

Who says money doesn't grow on trees?

THE MONEY TREE: A Christmas Miracle

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CHAPTER ONE

“Geronimo,” Willie whooped at the top of his lungs. The words hung mid-air, suspended with his frozen breath. With a mighty push he launched the bike down the steep incline.

“Geronimo,” echoed from the midst of his neighborhood gang of four co-conspirators, anxiously watching from the summit. No one before had ever successfully navigated a passage down Thrill Hill, no-hands style.

“Watch out for my bike,” Ralph shouted after Willie. “And what’s a Geronimo?” he added as an afterthought.

Descending at Mach-1 with his hands waiving in the air, Willie was in no position to recount the lessons in third grade American History Ralph had obviously slept through.

“Something my dad used to say,” he managed to shout over his shoulder before he lost control. Ralph’s new bike careened at breakneck speed, handlebars tumbling to wheels, to handlebars, to wheels, before smashing into the Christmas wreath on the grill of a moving van. A moving van that had been crawling up Willie’s street, the driver oblivious to the calamity descending upon him as he strained his neck, gazing out the passenger side window looking for the long faded curbside numbers.

A voice echoed from behind the van. “You darn fool.” A spindly legged curmudgeon, more spray than his years should have allowed, hustled to verbally assault the unsuspecting driver.

“You darn fool. You passed it.”

“I heard you the first time, old man.” The driver stepped from the van and straightened his wreath.

“What the?” the Old Man nimbly sidestepped Willie who, torn coat and scraped face, finished tumbling down the hill.

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Willie came to an abrupt halt when he crashed into the front tire of the van.

Ralph raced down the hill. "Willie, you O.K.?" he exclaimed breathlessly. He helped Willie to his feet. Then reality set in - the reality of his annihilated bike, his pride and joy, now a tumbled mass of twisted metal.

"Yea. I think so." Willie felt his various appendages, checking for any obvious signs of breakage.

"You killed my bike," Ralph whined as he surveyed the remains of his most prized worldly possession.

Short Cake, another member of the gang, arrived at the base of the hill. He was appropriately named for his love of confections and his diminutive stature. "Too stupendous for words," he pronounced, positively glowing at the spectacle.

"Colossal," chorused Hooter and Booger, brothers and Willie's remaining running mates. Hooter was eleven months older than Booger but they favored so much they often passed for twins. Everyone was afraid to ask how they got their nicknames.

A voice of command from the Old Man cut short the anomalous wake-celebration. "Get that piece of crap out of the way and get your butt moving unloading this van. It'll be dark soon and I don't plan on being here at midnight trying to move in by candlelight."

Casting his evil eye Willie's way, the Old Man examined the cuts, scrapes and torn clothing. "Too bad you didn't break something boy, might've taught you a lesson, pull a darn fool stunt like that."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Willie lay in bed staring at the ceiling. He thought of Dad. He thought of the hot, humid summer days he and Dad had chased retreating waves only to be slammed by the next row of relentlessly attacking surf. He thought of dusty whirlwinds cutting across chalk lined baseball diamonds as Willie got his first hit. He thought about running free across open fields, catching September winds in homemade kites and wondering how his father could run so fast, so effortlessly. He thought about the day Dad taught him how to ride a bike. And that, of course, was the trouble with Willie, he thought too much.

Willie glanced at the rising full moon framed through the frosted window. He hopped from bed in one motion and seemingly landed in his jeans, strategically placed as they were next to the bed. He grabbed a coat and his shoes. In a moment he was out the window and scrambling down to the roof of the garage and then to the ground.

Willie took a deep breath and walked to the house next door. Even though it was two a.m., light escaped from the confines of the home. Willie braced himself and rang the doorbell.

After what seemed an eternity, the Old Man eased open his door. He fixed his gaze on the young boy visibly trembling in the moonlight, unforgiving in his silent condemnation of what to Willie was a significant act of bravery. After a moment he spoke.

“Thought that might be you, boy.”

A moment passed. Willie studied the tops of his shoes.

“You got a bad habit of starting stuff you can’t finish don’t you?”

“I’ll do it,” Willie finally managed to get out.

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“Now? You sure picked a strange time.”

“You didn’t give me no required show times,” Willie answered, gathering his courage, tapping into his adrenaline.

“Where’s your bike?”

“Don’t worry I’ll find one. You wait at the bottom of the hill. I’ll be down.” Willie turned to go. He stopped. “Bring your money.”

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