About 4,900 words

THE BRAT

Holy moley!

The oasis mirage rising before me belongs in some French Foreign Legion desert, not here in Chinatown. Spanish Colonial, Moorish accents, palm trees, massive clock tower, acres of roof tiles. A conductor calls out. An engine whistles. The air radiates excitement. All I can do is gawk.

Caught up in the throng, my mother forges ahead, tall and willowy, her stride as graceful as the dancer she hoped to be before she met my daddy and got "smitten." Mother is off to be with her people, dragging me along against my will. That's all that matters to her—*her* people. But all that matters to me is what I feel, and right now I feel ugly. It dawns on me that I can vanish into the crowd if I please. Teach her a lesson. We haven't been on the best of terms and I'm primed to take a powder. Not far, not forever, I know that won't work, just enough distance and time to invoke terror.

Before I can act, Mother whirls around, almost dropping her purse. Her eyes flash alarm as she says something to the colored porter. Moments of frantic searching go by before they locate me, a tense scene I observe with glee. With a relieved shake of her head, Mother hurries back to take my hand. "Stop playing games, Tommy."

The cavernous station is even more impressive inside. Gigantic arches everywhere. A brightly-colored tile floor stretching like a coral reef beneath an unbelievably high ceiling.

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Exposed wooden beams, huge arching windows, so many ticket windows. People, people, people—men in suits and ties, debonair with cigarettes dangling from their lips; women in hats and heels, lipstick and rouge, perfume wafting an airy trail; spiffy soldiers, sailors, marines; a snooty zoot suiter having his shoes shined—where is everyone going?

I knew where we're going. Texas. We're leaving California—movie stars, orange groves, beaches, the ocean—taking the train to Wichita Falls to stay with Uncle Neal. Why? Because one day my daddy's working on victory ships at the Long Beach shipyards, next day he's leaving for Saudi Arabia.

Daddy's a welder. He signed up with our government to work on some oil pipeline. He's been Q-cleared, whatever that means, stabbed with a slew of needles, flown to the East Coast to board a ship. "We'll make lots of money," he promised Mother. "Tax free. When I come home we'll buy a filling station in the Piney Woods, settle down. You'll be close to your people. Two years isn't that long."

For Mother, two years *is* that long—like forever. She'd rather have Daddy here with us than a chest full of diamonds. She hasn't been the same since he left. She rarely smiles; I can't remember the last time I heard her laugh. Her nerves. Her nerves, she complains, make her so tense and anxious her muscles have knots. Not even a chiropractor can help, though she gives one a try.

She takes it all out on me, that's how it seems. We're not pals any more. At times I catch her eyeing me like a suspicious shadow on a dark street. I miss my daddy too but she doesn't seem to notice. I'm already starting to miss our home, my friends, my first grade teacher. I don't

want to leave California. I don't want to go stay with Uncle Neal.

It's all because of the war. Mother hates to talk about the war, so I don't know that much about it. But I'm learning. The Boy Scout whose family shared our duplex sometimes took me along to pull his wagon when he collected for the scrap drive: newspapers, tin cans, old pots and pans, balls of tinfoil and twine. Scot's older brother is a sailor on a destroyer. Daddy once took me to see a battleship launched that he'd helped build, lifting me up to his shoulder for a view of the pretty lady swinging a champagne bottle. Miss Blessingame, the best teacher ever, bussed our first-grade class down to the Pacific to see a wing from a Jap Zero that washed up on the beach. "Living history," she proclaimed, looking proudly patriotic in her red, white and blue babushka, cautioning us not to touch the battered flotsam emblazoned with an orange circle, as if it could still be deadly. "More important than anything you'd learn in class today. Imagine—that enemy plane might've been shot down over Pearl Harbor . . . even Midway!"

After our trunk and suitcases are checked, and Mother has our tickets, we stop at a newsstand. Mother buys a pack of Dentyne, a few movie magazines. She hands me a dollar bill, telling me to pick out ten comic books. I like how exquisite that dollar feels in my fingers. I also suspect Mother might think giving me a dollar will make me like her again, but my dislike has turned to contempt. I refuse to even address her by name.

The opulent spread of comic books makes me dizzy with excitement. They're all here—*Superman, Batman, Donald Duck, Dick Tracey, Mutt and Jeff, The Katzenjammer Kids*—on and on. Selecting the ten best is an absorbing undertaking and I lean over my work with the intensity of a scientist in his lab. Behind me I hear the newsstand proprietor, a stocky man with slicked-

back hair and a pencil mustache, chatting up Mother, his voice too sugary, his compliments too obvious. As we walk away, his eyes follow Mother with wistful regret.

We proceed through the terminal past the Harvey House restaurant. Big glass doors offer a look inside at cheerful waitresses skimming like swans among a profusion of booths and tables. We pass beneath a colorful archway into the vast waiting area. Luxurious leather chairs all in a row, canister ashtrays at each end, a huge exposed-beamed ceiling with art deco lighting, tall rectangular windows. So many people waiting. Waiting for someone's return. Waiting to go somewhere. Waiting to say goodbye.

When we're seated, I reach for a comic but Mother stops me. "Those are to read on the train, Tommy."

"Why can't I read one now?"

"You heard me."

"Just *one*?"

She stuffs the sack of comics into the carry-on bag. "They have to last the entire trip. I don't want you growing bored and finding something to get into."

I sit back and pout. Mother hates it when I pout. More than once she's accused me of pouting just for her, never for Daddy. But I know better than to let Daddy see me pout, whereas pouting sometimes gets results with Mother. Though not here lately. Not since the fire.

It isn't long before the officious voice on the loudspeaker announces our train is boarding. We hurry through a long, wide tunnel beneath the tracks to a ramp leading up to our platform. We get on the train, find our seats. Our car fills up fast. Soon the train is chuffing away from the

station, leaving the grandeur of Los Angeles behind. Goodbye, my beloved California. Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.

The cloudless blue sky is brilliant as I peer from the window of our air-conditioned car at the distant mountains. Heat waves dance above the vast desert, littered with scrubby hills, rock outcroppings, dry washes, mysterious gorges. Joshua, mesquite and juniper trees sprout amidst clumps of snarly brush and cactus. I'm so thankful not to be out there with all those rattlers, lizards, scorpions and tarantulas. An abandoned cabin appears, a rusty car body. A dust devil pops up like a ghost and spirals our way, only to veer sharply as if to avoid a collision. Whenever the tracks curve I can see the engine puffing black smoke, then look in the other direction to view the rest of the long train snaking behind. I can even see the caboose.

After awhile my attention wanders and I take out one of my comic books. I can't read yet, only certain words, but I can pretty much figure out what's going on from the drawings. Whenever I'm stumped, Mother eagerly translates. I can tell she needs to believe I still need her.

She brought sandwiches for our lunch. Baloney and cheese. When it comes time for supper, we eat in the dining car. This pleasant diversion helps soothe Mother's nerves. White table cloths, polite colored waiters wearing white jackets, savory food in shiny containers, sparkling silverware, other diners engrossed in conversation. Everything just so. While right outside, the baking desert keeps on reeling past.

When the sun sets and darkness falls, I press my nose to the window and watch the moon rise. A zillion sparkling stars pop out. A porter appears to magically transform our seats into bunks. Ours is an upper bunk, a canvas curtain provides privacy. There's a light to read by.

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Mother slips into her pink nightgown and I squirm into my pajamas. I start on another comic, but before I get past the first page the clicking of the rails and the swaying of the car lull me to sleep.

Next morning the porter returns to change our bed back into a seat. We leave to eat breakfast in the dining car. Hotcakes and Log Cabin syrup for me; scrambled eggs and bacon for Mother. She tells me the butter is real, her coffee delicious. Then she leans toward me, a slice of toast poised at her lips; I can guess from her tart expression what's coming.

"It's not something I want your Uncle Neal to know," she says, just above a whisper, "but at the same time I feel obligated. I mean, I'd want to know if a relative of mine brought a firebug to stay in my home, wouldn't you?"

"I'm not a firebug."

"But how do I know that, Tommy?"

"I'm telling you . . . I'm not a firebug."

"Well, you could've burned down the entire neighborhood. My gosh! All those homes. All those families. Somebody might've died. Did you even consider that?"

"I already told you. I didn't think . . . just one little match . . ."

She scorches me with her sourpuss look. "That's all it takes, son."

"I know that now."

"And you think you're cured?"

"Cured?"

"What you did—what caused you to do such a thing—has to be some sort of sickness."

"I'm not sick. I'm not a firebug. I'm fine. I was just . . . curious. I'm not any more—not

curious—because now I know."

"Know what?"

"What can happen."

"You're sure about that?" Her penetrating brown eyes can't conceal her doubt, a doubt that's nonetheless tempered with hope.

"How many times do I have to tell you?"

She pulls back. "Hey there, fella. Watch your tone. That's awfully close to sass. I need to believe I can still trust you. You need to convince me."

I sip some hot chocolate, aware that I've gone too far. And yet I'm *not* a firebug. I just wanted to stop being bored. If Daddy had been there I wouldn't have done it. And Mother was to blame as much as me, that's my take anyway. "You can carry the trash out," she said. "A boy your age needs some chores to do."

Every day she'd give me two matches; the extra match in case the wind blew the first match out, which it sometimes did. Otherwise, I had orders to return it. I did get a kick out of watching the trash burn, but did that make me a firebug? I liked it especially when there were cracker or cereal boxes I imagined being a military headquarters with a bunch of Krauts or Japs inside. I became a commando on a secret mission. My heartbeat would surge as the flames licked closer and closer until the buildings caught fire. I'd imagine the enemy trapped inside scrambling to escape. I'd seen newsreels of Japs flushed out of their island caves, writhing in swirling balls of fire. I could almost hear them screaming. The Marines used flame throwers. It was horrifying to watch, but after what they did to us at Pearl Harbor and Bataan I guess they

deserved it.

The incinerator stood on the pavement near the garage. The open field in back of the garage was overgrown with high weeds. One day, feeling bored like I said, I burned the trash and wandered into the field holding the extra match. I spotted this broken brick and knelt down to study it. I'm not sure why I scratched the match against the brick, but there was something hypnotic about the flickering yellow flame. Just before it burned out, I touched it to a single weed. Just one. That weed leaped into a higher flame. More flames followed, flames that spread like they were spewed from a flame thrower.

I grabbed a rusty piece of tin lying nearby and tried to smother the fire. The hot metal burned my fingers. I had to let go. I kept backing up, stupefied by the spreading fire. I heard sirens. A big red fire engine roared up our driveway to the garage. Firemen dressed in red jumped off the truck and hooked a long hose to a street hydrant. Mother ran out of our backdoor, waving her arms, shrieking, "What did you do, Tommy! What did you do!"

I stood there looking at her.

The firemen gushed water onto the flames until nothing but a ragged black wet spot was left spreading out behind the garage, oozing lazy tendrils of smoke. I heard the fire chief say something to Mother about hauling her little firebug off to the calaboose. I was pretty sure he wasn't serious, but Mother's face turned as red as that fire engine. She dragged me into the house, shoved me onto her bed, yanked one of Daddy's leather belts out of the closet, and laid into me.

I'd never been spanked before, not even by Daddy. I'd never seen Mother so scarily wild-

eyed. I screamed and tried to protect my hands and arms. I begged her to stop, swearing I'd never do it again. I tried to escape by burrowing into the corner between the mattress and the wall. When she saw this, Mother stumbled backward and dropped the belt. Gasping for breath, clasping her jaws, she stood there trembling.

She made me stay in the bedroom until supper time. I cried myself to sleep. When she let me out, and I came warily to the table, I could see how she'd changed, the way she looked at me with those accusing eyes. She told me the fire chief had allowed us a reprieve. I asked what that meant and she explained it meant neither of us would have to go to jail for arson. I asked what arson meant and she explained that to me. Mother seemed bewildered and lost. I sat staring at my half-eaten food until she shook her head in a mystified way and got up to clear the table.

Not long after we finish breakfast, we have to get on a different train. The car we now find ourselves in is older, somewhat shabby. We're surrounded by soldiers—I can't see one other civilian. The car is so tightly packed that a lot of soldiers have to sit in the aisle on their duffel bags. "The military gets priority," Mother whispers, "but at least they're not making us wait. At least we have a seat."

It's hot and stuffy. Mother says the air conditioner must not be working right. The soldiers wear their olive-drab winter uniforms. The stench of sweaty wool burns my nostrils. Mother tugs at the collar of her blouse as she thumbs through one of her magazines. I've never seen Mother sweat and she doesn't now, sitting demurely with her knees together, shoulders back, chin held at an elegant angle, refusing to surrender to discomfort.

The Brat

The soldier sitting across the aisle keeps turning his head our way. I've noticed how strange men often look at Mother with this appraising intensity, and how it makes her uncomfortable. But when we make eye contact I can tell this soldier's more focused on me. He wears sergeant's stripes and has bright red hair, even redder than mine. His tie is askew. Freckles dot his forehead and cheeks. He looks jaded, world weary, though he's not that old. His blue eyes are bloodshot with a watery sheen, like Daddy's when he's drinking Old Granddad. He smiles at me in a goofy way that prompts me to smile back. I try to focus on my *Captain Marvel* comic but I can't help glancing up occasionally to catch the sergeant smiling at me.

"Shazam," he says at last, in a low, conspiratorial voice.

I smile back. "Shazam."

"That a good one?" He nods at my comic book. "The Captain wasn't around when I was a boy, sorry to say. If he had been I'd want to be like him. Able to fly. Strong, courageous, fighting evil, taking care of bad guys. That how you feel?"

I shrug my shoulders. He speaks with a strange accent, Brooklyn or Boston, maybe some other foreign city.

"But if you want the straight scoop . . . I wasn't a very good boy. Not like you."

"Me?"

"You look like you've got the goods. I can just tell."

I sneak a glance at Mother but she's engrossed in her magazine, or pretending to be. I'm surprised she doesn't blurt out the truth about me. It would be just like her.

"What's your nickname? Bet I can guess—it's Red. That was my nickname when I was

a boy."

The sergeant reminds me of Daddy. I like him. I like him a lot.

"I didn't like being called Red. I was primed to slug any kid who called me that. How about you?"

I shrug again.

"Yeah, well, I could be touchy. I had a temper." The memory makes him chuckle. "Hey, kiddo, Christmas isn't that far off, y'know? What do you want Santa to bring you?"

It's October and to me Christmas seems a *long* way off. "I'm not sure . . ."

The sergeant laughs, a raucous, unharnessed sound. "You're not sure? Holy moley! When I was your age there were a million things I wanted from Santa—I could rattle them off in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

This makes me laugh out loud.

"I was that way." His eyes mist over like he's recalling something sad. "I wanted it all—everything in the damned toy store. I was a greedy kid. My mother was always telling me that. You're a greedy kid, she'd say, you want everything—want, want, want. Think money grows on trees?"

Hearing how the sergeant didn't get along with his mother, I have to giggle.

"I don't think you're that way, though. Greedy. Not if you haven't thought about Christmas yet. Shows you don't obsess over it . . . like I did. Santa never brought much to us kids. I wondered if it was because of where we lived but why should that matter to Santa? More likely it was because I really wasn't a very good boy." He hesitates before adding, "I got in

Dutch more times than I could count."

There's a long silence and I feel like I ought to say something, maybe ask what sort of Dutch, but that seems too personal when talking to a grownup. I'm liking the sergeant more and more. I like how he sees us as equals. I steal another peek at Mother and decide to be as frank as the sergeant.

"Well," I say, keeping my voice low, "to be honest . . . I'm not a very good boy either."

The sergeant snorts. "Baloney. Don't believe it. You're humoring me. I've had my eye on you. Comparatively speaking—compared to me—I'd have to say you're a very good boy."

I expect Mother to jump in and say no, he's actually telling the truth, he's not a good boy. He's a firebug. But she keeps her eyes glued to a picture of Clark Gable.

"You know what I wanted Santa to bring me more than anything?" I shake my head. "A fire truck. A big red fire truck. I was crazy about fire trucks."

My face flushes hot. What the—has he been talking to Mother? But I know that can't be.

"I wanted to be a fireman. Those ladders and hoses and sirens and stuff. Those nifty hats they wear. Saving people from burning buildings. I'd've given my eye teeth to get a fire truck for Christmas . . . that's what I wanted most in the world."

"Did you finally get one?"

"Never happened. I wrote to Santa every year pleading for a toy fire truck. Santa ignored me." A wide grin spreads across his face. "So I couldn't have been very good, now could I?"

"Didn't you tell your dad what you wanted?"

He snorts again. "Lot of good that would've done. My dad was always away somewhere . . . working . . . trying to find work."

I'm really into him now. "My daddy's on a ship sailing to Arabia. He's going there to work on an oil pipeline."

"Arabia? You don't say." He gives Mother a quick look. "I bet when he comes home he'll bring you something swell, something exotic. Maybe a camel. You think?"

I laugh and he laughs with me. He fumbles behind him and takes out his wallet. Removing a bill, he leans across and pokes it into my shirt pocket. "There. You go buy yourself a big red fire truck . . . on me."

"He can't accept that," Mother says quietly.

The sergeant puts his wallet back and gives her a sloppy wink. "Sure he can. I want him to have it. I want him to have a fire truck."

"He can't take your money, sir."

"No need to sir me—I'm not an officer."

"Please—"

"It's okay. I want him to have it."

"No, it's not okay. I can't allow it." She lowers her magazine and sits up straight. Her East Texas drawl, usually pleasingly soft, sports an edge. "Give that back to him, Tommy."

"C'mon, lady," the sergeant pleads, "he's such a good kid."

"Tommy . . . are you listening?"

In my mind I'm trying to work my way out of this. A dollar isn't enough to buy a fire

truck, but it *will* buy ten comic books. I can think of lots of other stuff a dollar will buy. Like nine comic books, a pack of licorice, and a Baby Ruth. Why is Mother being unreasonable? Why can't she respect the sergeant's wishes? Don't sergeants have authority over mothers?

"*Tommy!"*

Gritting my teeth, I tug the dollar out of my shirt pocket. But when I look at it, I gag. I may not read very well but I know numbers: the sergeant gave me a twenty-dollar bill. That'll buy a fire truck all right, a big fire truck—a gigantic fire truck. An explosion goes off behind my eyes. The shrapnel sent tearing through my imagination turns into a Monkey Ward catalog of fabulous toys.

I shove the twenty back in my shirt pocket.

"Give . . . that . . . back," Mother growls. "Right now."

I keep my eyes on the sergeant. Why can't he make Mother stop this nonsense? But he looks as befuddled as I feel.

"Tommy!"

I drag the twenty out once more and hand it across the aisle. The sergeant takes his time accepting it. I sit there twisting my comic book in my lap, waiting for his next move. I decide I love this man, love him as much as I love my own daddy. He's my hero. Mother is our common enemy. I'm thinking I'd like to go with him to whatever battlefield he's headed for, just to escape from her. I could carry his ammo can. I'm thinking I'd lay my life on the line for this guy. He's clever, shrewd. A soldier has to be clever and shrewd to wear sergeant's stripes—to be in command. He'll never quit on me. He'll think of some way to outsmart Mother.

The Brat

So why doesn't he? Why doesn't he show her who's boss by sticking that twenty back in my shirt pocket? I wait and wait, until I hear an ominous sputtering sound, something like a flivver makes, a sound that makes me want to puke. I look over to see the sergeant's head tilted back against the seat, slack mouth gaping. He's asleep. He's actually asleep. For a minute I'm afraid I truly am going to puke.

We're almost to Wichita Falls before the sergeant wakes up. There's still time. I keep glancing over, expecting him to sneak that twenty my way. But he just sits there, rubbing his eyes like he's not sure where he is. Like he doesn't remember what happened. Like he doesn't even remember me. And clearly he doesn't remember that twenty dollars.

It's raining when Mother and I get off the train. She gives me the carry-on bag. The sky is low, a depressing, churning gray. Distant thunder echoes. I shiver in the cutting dampness. A big shaggy dog, soaked to the skin, has taken refuge on the platform beneath the overhang. Crouched in one corner, he eyes me forlornly. I'm already missing the palm trees.

Mother suddenly grabs my arm and steers me aside. "I don't know what got into you back there, but you'd better not ever pull a stunt like that again—ignoring me when I tell you to do something. Understand, Tommy?"

I lower my eyes, sulking as she lambasts me about how soldiers aren't paid very much and how they risk their lives for us and how the sergeant probably has a family who can use that money and how he might never return from wherever it is he's headed and how it's just plain wrong to take advantage of a drunk like I was bent on doing.

"And by the way," she adds, "I doubt if you can find a toy fire truck anywhere these days.

If you did it would be wood or some other metal substitute. That would hardly suit you, now would it? I can just picture you mooning around like some old sad sack."

By the time she finishes, I'm drowning in shame.

Texas is no match for California. Wichita Falls is no match for Los Angeles. The small spare depot is no match for Union Station. Even the people look different—chewing tobacco or rolling their own, talking slow, walking slow, not as well-dressed—some actually wear bib overalls. Mother looks out of place in her heels and trim gray suit with padded shoulders. Too glamorous, too cosmopolitan.

She uses the pay phone to call Uncle Neal. We sit down on a hard wooden bench to wait. Mother is at last calm, the tension lines miraculously smoothed from her face. She sits and stares at nothing in particular, deep in thought, an enigmatic smile playing on her lips. Talking with her older brother has somehow brought about this transformation. Uncle Neal has always been one to make her laugh. She's home now, home with her people. Nothing else matters.

Out of the corner of my eye I watch her open her purse, rummage around, unwrap a piece of Dentyne, place it delicately on her tongue.

"Want a stick, buckaroo?"

I shake my head.

She sighs. After a minute she again reaches into her purse. "Here," she says, shoving a dollar into my hand.

I stare at the bill in disbelief. It's not a twenty, not even close, but it *is* a whole dollar.

"So what do you say?"

"Thank-thank you."

"Thank you who?"

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Uh-uh."

"Thank you, Mother."

"That's better. And don't worry, I promise not to tell your uncle about the fire." She sits chewing her gum for a minute before she adds, "You're my big boy, Tommy. You know that, don't you?"

I look away and nod.

I fold the dollar and slip it into my pocket. Mother rests her hand lightly on my shoulder, one finger touching my neck. The train whistles, steam belches. I think of the sergeant on his way again. To where? To what? I wish I'd told him goodbye.

END