

Just Wait

"Just wait until your father comes home...." Supposedly those words strike terror in the minds of youngsters in the average American family and cause them to behave the rest of the day to avoid a dread discipline. I say "supposedly" because I don't remember ever hearing it in my family, nor do I recall that any of my young friends reported hearing it. I believe the expression is probably part of the mean stepmother syndrome of fairy tales and other fiction.

I do remember an expression similar to that, but it's an expression which was my own: "When Daddy gets home, he'll . . ." mend my doll, fix my tricycle, make a whirly gig ... And he generally did.

The trouble was that he didn't get home every day. In the years before the Great Depression, Daddy was the production manager of the Republic Production Company, one of the cogs in the flourishing oil business in Texas. As I comprehended his job, he negotiated leases with ranchers in West Texas after the company geologists had determined that a particular area was worth exploring for oil. Then he supervised the establishing of the drill site and generally superintended the exciting or discouraging work attending bringing in a new well. His work took him to West Texas, to such towns as Lubbock, Olney, Midland, Odessa, and even El Paso, for a week or two or three weeks at a time. This absence would be followed by a week or so at the home office in Dallas. I have to describe his duties in vague terms because of my age at the time, my lack of deep interest in the details of his work, and the fact that, once the Depression put a temporary end to the exploration for oil in West Texas, his company failed and we didn't talk much about the work he had done. But I do recall an occasional triumphant return home when he was able to celebrate a "gusher," when the drilling struck a productive oil stratum with sufficient force to blow oil out the pipes into the air. And I recall a few trips with him to the mysterious oil rigs, with the matter-of-fact "roughnecks" who wrestled long pipes in and out of the hole they were drilling into the depths of the earth.



Since Daddy didn't get home every day, sometimes not every week, his arrival was an event I eagerly looked forward to. The arcane language of the oil field may have been exciting to him, but Daddy's activities with us children were what we waited for. I was convinced that he could fix anything. If my doll's eyes rolled back into her head leaving blank holes, he could remove her head and show me the mechanism of the eye lids/blue eyes balanced by a tiny lead weight which opened or closed the eyes depending upon whether the doll was sitting or lying down. He would re-install the mechanism and carefully return the modeled head to the soft body. My "baby" was well again until she suffered another accident.

During the summer months, we would save peach pits, drying them carefully until Daddy had time to take out his pocket knife, open the smaller blade, hone it to an exquisite sharpness, and slowly carve the seed into a monkey holding his tail between his front paws. Sometimes he would make a tiny tea set from the seeds. I regret that I no longer have any of those cunning sculptures, but I must have had dozens of them over the years and the memory of the stylized animal and utensils taking shape is one I treasure.

That pocket knife featured in other activities I always looked forward to. When he found the right piece of wood (white, grainless, smooth - it must have been pine), he would take a two-foot square piece and whittle it into a marvelous shape. On each end would be a six or seven link chain, one set of links straight, the other set twisted. In the middle would be a three-inch, four-barred cage with a free-floating ball I could tilt from end to end. I was enchanted with the one-piece production of these toys, and later I thought I understood what Michelangelo meant when he spoke of releasing the figure in the piece of marble before him. Daddy released those links and that ball from the piece of wood, using only his ingenuity and his trusty pocket knife.

The knife starred in an annual Fall ritual during which Daddy would sit on the cement steps leading to the backyard and shell the pecans that we had collected from the trees on his old homestead farm in Cook County north of Dallas. He would carve away bits of shell from pointed end to rounded end of the nut to reveal and then release the whole meats that Mother would store until she needed them for her pecan pies or other delights. There was always a large clutter of bits of shell around him on the steps as he worked. He would sweep them up, but inevitably there would be shells in the grass, which disappeared by the next spring. Did he sweep them up, too, or did they biodegrade into the soil? I don't know, for by the time he had finished the shelling operation, I was generally involved in watching the production of the ceremonial first pie.

Sometimes, Daddy, my brother and sister, and I would attempt to play mumble-de-peg (my dictionary assures me the word is "mumble-the-peg") in the back yard. Daddy had many variations of the game, some with the large blade bent at a ninety-degree angle, most with the blade extended straight. The only one I was ever successful doing was flipping the blade from my hand as straight as possible into the ground, the simplest and least challenging version of the game. He could launch it from his shoulder or from his elbow and have the blade sticking upright in the ground every time.

Several times he brought home pieces of steer horns he'd picked up on the farms around the oil rigs. These he would saw into one- or two-inch lengths, carefully and laboriously whittling them into rings. He would end by sanding the ring to a satiny smoothness, an operation I didn't enjoy because the heat of the sanding produced an acrid, disagreeable smell, the same sort of odor one can get by too industriously filing one's nails. But the rings were beautiful - various solid colors of brown or green, some brown and green striped. There were many demands for these rings among family and friends. One horn usually produced no more than two or three rings because the size was determined by the diameter of the inner core of the horn. He may have produced other carvings from the remnant of the horn, but I don't recall any specific ones. But I do still have one of the horn rings.

I believe his practice of whittling all of these toys and ornaments must have been the basis for his later hobby of wood carving. My siblings and I own lovely coffee tables, mirror frames, boxes, serving trays, and wall hangings he carved from walnut, pecan, and mahogany when we were older.



Daddy's coming home held other surprises. He would occasionally bring home horehound candy which he'd found in some country store. It was pretty to look at, something like dark amber beads, but the sweetness was often overcome by the natural bitterness of the mint. Much as I loved candy, I found that one piece of horehound candy, with its aura of medicine, satisfied me for several weeks, even months.

One favorite taste delight he brought home was the highlight of several of his returns in the summer. When his route took him through Parker County, he would stop at a farmer's stand in Weatherford and bring home a couple of very large, round watermelons, usually red but sometimes yellow. These he would leave at the local ice house before he came home, retrieving them several days later for a magnificent feast in our backyard. Since

the melons weighed anywhere from seventy-five to occasionally one hundred pounds, you can understand why the ice house rather than the ice box was the logical cooling agent. (Generally, he paid the "rent" for cooling our melons by bringing extras for the ice house owner.) Our neighbors as well as the family benefited from these parties. Never since then have I tasted watermelon so firm, so chilled, so sweet, so delicious. Sometimes the children would retire to a far corner of the backyard with our great rounds of melon and have seed-spitting contests, until some stodgy adult would put a stop to the resulting mess. But the icy-cold, wet melon meat on an evening following a hundred-degree-plus day was a delightful substitute for the air conditioning no one had then.