don't think the priests liked that too much.

After Mass, all I could think of was home—home and presents. Mom would always have some hot-cross buns warmed up, along with eggnog. To tell the truth, I think she spiked the eggnog a little with some brandy or something. Otherwise, none of us would ever get to sleep, thinking of the presents under the tree.

Anyway, come early next morning, we sprang out of bed and made a dash downstairs. Sure enough, just as I expected, there under the tree was a bright red wagon. Santa always kept his promises.

I was too young at the time to think too much about the reasons for Christmas, although I knew, of course, that we were celebrating the birthday of Jesus. Sister Helen never got tired of telling us about that. We also had the beautiful Nativity scene along both sides of the altar and, up above, perched on a wire, was an angel holding a sign: *Hosanna in the highest!* Come to think of it, I also didn't know too much about where all those presents came from, I mean, the ones from mom and dad. Dad was a grocer and had some money in the bank. That's all I knew. But now as I look back, I realize that there was a lot more involved.

For one thing, there was a friendly spirit that sort of floated around. We didn't say many words, just 'Merry Christmas!' or 'Here's for you!' But those few words always had a lot of meaning. They went to the heart.

Years later, my brother Timmie, having finished college under the ROTC program, decided that the best thing for him to do would be to join the army. I still remember what mom said to him as he was about to leave home. 'Ask them if they'll let you come home for Christmas.' And, wouldn't you know, by some good piece of luck, he was able to come home for Christmas, even though he'd been in the army less than a year.

Now, I'm not really sure just how much soldiers are paid each month nowadays; I think it's much better than it used to be. But what I do know is that when Timmie came home, the first thing he did was to go straight to town and begin buying Christmas presents. Not just for mom and dad; he bought presents for everybody. What did he do then? Crazy guy—he spent all Christmas Eve wrapping them. No kidding! When I woke up early Christmas Day, there he was close to the Christmas tree, wrapping the last presents and pasting on little stickers with names on them. You should have seen the look on his face! Honest to God, though he hadn't slept a wink, I've never seen anyone look so happy.

Everyone is a lot older now, and our roads have diverged in many different directions. But Christmas is

still a special time. And we still have the custom of giving one another gifts, whether it's a parcel in the mail, a phone call, or a direct hand-to-hand offering. It's wonderful, really. I wouldn't change it for the world.

Just a Lot of Talk

It wasn't supposed to take long. I only had to run to the grocery store just down the street to buy some sugar, salt and yeast. Grandma wanted to bake some bread, and I was sent to get the ingredients.

Since it was summertime, it was still light at seven-thirty. Anyway, the dark didn't scare me anymore. All those stories about devils with long tail coats and pitchforks were a thing of the past, and I could now laugh at myself for being afraid to creep up the attic steps till I got to the light switch, and how I'd breathe a sigh of relief once the light clicked on. All that was for sissies.

Mr. Walsh, the grocer, sorted everything out, wrapped it in three small packets, tallied up the bill and reached across the counter to give it to me.

'That'll be fifty-two cents, young man,' he said in a friendly voice.

I had the money in my hand already, two quarters and two pennies. (Grandma was always correct about these things.)

"Thank you very much," said Mr. Walsh. "Your

grandmother's very sharp, isn't she? Can't fool a soul like that. Say hello to her for me, won't you?'

'Yes,' I answered, and headed for the door.

As I began to walk towards grandmother's house—it was only four blocks away—I thought I saw in the distance the figure of a man running in my direction. I didn't pay much attention until he came closer, then I began to wonder why he was running. Presently, as he came near, he slowed down, then began to walk. I watched him intently, still rather puzzled. As he passed me, I got a glimpse of his face. He was young, maybe about twenty-five or twenty-six years old, tall, good-looking, and dressed rather nicely in a long overcoat, a suit, and a tie. At that moment, although it was summertime, his wearing an overcoat didn't strike me as odd. Later, though, I wondered why someone would be wearing heavy clothes in such mild weather. Anyway, as I said, when he passed me, I got a good look at his face, or as good a look as might be had at that time in the evening. He smiled as he passed, and I continued walking up the street towards home. But then, whether out of curiosity or because of some kind of presentiment, I slowed my pace and turned to look behind me. There he was, standing at the crossing, looking towards me. After a few seconds, he began to walk in my direction. Sensing that he wanted to talk to me, I stayed where I was and waited. When he came close, he held up a finger indicating that he had something in mind.

'Excuse me, little boy,' he said with a smile. "Can you tell me where O'Malley's is? You know, O'Malley's Bar? I'm not from around here. Kind of lost, actually.'

'Oh, yes,' I said, trying to be helpful. 'It's just down the street. Go down to Albright Avenue—that's the street down there—until you come to Walsh's grocery store. Then turn left. It's just up the street on the right side.'

He smiled again, and drew a little closer. 'Say, young fellow, you seem to know your way around here pretty well!'

'Yes,' I said, 'my grandmother lives here.' I pointed in the opposite direction. 'Right up there!'

"Oh, is that so?" he quipped. 'And what brings a little fellow like yourself outside at such a dark hour?'

I held up the bag of groceries, trying to indicate my mission. 'I just bought some things for her.'

'My, my, isn't that something! Little Red Riding Hood . . . different sex, though, isn't it?'

At this point, he inched closer to me, so close that I stepped back a little. Then he put his hand on my shoulder. 'Listen, what's your name? Can you tell me that?'

I didn't really feel like telling him anything, much less my name but, feeling it would be impolite not to, especially since he had asked so directly, I told him. 'My name is Jack.'

'Jack! My, my, isn't that a nice name! Reminds me of the children's story . . . what's it called? Oh, yes,

"Jack and the Beanstalk." Isn't that it? Ah, yes, now I remember. "Once upon a time there lived a poor widow. . ." Sorry, can't remember the rest. It's been a long time. Can't forget the beans, though, and the cow. The cow, hah! Can't forget the cow.'

As he was talking, one hand—I think it was his left—held my shoulder firmly; the other hand went back and forth slowly across my chest. He kept saying something, but I can hardly remember now, having grown so anxious with fright. I think it was: 'Perky little fellow, perky little fellow, trading his mother's cow,' or something like that. After some time, the hand moved down to my stomach, again slowly moving back and forth, back and forth. By then, I found myself frozen into a block of ice, unable to move. I didn't even think of calling out.

Just around that time, another figure began to walk toward us from the direction of grandmother's house. When the figure drew near, the man took his hands from me and stood there, as if he was just having a friendly chat with me.

Now, why at that time I didn't bolt for freedom or say something is beyond my comprehension. God knows, I had good reason. But, instead, I just stood there like a stupid scarecrow. The figure passed by and, after some time, once again, the man laid his hand on my shoulder. Just when I thought everything would start all over again, I noticed that the man who had just passed was pausing

before crossing the street. Then he turned around, looked back at where we were standing, reversed himself, and came walking briskly in our direction. That was enough for the man holding me. He took off with a violent burst of energy, entering an alley a little way up the street and perpendicular to where we had been standing. The newcomer approached me, crouched down, and began to ask questions.

'Are you all right? Was that guy up to anything with you? What's been happening here?'

I was shaking so badly, I could barely manage to talk.

'I . . . I don't know,' I mumbled. 'I . . . I have to go home now. Th . . . thank you. I . . . I'm sorry.'

'Wait!' the man said. 'Where do you live? I'd better go with you.'

Kindly, the man accompanied me the short two blocks to grandmother's home. Once again, I thanked him. He waited until I opened the door to go inside.

No one was in the kitchen, so I quietly made my way to the living room and sat on the sofa. Presently, grandma came. When she saw me sitting there, alone and quiet (probably looking as white as a ghost), she began to ask questions.

'Jackie, what happened? Are you all right? Did something scare you?'

I tried to explain that everything was all right. There was nothing wrong. Then, like a cracked dam, the