

Chip Off the Old Block: A Short Story

By Paul Attaway

Tommy was up early but he could already tell it was going to be a hot one. Farming wasn't easy but it was what he knew. It was the life he chose. It was what he loved. As he stood on the back porch and watched the sun begin its ascent, he reviewed all that had to be done. They were expanding. Times were good. 'You had to make hay while the sun shined,' his dad would say. That phrase always struck his mother as odd given that they were cattle farmers.

Expansion meant new fences, new pastures, more cattle, more worries, and yes, more debt, but it also meant more profits and more land. And ain't that what it's all about? Something else his dad always said. Yep, plenty to do. In the distance, he saw the truck come around the corner. Right on time. Tommy could always count on John, John and his two reliable hands, the Caybee boys. The Caybee boys were brothers and had been inseparable and known as the Caybee boys for as long as anyone in these parts could remember. Yep, Tommy could always count on John and the Caybee boys.

John pulled his truck up to the side of the house and parked it under the shade of a magnolia tree. He rolled the windows up but not all the way hoping that the shade from the tree and the cracked windows would keep the temperature below 100 when he would climb back into it at the day's end.

"Mornin Tommy," he said raising his coffee mug to salute both his boss and the coming day.

"Yep, it's mornin alright. Let's get a start on it before that sun gets much higher."

Tommy and John hopped into Tommy's truck and headed for the new land Tommy had just purchased. As they drove, they discussed where to lay the fence for the new pasture and whether the sheriff would have to show up and settle the dispute with their neighbor to the north.

“Tommy, don’t worry. Billy Ray down at the county recorder’s office assured me that your easement is as good as gold. You have every right to cross Roscoe’s land to get to the state highway.”

“I know, and Billy Ray down at the county office is a good man. I just hope it don’t get ugly. Roscoe can be a mean cus.”

“Don’t you worry about him. I got it under control.”

Tommy was driving and his eyes were focused on the dirt road ahead of him. He liked to drive. Gave him a sense of ownership, of control. He briefly looked at John and nodded.

“Alright then. So, when can the Caybee boys get started?”

“Tomorrow morning, early. I told them we had to finish in time for your new herd to arrive. With beef prices this high, every day lost is a dollar lost.”

“More than a dollar, John.”

“Your right about that,” said John, smiling from ear to ear.

Tommy and John sat in silence for the next few minutes. They’d been friends along time, good friends. Half the time each one knew what the other was thinking before either of them spoke a word.

“I was thinkin,” said John.

“About a new silo?”

“You guessed it. With the year we’re expecting you’ll be able to pay off the bank loan *and* replace that old silo.”

Tommy smiled at that. “That would make a swell Christmas gift for Dad,” he said.

“He deserves it. You both do.”

“Thank you, John.”

“You know what I’m gonna do?”

“What?”, asked John.

“Well, seems like you and the Caybee boys have everything under control for the next few days. Do you mind if I drop you off up the road at the barn? I think I’m gonna take the rest of the day to mend the fence on the back forty and do a little fishin in the pond back there. You can give yourself a ride back to the house on the tractor we got behind the barn, can’t ya?”

“You bet. Tommy, that sounds like a fine idea. You do that and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Tommy slowed the truck to a stop and John hopped out, took his coffee mug with him and saluted Tommy again with another tip of the mug. Tommy, pulled away slowly so as not to drown him with dirt and headed off for the lake and to mend a fence. Tommy liked mending fences. The work was hard, but it made sense, and he was good at it. The fence was in better shape than he remembered, so the work went quickly, giving him more time to wet a line.

Tommy walked over to the edge of the lake shaded by a tree and set his tackle box down on the ground and leaned his rod against it. He ate a peanut butter sandwich he’d brought with him and chased it with a bottle of coke. It was time to fish. Tommy picked up a rock close to the water’s edge and dug into the dirt with his hands. The rain the night before had loosened the soil and brought up the worms and the cold, wet dirt felt good on his hands. Tommy put a handful of worms into a mason jar half full of dirt and then took a few pieces of ice from his thermos and put them in the jar to keep the worms fresh longer. He sat on the ground next to his tackle box close to the end of the rod suspended in the air and slid a bobber up the line about two feet above the hook, and using his teeth, he crimped a small split-shot sinker just below the bobber. He then selected a worm from the jar and ran the hook through the worm until it reached the line making sure that a small portion of the worm dangled beneath the tip of the hook.

Tommy moved out from under the tree’s branches and cast the line and let the worm sink. He then turned the reel a half rotation and set it and took a seat on the ground and waited for the bobber to dance. It didn’t take long. A couple of half dunks and then the bobber disappeared. Tommy sprang to his feet and with one quick tug set the hook and reeled in a fine two-pound bass. Tommy caught another ten or so fish that afternoon and cooled off occasionally with a dip in the lake.

Tommy didn't wear a watch but knew from the sun's position in the sky that he should be heading back. It would be dinner time before long. By the time he returned, John had left. Tommy peddled over and leaned his bike and fishin rod against the tree and then took his shirt off and lay on the ground in the shade of the Magnolia. The grass felt cool against his skin, and he could see the tree fort his dad and grandad had built the summer before. Tommy thought about what a fun day it had been and what good friends John and the Caybee boys were.

Laying on the ground, he heard the back door open, and he turned to see his mom step out into the top step.

"Tommy?"

"Yea, Mom."

"Honey, come on inside and get cleaned up. I could use some help in the kitchen. Besides, your daddy will be home soon.

"He was meetin with the man about buyin more cows, wasn't he?"

"Yes, honey. Now come on. I'm sure we'll hear all about it at the supper table. And pick up your toys. You know how he likes it when you put away your things.

"Okay, Mom. I'll be in in a sec."

The inspiration for this very short story came to me as I was having lunch with my wife recently. We visited the Brookgreen Gardens in South Carolina and were talking about our grandparents' lives working farms and the times we visited them. I told her how as a child visiting my mother's parents in Mississippi, I would spend hours laying out a working farm in the dirt using rocks, twigs and branches and little else. She asked me if John and the Caybee boys were there to help to which I responded: "Of course. I couldn't do anything without them!" Lyn knows that John and the Caybee boys were my childhood imaginary friends. Lyn summed it all up perfectly: "You know, there really is no excuse to be bored."