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The Tale of Trot and Dim Johnny

AS ALL ACCIDENTS ARE ABOUT TO HAPPEN, OR STRANGE ENCOUNTERS TAKE PLACE, fate stands at the edge of the road waiting to announce itself, an unseen signpost, an unseen hitchhiker. Such was the plan when Banford J. Hibbs pushed his wheelchair out of the driveway and onto the sidewalk. Both his legs had been left on the rampant sands of a Pacific island half a century earlier. He did not see the boy with the white cane until he had almost knocked him down.

"I'm sorry, son. I didn't see you," Banford Hibbs said. In a gray shirt his arms bulged from wrist to shoulder, exhibiting some long siege at arduous labor. His eyes were clear, he was clean-shaven, an odd bump accented an otherwise long straight nose, and his hair was military-trim. The boy, not in any great contrast, was clean-faced, dark-haired, but wore dark glasses, as if hiding within himself.

"I didn't see you either, mister," the boy said, and the grin leaped across his face. "My name's Dim Johnny, but it's not really that bad a name. Kids just got used to it. Kind of tells a story." Bright teeth filled a mouth formed with full lips, and one would gather he spent little time frowning. The remnants of the smile lingered at the corners of his lips, the way smiles like to hang around pleasant people.

"Well, Dim Johnny, from the days when I was in a rehab hospital, after losing my legs, all the guys there started calling me Trot. So it's been Trot ever since. Trot locked up in a wheelchair. Trot do this and Trot do that, Trot never swung a baseball bat."

The boy giggled. "That's kind of like my name. It's getting us to laugh a little bit at ourselves so we don't spend the day sulking in a corner, like my grandfather used to say. He used to read a lot to me. I can still hear him."

"Do you like parades?" Trot looked up and down the street, through breaks in the small crowd gathered along the curbing.

"I don't see too much in parades, but I like to listen, to everything." He slanted his head as if it were an exclamation mark.

For the first time in all his parades, Trot heard the crowd and all its props: cap guns, whistles, whirling plastic bird's wings, yells and exuberance of all kind and manner. He'd always seen a parade but had never heard a parade, not really heard it. That his ears were opened made his eyes open. "Someday you'll be in a parade, Dim Johnny. I'd bet on that."

Just the way fate hung at the edge of the roadway like the announced hitchhiker, so did prophecy, and the tingle was alive in Trot Hibbs' phantom toes. Both feet, he said to himself.

"Hey, Trot," hailed a voice from the crowd. "Just in time for the parade. They remember us today, you know, but the ranks're getting thinner. There's only us sergeants and chiefs of boats left now."

Trot recognized the voice even before he saw the face, old Chief of Boats Snorkel Boatwright. "Hey, Snorkel, what brings you up from down under? They let all the water out of the tub?"

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The boy's laughter burst out of him again and he tapped his cane on the ground as if he were making more exclamation marks. "I know him," he said. "He's the guy at the gas station. Sometimes, when my parents bring me to my uncle's house around the corner, we stop in there for gas." The tip of his white cane came to rest against one of the Trot's wheels. Trot guessed him to be about eleven or twelve years old. He had already decided that the dark glasses were not going to hide much about Dim Johnny.

"I used to be able to see," the boy said. "I can remember what my mother looks like. She says I'm her savior 'cause I keep her looks frozen in time. She'll never get any older. That makes me feel good." His head moved off at an angle as if he were posing, but Trot guessed, and correctly, that he was keying in on some feature of his mother. "She has the biggest and softest eyes you can imagine. Like Oreos. That's really what I see. It's a secret I'll share with you. One I can't tell her, that I can't remember all of her face. I'm happy it's the eyes. Big, soft and brown. She never has to know, does she?" There was affirmation heard if affirmation was ever said.

"Not on my account. What happened?" Trot said, trying to stay in place with something remarkable happening to him, around him, finding it difficult to do so. Unknown pleasant tremors were at work.

"Nobody really knows. It just started getting darker each day, a little bit at a time. They took me to six doctors, but they couldn't find anything. Then one day," he shrugged his shoulders, "it was all gone. At first it was dim, then dimmer, then just dark, just nothing. Some of the kids began to call me Dim Johnny, kind of like the game your pals pulled on you. But you guys were all hurt, weren't you? You were a sergeant, weren't you? Gramp said he could run a war with sergeants. What about all the generals?"

"You only need one of them, Johnny. The rest become errand boys. Yep, Gramp's right, and so are you. We were a hurting army, the bunch of us, but we were winners. Tell me, is your hearing now excellent or special? I've heard stories from some of the guys." Trot had seen how Johnny's head would turn or spin about according to the introduction of a sound, a noise, a bit of music from a distant radio, a single trumpet warming up for the parade. He wondered about handling disparate sounds, unidentified sounds; how would they be classed or sorted, or even referenced.

"I can hear music in anything. I can tell a note of the scale from a hundred yards away. Lots of songs I know by just hearing a couple of notes together. Oh, they have to be kind of special, but I have to get some kind of help. I'm only a kid, you know." He laughed all over again and it made Trot feel warmer inside, the core being touched again. There came a sudden balance in all of it, thought Trot, as Dim Johnny, too much of the spotlight on himself, said, "What do you do Trot?" Enough of me it seemed to say, and said honestly though with a righteous reserve. Manners it also said.

Trot Hibbs flicked a thumbnail against one of the spokes in a wheel.

"That's an A Flat," Dim Johnny said, "if that's a test note." He laughed and tapped his cane again on the cement of the walkway. It was just the way Trot handled a cue stick playing pool in the Old Rathole before the war. It was akin to applause or ovation. Johnny continued, "I wish there

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was a way I could make money with it. I'd really like to help my mother and father. He gets odd jobs now and then and he's not really in the best shape. I guess worrying can do that to you. Gramp used to say that, too."

"Well, I make things out of iron. I try to bring out objects that I see in an old piece of metal. Some people call it art. Some call it junk. But I love doing it. It's like special salvage."

"Boy, I'd like to see some of it. Could we do that? I mean, I'd like to touch some of them, see what you're saying to me, if you know what I mean. My hands can remember my grandfather's face, how he used to read to me. He had big ears, a heavy chin, sometimes when he talked his jaw cracked. My dad doesn't have time to read like that. He's always worrying about something happening that never happens. Never once."

"Sure, if you get the okay from your folks. I live back there in that alley. All my stuff is there. You go in along the fence and there's a wall only about two feet coming off the fence. The wall says my stuff is going to be all over the place. You have to be careful and stay against the edge of the building, against that wall. It's an old garage I live in now. Fixed up pretty good. Yell out my name."

"Sure," Dim Johnny said, "I'll yell out, 'Hey, Trot, what you got?'"

Banford J. Trot Hibbs, for the second or third time in a long time was warmed right down to his missing toes.

Sleep eventually came to Trot Hibbs that night, after the minor Memorial Day parade had passed, after he had said goodbye to the boy, after a long siege on Kwajalein sand was relived once more. In that sense of small silence, he thought about the boy's good spirits.

Barely out of bed and dressed, near-burnt toast aroma climbing the air, coffee scent its companion, the sun a huge promise coming with a quick slant onto the kitchen table, he heard the yell. "Hey, Trot! What you got?"

Out the window he saw the boy, in a dark blue jacket, a bag in one hand, the white cane in the other. "Hey, Johnny," Trot yelled. "Keep coming along the wall, open the first door you come to."

The boy stood in Trot's foyer, kitchen, half workshop, and home. "You burned the toast," he said. "Your coffee's like my father's, he calls it camp coffee from when he used to go fishing with the guys. He doesn't fish much any more. You got iron in here? You won't believe me, but I can smell feathers. D'you just wake up?"

Pronouncements and observations of all kind were not very far from Dim Johnny, Trot had already decided. He swore his toes tingled again. "Come straight ahead. There's a chair you can sit in. What's in the bag?"

"My Mom said I had to bring a lunch. She talked to some people about you, swore you ain't going to hurt me or anything crazy. She knows your cousin Sydney from the phone company. What you got, Trot?"

"You sit there, Johnny, and I'll put some things in front of you." Iron and steel sounds clinked in the air. A small measurable thud sounded on the table in front of Dim Johnny. "Tell me what you figure this piece to be, Johnny."

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"Ah, Trot, you don't have to be careful with me. Everybody calls me Dim Johnny. Don't worry about it, and I won't call you Banford." The giggle was authentic, and the toes tingled for sure.

"Just reach out and tell me," Trot advised the boy. "A few sharp edges, but not knife-sharp. Just be careful. It's iron and weighs about nine pounds." At an aside he said, "About the weight of a Garand."

"I know about Garands." He pronounced the name of the weapon correctly. "My grandfather knew what they were. Told me about his." Then Dim Johnny fondled the piece of iron sculpture. His fingers, like reaching for piano keys in an early lesson, touched the perimeters of the piece. A dozen times his hands, petting, coaxing, almost adjusting to shape, moved across the nine pounds of iron. At one point he snapped a finger against an elevated piece and the note ran around the room. He nodded his head and leaned back in the chair.

"That's a bird in flight, a hawk with fingertip wings, a hunter. I'd call him Black Hunter. I can feel its head down, looking at the ground, eyes searching. Yeh, Black Hunter."

Trot Hibbs' toes were alive, his head swam, his heart leaped. All across the prairie or a mile-wide meadow he could see jackrabbits scattering, could see the shadow of wings patrolling against the sun, wings coming from another part of day, where daylight emptied itself into. "I couldn't have named him better. From now on, that's what he is, Black Hunter. Try this one." He positioned another smaller piece of work in front of the boy.

Dim Johnny went at this one from the base upward, caressing a column, finding the core of something on top of the column, stroking the mass lightly. Behind the dark glasses Trot thought he could see the boy squint his eyes. "This could be a lot of things, but I think it's a bear in the middle of winter. Maybe a polar bear but I don't figure it to be white." He tapped his fingers on the column. A new sound ran around the room.

Trot Hibbs suddenly realized he had never before paid attention to the sounds of his own material. Johnny tapped it again, and it was musical. There was no way in his mind this was intended to be a bear, but the thought persisted. Maybe that's why it was not so quickly received by people. He'd keep the polar bear in mind, but would not tell the boy. What was really happening to him was the recognition of a new level of achievement, of selection, of newness itself. And what was it with the happy toes, the phantom toes he had heard so much about over the years. Was all this boy work?

A third mass of metal thudded on the table. "That's bigger than a Garand," Johnny said. Again his fingers found the form, froze for a moment, moved on, all parts touched, caressed, known. Trot kept the minute titillation to himself. "I don't know what it is, that's for sure, but I'd call it Tomorrow. It promises so much." He chuckled. "It's kind of like a poem my grandfather told me once. I didn't make it up. It's been there." But from its mass he brought out the sound of music by rubbing an edge. Trot thought it to be an organ at the low end of the scale.

"Tomorrow is what we'll call it from this day on." Over his shoulder he looked at a pile of iron of sundry shapes, conditions, some structural,

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some mechanical. In his hands he could

feel each piece. The many times he had fondled them went without count, but the heft continued to be known in his hands. The iron fire engine, but a few inches long he had found as a boy, came back like an exposed negative. It was someplace in the pile in the corner. If there was anything he wanted the boy to know, it was the iron fire engine, thick with rust undisturbed for years. It was like a found poem with him.

He rolled across the room, extracted a few pieces, and brought them to the table. "These are scrap pieces from my pile. What can we do with them? Do you have any ideas?" He pushed the pieces across the table to the boy. His head tilted, his ears cocked, the boy was hearing the metal in a near-silent state, the mere breath of the pieces sliding across the table.

Dim Johnny, mouth slightly open, tongue touching his top lip as if he were tasting sound, touched two pieces together. Trot had never heard that sound before, the tone, the notes coming as the boy touched them along the length of each piece, ringing them, tolling them. Musical notes were coming out of old iron he had banged together a hundred times without regard for sound. Two other pieces came into the boy's hands. They too made a music Trot Hibbs had not heard before.

"What do we do with this stuff, Dim Johnny? You're finding something I didn't even know was there. But what can we do with it?"

"Well," Johnny said, "some of the notes are softened by my hands. If you could make a small hole in each end or at the top of each piece, we could hang them by wire loops. Hands just dull the sound, kind of make it too sloppy. I heard my mother talking about some kind of chimes she heard once. We could make chimes. If the sound is good, and I can tell if the sound is good, we can make some chimes. If you shake them against each other and we know what the sound is going to be, we can make music. We could hang them in people's trees and let the wind play them."

The partnership of Banford J. Trot Hibbs and Dim Johnny Hardcastle was formed. Trot worked the pieces, bending, cutting, welding, joining, thinning the note of one or another by whatever craft he could bring to bear on it. Oh, he polished them, too, and made them catch at the sunlight as well as the ear, pretty pieces, rugged pieces, marvelous pieces. And day upon

day he felt the tingle crawling about in his toes and the sands of Kwajalein falling further away from him more and more with each passing day. The half century that had hung on so long was letting go.

With his incredulous ear, Dim Johnny found the right notes in the odd lots, or matched pieces so that notes came out of their touching, notes of rare beauty and rare orchestration. Came out of them sounds that spilled over the Chautauga

Valley and clean across the river, so that children at school were often pulled from games hearkening to them.

And the partnership sold hundreds of pieces to hundreds of people with the passing of five more Memorial Day parades until the morning Dim Johnny found Trot Hibbs still in his wheelchair from the night before.

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A few days later the flag was hung part way up the pole at the center of town. Old Chief of Boats Snorkel Boatwright closed his station for the day when there was another minor and extra parade in town, and Dim Johnny rode down the street in Snorkel's car with Trot Hibbs' Silver Star hanging from the rear view mirror for all to see.

Johnny swore he could see the gold from the Silver Star, just as he was sure that Trot Hibbs' toes were still feeling their way through a new kind of grass. In his hands he clutched a rusted iron fire engine, about a half-pound of ferric beauty that had long become his personal rubbing stone.

Some fifteen years later, and now from the same garage, Dim Johnny Hardcastle is still selling The Trot Hibbs' Silver Star Mobiles, famous makers of music.