

The Real Prize

Y York

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Malcolm is rowing old Joe's rowboat into the Sound. Malcolm never lets me go with him in the boat; I have to watch from the cliff, like now. Every day or so Malcolm goes down and bugs Old Joe until Joe screams at him to "take the damn thing, just get out of my hair." Joe doesn't have much patience with us kids, and he has absolutely no use for me. Once I overheard Mom complaining to him about me.

"I don't know Joe. She doesn't do anything. The doctor says she's okay, but she won't try."

"Why don't you just drop kick the little pipsqueak; that'll get her going."

Drop-kicking is something a punter does with a football, and I don't want anybody trying it with me. I stay clear of Old Joe.

Mom has no business talking like that about me. I do plenty of stuff. I spend hours with the modeling clay. I do the simple stuff. My favorite thing to make is an ashtray. It was the first thing I learned, it's pretty easy, but the other things in the book are too hard. Mom says I should stop making ashtrays on account of nobody smokes anymore.

I see Malcolm reach the little island and pull the rowboat ashore. I can see him walk into the woods, but then he disappears. He doesn't ever say what he does in the woods.

I decide to brave meeting old Joe and wait for Malcolm on

the dock. There's a steep ladder leading down the cliff to the dock. I know it'll be hard to get back up the ladder, what with my breathing problems and all, but I go down anyway. Mom is wrong; I do stuff.

Joe's there, of course, messing around in the boat house.

"Hi, Joe."

He grunts, so I know he hears me. He's scrubbing one of the metal paddles with steel wool.

"If you don't get the rust, the rust will get you," he says.

"I'm too fast for the rust, Joe." I think that's a cool reply.

"From what I hear you're not even too fast for a weary clam." He doesn't even look up to see if his zing got me.

I wish I was somewhere else, but I'm here, and it's either make the best of it, or go back up.

"I'm just waiting for Malcolm," I say, hoping that my explanation will deter any further need for conversation.

"If your brother had any gumption, he'd row to the other side of that island. That's where the real prize is."

The real prize. The words hit me harder than his insult. "What prize? What's on the other side of the island?"

"Something you can't see unless you row to it."

I can tell he's done talking. He locks the boat house and heads up the ladder, leaving me to think about the prize on the other side of the island. I wonder if Joe's making it up; he can be a pretty mean guy. Maybe there is no prize.

It takes Malcolm forever to reappear out of the woods, then just to torment me, he doesn't row back right away. He walks up

and down the island beach pretending to look at sea shells. Sometimes I hate my brother. When he finally arrives in the rowboat he looks so full of himself, I can hardly stand it.

"Tie me up," he says as he tosses me a line.

"Malcolm, Joe says there's a prize on the other side of the island. Will you take me to the other side of the island?"

"There's nothing on the other side of the island, I walked over there, I always walk there, it's the same as this side. What's the big deal?"

"Joe says there's a prize there. I need you to take me to see it." I hope Malcolm will see my newest, deepest need and relent.

"There's nothing to see. And I'm not taking you in the rowboat anyway. It's hard enough to row just me, and you weigh an extra thousand pounds."

I try not to, but I start to cry. I can't believe that he's making me cry again. I always cry when he says I'm fat, and he always says I'm fat. Now, I'm going to make some pitiful reply.

"I don't weigh an extra thousand pounds." I sputter.

"You're right. I'm sorry. It's only five hundred." He laughs, punches my head, and runs toward the steps. Now I'm really sad, and Malcolm's not going to take me in the rowboat.

Walking up the steps, I feel like I weigh a thousand pounds. I have to stop two times to get my breath on the way up. Old Joe is standing at the top of the steps when I get there. I want to kick him, but I don't because then I'd be in big trouble.

"Your brother tie up my boat?"

I nod because I can't breathe good enough to speak. Joe

heads toward his house, but I manage to stop him.

"Hey, Joe," I gasp, "Malcolm says the other side is the same as this side."

"Other side of what?" he snaps.

"The other side of the island. He says there's no prize there; it's the same as this side."

"Did he row to the other side of the island?" Joe looks real smug now.

"No, but he walked to it. He walks to it a lot, and he says it's the same as this side."

"You got to row to the other side of the island for the real prize. You're not going to see it on foot." Joe walks into his house.

I'm pretty mad at grownups and big kids at this point. I wish I could sick Joe and Malcolm on one other. The way I see it, I really have no choice. I have to row to the other side of the island.

Going down the steps is easy, and I get my wind back on the trip back down.

I love the row boat. Joe showed me how to row last spring in one of his more civilized moods. It made me out of breath really fast. None of these people appreciate how hard it is for me to get around.

It's four o'clock, so there's at least four hours before dark. I row into the channel pretty fast, but then it seems like I stay in the same place for practically ever. I look at my watch and it's only six minutes later. I suddenly feel really thirsty. I'm probably going to be on the water for hours, and I

forgot to bring something to drink. The bottom of the boat is feeling hard against my behind, too. It's maybe the first time ever I'm glad to be fat; a skinny person would be miserable rowing this boat.

I take off my ring and put it in my pocket. There's already a little blister on my hand from where my ring was. My palms are all red from rowing, and my back is sore. If this is some trick, some stupid trick, I'm going to smash this row boat to bits. I take a little rest, but when I row again, it's worse. I decide not to rest anymore, but just go slower. Finally the main shore looks a little further away. I peek behind me and see that I'm getting closer to the island.

I realize that if I row all the way to the island, I'll get caught in the breakwater. I turn the row boat so the island is on my left, and start rowing to the other side of the island.

I know a person gets callouses from rowing. I hope I get my callouses soon.

I row to a place that I can't see from the dock. I'm on my way to the other side! A giant heron swoops out of one tree and flies to another. It's a truly inspiring sight. She waits for a minute then flies back to the first tree. I guess she decides I'm not going to hurt her nest. This is a very beautiful bird, but if it's the prize, I think it's very insufficient.

I think the prize will be further away. I keep rowing.

There's an annoying current on this side of the island. I'm not making any progress at all. I look at my watch. I've been rowing for almost an hour. That means it will take me that long to get back, plus however long it takes me to get to where I'm

going times two. I've never done any exercise for this long, and I feel very tired out. This is beginning to look like a big trick to make me do exercise. Mom and Joe have made a conspiracy.

It's not like I don't try. Last winter Malcolm and his filthy, stupid friends planned to go sledding by the creek. I begged him to take me along, but he wouldn't. Mom heard us arguing, and she made him take me.

"All right, fatso. Don't fall behind, or we'll leave you for the wolves." Malcolm said kindly.

Mom bundled me up in so much clothing I could hardly walk. Malcolm and Company smirked at my outfit. Then they ran ahead. I waddled along as fast as I could. After a couple of minutes, I couldn't even see them anymore. I thought they were going to the hill by the creek, but when I got there, all out of breath and exhausted, nobody was there. I looked everywhere, but no boys, no sled, no nothing. I climbed the hill to look around, and sure enough, the boys were sledding down the glen, completely out of earshot from where I stood shouting and hollering at them.

They thought their joke was a real scream.

Now, this feels like another joke. Joe is a crotchety old guy, and I'm beginning to think he's also a weasel and a big cheat. I feel let down and sad. Everybody thinks I'm a pitiful kid because I'm fat and I'm sickly, but that's no reason to take advantage of me.

Sometimes I don't blame people for teasing me. If I knew me, I'd tease me too. There are those tears again, falling down my face and dripping into the bottom of the boat. Oh, well. At

least in the boat nobody can tell my tears from the puddles of salt water from the Sound.

I stop rowing and look down at the growing collection of tears and sea water at the bottom of the boat. When I look up, there's a face looking back at me over the edge of the stern. I'm so surprised I can't even breathe. It looks at me for a couple of seconds then slips back into the water. I'm frozen for a second, then I gently take the oars out of the water and stick them in the boat. I hope the little head reappears. I hear a splash to my left, it scares me and I jump, so the thing goes back into the water. Clearly, I have to be calmer, or I'm not going to see it again. It pops up at the end of the boat. I hold my breath and don't jump around. It's a seal! A perfect little seal. While I'm looking at it, I hear a splash again, I peek to my left and there's another seal. This is my prize, and it's a real prize. A family of seals. No wonder Malcolm didn't see them. You'd have to be among them to see them. I wonder if they have any babies.

My wonder is answered when two more heads appear on the right side of the boat. One is huge and one is little. The big guy gives a snort, then leaps into the air and dives. A real show. I glance a little further away from the boat and see dozens of little bumps in the water. I look around the boat and see that there's maybe a zillion seals, maybe two zillion. I take back everything bad I ever said about you Old Joe. This is a prize; this is a real prize.

I sit back and watch. I turn out to be the big event of their day and to celebrate, they put on a show for me. Surfacing

and diving, coming close to the boat and hurrying away. I sit back and watch the show that is just for me.

I notice finally the gray in the sky. I look at my watch and it's time to row back.

I hear the motor of the power boat before I see it. It's old Joe coming around the side of the island. For a second I almost think he's smiling, but I must be mistaken. He comes up and tosses me a line.

"Thought you might want a lift." That's all he says.

"A lift would be great." That's all I say.

Every couple of hundred yards, Joe slows down, and three or four little heads pop up around my row boat. My new friends are racing me back to the dock!