

To Win the Prize



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CRAIG WAS EXCITED when his school announced a contest for drawings. He must win the prize! It would mean he could get new colors and supplies. Above all, it would convince his father. Craig's dad thought drawing was a waste of time, especially for Craig. "Just an excuse for dreaming," he said. "It doesn't do anything."

Craig knew better. It created beauty, and Craig loved beauty. Woods, fields, snow, summer clouds, old rail fences, and blue smoke curling from red chimneys on a frosty morning. Just looking was fun. But when you tried to draw things, it made you part of them.

He knew what he would draw. He went there right after school, as he had done so many times. It was a little, hidden, secret glade in the woods. A wonderful stream flowed there; this golden autumn day it was purple flecked with tiny silver circles. A bright dragonfly zipped close to the surface; water spiders rowed, contentedly.

A willow tree arched overhead, its delicate green falling like protecting hands. The sunlight was soft orange, touching the red and yellow leaves on the ground—a magic glade of peace and color and companionship. One sensed all the hidden life of the woods, the very ants and wood flies and creatures that burrowed in the ground.

This he would paint. So he started right away, drawing from his pocket the cherished water colors, the two brushes, and the big sheet of Whatman paper. Hidden under a fallen log, wrapped in waxed paper, was the drawing board. Craig drew,

and felt within him the spirit of the forest and the stirrings of pride and happiness.

He drew each evening for an hour, all the next week. His dad had finally allowed him time off from chores, but had fumed about it. "Just mooning in the woods," he called it. His dad knew he had no chance of winning, of course. But Craig had a very different idea.

As he drew the willow seemed to come alive in all its elfin witchery, and the brook was a thing of mystery. The little glade caught the sparkle of sunlight, the haze of autumn, the crisp smell of wet, black earth and fallen leaves, the suggestion of pumpkin pies, roasted chestnuts, and cool, sweet cider. Craig tried to capture with his brushes all the things he saw, felt, and thought, all his memories, dreams, and hopes.

Then it was finished. Not just as he hoped. Perhaps it was a bit crude, but there seemed a certain something about the drawing—a spirit of beauty, of woods, elves, and woods mystery. Never had the glade seemed so glorious as this last afternoon. Craig had seen it in all seasons—in winter, when the snow turned it into a Christmas card of glitter and shimmering black and white; in spring, when the willow was a nymph dancing joyously in the breeze and the brook ran gurgily; in summer, when the Sun came through the foliage in yellow gold shafts, and the shadows were purple pools;

and on rainy days, when it was most companionable of all to huddle beneath the branches and hear the patter of the rain in a moist, lonely world. But never had he seen the glade so truly lovely as now.

Finally Craig rose, hid the drawing board, stuffed away the paints and brushes. In the west big cumulus clouds were piling up, and a low mutter of thunder sounded. He must hurry home and fix his colors.

The boy was half-way home when he heard it—the low, repeated whine. He stopped, and saw the dog lying on the ground. Tip, a neighbor's mutt. Craig had never liked Tip—a gossip and a chatterbox, barking aimlessly at everything and everybody. He simply couldn't stop now; the first big drops were beginning to fall. But Tip had seen him, too, and burst into agonized pleadings. Frowning, the boy hastened over. He saw at once what had happened. Tip, probably chasing a squirrel, had tried to get through the rail fence, caught his leg, and broken it. His eyes sought the boy's frantically.

Craig pulled his shirt loose and gently thrust the drawing between undershirt and trousers. Then, with an effort, he managed to lift the heavy animal in his arms. He was panting when he reached the back door of Josiah's sprawling farmhouse—panting, and soaking wet from the pouring rain.

Josiah came from the barn at the sound of Craig's calls. He took the whining dog in his arms, turned to reach the party telephone inside the house. At that moment the drawing managed to edge its way out and fall to the ground. It landed face up and together the man and boy looked down at a streaked, smeared, blurred ruin. The drawing now would not even pass for surrealist art. The beauty the boy had created had washed away into a stained sheet of paper.

Craig let himself into the house very quietly. He heard his mother in the kitchen as he went to his room and flung himself on the bed. He didn't mind the loss of a week's work: that had been fun. But his opportunity to show his dad was now lost. His mother understood, but his father didn't.

The boy knew his dad liked the country. After his return from the war they hadn't been able to find a home, so they had taken over this rundown farm and were making a go of it. His dad liked



Watercolor and crayon, 1992. Courtesy of the artist, Mary Whyte, Nina M. Dana Collection

growing things, and the smell of hay, and being around horses. Maybe he liked sunsets and the smell of rain and ozone, too. But he liked results. He liked to see something practical—corn, oats, buckwheat, alfalfa, and bins of apples and potatoes. Craig liked all this too, but his dad didn't understand that a fellow had an imagination, and needed the woods and the drawing of trees to sort of, well, give him something inside that made him happy. Maybe if he had shown his dad some of his drawings, he'd have understood. But Craig was secretive. Besides, as he had never done anything very good, his dad thought he just scribbled, like people doodled on pads of paper.

Craig heard them calling him in the yard, and finally he went down. They noticed how he looked. He mumbled something about the rain coming up. His dad smiled.

“Well, son, maybe now you can forget this drawing business for awhile. School and chores and all the things to do this fall can keep you happy. Later on, maybe....”

He hadn't explained. Craig wasn't much on explaining things to grownups. He worked an hour in the barn after supper and then went to his attic room again. He decided to go to bed. Then all at once he sensed the absence of something. The rain. It wasn't raining. He went to the window and looked out. The thin, filmy clouds were racing across the sky and a big yellow-white moon made the whole outdoors silver. It was beautiful, and it did something to the boy. The plan just seemed to come to him on a moonbeam. He could enter the contest after all. Why not? He had never tried anything like this. But there was a chance.

Craig found the big, clumsy charcoal pencil and a sheet of paper. A heavy box lid would serve as drawing board. He stole downstairs, passing the living room like a ghost. Outside, the air was sweet with the rain fragrance. Trees and bushes were black phantoms, the yard was pale silver. He walked some distance from the house and studied it. A black silhouette it was against the storm-sky, but not unfriendly. The yellow of his small window, the orange glow from the living room, were like beacons.

The young artist set to work, surprised at the amount of light the big Hunter's Moon offered. Black and white, shadows and highlights, the black house, the black trees, the silver lawn, the thrilling sky. Nothing detailed like the glade, just a sketch that tried to catch the strangeness of night, the vastness of sky, the friendliness of home, and lighted windows. It was nearly midnight when he finished and went to his room. All the rest, of the house was dark and all were asleep.

Craig handed in his charcoal drawing the next morning. The exhibit and judging were to take place in the afternoon. Well, he wouldn't think about it any more. He had done his best, but charcoal was new to him and he wasn't so good at it. Still, he had a chance, maybe. His heart leaped at the thought he might win after all.

Straight to the barn the boy went from school. He saw Josiah and his father talking when he went in. He spoke to Josiah and asked about Tip. Josiah told him the veterinarian had fixed the leg and he would soon be all right. His dad gave him a queer look.

"I'm sorry, son, about your water color getting ruined that way." Craig shrugged. He liked his dad for not stopping over or praising him about the dog business. They understood each other pretty well that way.

Josiah said he was sorry that Tip had cost the boy his chance to enter the contest, but that he wouldn't forget it had saved Tip's life.

Craig didn't want any sentimentality so he broke in. "But I did enter the contest." He took his charcoal drawing from his big geography and showed it to his dad.

The big man studied it silently. "I never saw our home in quite this way," he said finally. "So mysterious and yet homey." He passed it to Josiah. "I didn't know you had any ability, really, son."

"I didn't win the prize," Craig said. He turned toward the silo.



Though Craig's picture got wet, he probably saved Tip's life.

His father called him quietly. "Winning a prize isn't all that matters, son. You didn't give up. You tried something strange to you, and you didn't offer excuses when you lost. Maybe that's the biggest prize a man can win. I think we'll visit an art store next Saturday—together."

Craig caught a glimpse of the glade wrapped in snow, the bushes turned to magic in the sunlight; and a quick picture of his dad back of the team, harrowing, next spring. A dozen other visions flashed in his mind, of color scenes that could bring beauty to his soul and be transformed by his brushes to paper. Something began singing in his heart.

But he didn't put any of this into words. "I'll get down the ensilage now," he called to his dad. Whistling, he opened the door and sniffed the pungent, fragrant aroma. □

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