

from *After The Goldrush* by Lewis Buzbee

### Five and Dime

You have to know how much I hate this. By the time I get to after-school, a little late, Sam's on the verge of tears. He's a big kid, nine, but why shouldn't he cry? And he's still my baby. It's raining, pouring, December dark, and after-school's been closed and locked for forty-five minutes. Sam knows that sometimes I'm late—it's happened before—but still. I called the school to let them know, and like every other time, they plead there's nothing they can do, they've got families, too, he'll have to wait outside. He'll be okay, they tell me.

Sam's huddled under the little porch by the school's multi-purpose room, afraid to move away from the cone of light there, afraid of the shadowy playground and the slick river of traffic beyond the fence. He's got his backpack on, it drags him down, he's ready to go. When he sees me, he bolts through the rain, his backpack bumping, he whispers my name, mom, and runs right into my arms. I can feel the heat from his face, feel the sob rise up in his chest, then he sighs and the evening runs out of him, he collapses into me, uncurls. I hate this.

I have a pretty good deal at work, considering, but every so often there's some sales report that can't possibly wait, and I have to stay and tweak it, knowing full well the report will sit on Harmon's desk all the next day, probably over the weekend, too. I mean, give me a break. Even when I get out on time, I don't get to Sam until six, and he's stuck in after-school, reading, drawing, waiting. I imagine him waiting there with the other kids, every once in a while looking out the window, wondering if he'll ever get out.

And tonight has to be a Thursday, our special night, though not much of one. We take the train back to our neighborhood and go straight to the five and dime, eat grilled cheese at the counter, chocolate milkshake for dessert. Sam always gets to pick out a

little something for himself.

I ask Sam if he still wants to go, maybe it's too late or too cold, and there's that sob again, clouding behind his eyes. He nods and nods, whispers a thin yes, then sees something in my look, and there goes the sob, winding out of him. We head for the train.

\* \* \*

It's possible we moved into our neighborhood because of the five and dime. We'd been looking at apartments for days when we found this one, the one we're still in, a basement unit in the back, small and dark but nice enough, nice enough for Sam, little trooper, to call it rustic, a word I could not have imagined he'd know. I wanted to take the place immediately, out of sheer fatigue and hunger and a general pissiness that we had to do this at all, when Sam spotted the five and dime and its old-timey lunch counter, and offered to buy me dinner. With his own money, his allowance. Now and then I have to remind myself that he's very sharp at reading other people, too good perhaps, too attentive.

Walking into Irving Variety Five and Dime was like stepping into my own past, and the first thing that told me this was the smell of the place, popcorn and butter and salted nuts, a bit of tang from the grill, the slight must of things that haven't been moved in a while. There'd been a store like this in San Jose when I was growing up, a Ben Franklin, and I'd stop there on the way home from school to buy candy or pencils, and sometimes with friends, in junior high mostly, we'd have lunch at the counter on weekends, feeling very grown-up. I bought my first bra there, without my mother knowing, ashamed to be buying it in such a store, not a department store, but relieved to be anonymous. The salesgirl wasn't much older than me, and she had bad skin and braces and seemed very unhappy, so it was perfect. The only time I ever tried to steal anything from anyone was from Ben Franklin, nail polish, Cherries in the Snow, but

after walking around with it in my purse for a long time and pretending to be ruthlessly interested in every piece of merchandise in the store, I relented and put the polish back in its little rack, the end of my life of crime.

The day Sam and I first found Irving Variety was just like today, rainy and cold, the heart of winter's clipped days, two years ago now, and we both fell into the comfort of the place, the crowded aisles, the racks of cheap and cheerful and overlooked goods—tube socks, votive candles, ledgers, cookie cutters, jigsaw puzzles. I let Sam buy me dinner that first time. He was so proud of himself.

When we left that night, the little shopping street was all lit up, and we chased the shop windows in the rain, the shoemaker, the comics shop, the photo store, coin store, notary, a few cafes. We agreed to take the apartment, and I called the manager that night and wheedled and promised, and we got it. Paul had left us the year before and was living with his new girlfriend by then and she was already pregnant, so Sam and I had no choice but to move smaller. Paul and his new family could afford to move to Belvedere, in a big house that overlooked the bay and the city. With what I was making and the child support from Paul, Sam and I would just barely get by. That first year we were separated, Paul was super dad, taking Sam all the time and making promises to me about how good everything would turn out. Then Debbie showed up, and they were pregnant and moving into the big house, and Sam and I were suddenly out of our lovely flat, and Paul decided it was best for Sam to stay with me in the city for the school. Sam knew all too well what it meant, he'd have the bedroom, I'd sleep on the couch, and so he allowed the quiet charm of this poky little neighborhood get to him. He made it appeal to him. All the merchants know Sam now, and if we miss a single Thursday night at Irving Variety's counter, they worry. We feel at home here.

\* \* \*

The train comes up out of the tunnel into our neighborhood. The rain's stopped

and the sky's practically clear. But colder, too, really cold. The shop windows are all steamed up. I feel the skin on my face pinch. If I know anything about the weather here, all this points to a week of very cold and dry weather when the rain stops, it happens every year around this time. The problem is, we're not ready for this weather, not by a long shot, don't have the heavy coats and boots and gloves for the cold. This isn't Canada, after all. I'd prefer that it rain, swamp us, it's warmer that way.

Irving Variety is toasty inside, the ceiling heater blowing overtime. Dan and Treung, the owners, are behind the front counter, watching their small black and white, Wheel of Fortune, I think. They wave and call Sam over, offer him a toffee, a candy I know he doesn't like but which he dutifully accepts and pops in his mouth. He mumbles a thank you, and we all laugh a little. Like every Thursday.

Mrs. Park, cook and waitress, see us, smiles broadly, then turns and begins to make our sandwiches. She knows what we'll have, there's no need to order. We sit on our usual stools at the far end of the counter, where we can watch everything come and go, keep an eye on who's passing by. Usually Sam and I spend dinner talking about the other customers, invent surprising histories for them. That one may look like an old lady, Sam'll say, but in reality she's a spy in the service of the evil Dr. Xanadu, and Sam, secret agent that he is, will have to save me from her evil clutches.

Tonight Sam goes on and on about the California mission system, and I'm happy to let him, and he's happy to tell me. They're studying how Spanish priests and soldiers made their way north from Baja and established a chain of small settlements. In the beginning it must have so hard for them, Sam tells me, but they knew that one day they would build great cities here. Just think, Mom, he says, how far away they must have felt, Spain was far away, and all they had here was adobe and grass.

Over our shakes, Sam is telling Mrs. Park about the missions. He'll talk anyone's ear off. Mrs. Park nods and smiles and says, you don't say, which is how she keeps him

talking. Sam draws a map for her, in crayon on one of the paper place mats. This is California, right?, he says, and see, they put the missions here and here and here, each one of them a day's horse ride from the other. They didn't have very much back then, especially the riders out on their own. They could only carry what they could carry, just enough to get them to the next outpost. You don't say, Mrs. Park says.

Later, Sam's glued to the glass cabinet of roasted nuts, and who can blame him. You can see the rich oils sweating out of the nuts, smell the dark surprise brought out by the hot lights in the case. They're expensive, I know that and Sam knows that, but it's been such a shitty day, why not. I order a half pound of cashews. Mrs. Park gently scoops the nuts out of their bin and empties them into a white paper bag. She hands me a chit and I go up front to pay. Sam hangs back in the toy section.

At the register I hand over the chit, fish out my wallet, and pay, and that's it, there's not a single bill left in there. Two quarters, we're done. Paul's check was supposed to be here Monday, but it wasn't, and when I called he apologized and told me it was on its way and it probably is. But still. I do get paid tomorrow but that's tomorrow and not tonight, and I'm the one who wants to break into tears now, there's not enough for the smallest trinket. I could charge it, but you know how that works, and I just don't know how much more into debt we can go.

Sam's standing by the wire rack of toys at the back of the aisle. These are the toys, what Sam's used to getting from me. Plastic paratroopers, jacks, Chinese jump rope, small bags of Army men, a stack of play money, glitzy crowns. Sam hands me the bag of cashews—he's saved my portion for me—then wipes his salty fingers on his pants before he picks up what he's been staring at. We've looked at this before, and I know he's wanted to get it but has been waiting for the right moment. Magic Crystal Garden, five-forty-nine, in a box about so big by so big. The picture on the box shows a Japanese looking rock garden with two bonsai trees growing out of it and between these a miniature Mt.

Fuji that's supposed to be in the distance. You soak a plastic skeleton of the garden in the solution, and over the next hour, the trees bloom and Mt. Fuji turns all blue and snow-capped. I suppose there's some educational value here, something about the science of minerals, but mostly it's cool looking.

Listen. I know Sam will be fine without this gewgaw, that his life would go on unimpeded, unharmed. And besides, at his father's on alternate weekends, he has more toys than a hundred kids could want. This is not a big deal. But I want him to have it, I want to get it for him tonight.

He's reading the directions on the back of the box now, and this means he wants it, he's made his choice. Do you want it, Sam, I ask, and the sound of his name in the air, unnecessary and unexpected, slays me. Oh yes, he says, always so polite. I take the box from him, tell him to keep looking while I pay.

They are so good to us here, I hate to do it, but in the housewares aisle, surrounded by cheap dishes and flimsy towels, I slip Sam's present deep into the bottom of my purse. I'll pay for it somehow.

\* \* \*

After he's done with his homework, Sam readies the Magic Crystal Garden. He covers the kitchen table with newspapers taped together, and fills a Tupperware container with water. He mixes the galvanizing solution into the water, and we wait the required five minutes. Wearing my yellow dish gloves, he then immerses the plastic skeleton of the garden, and we wait another ten minutes, which Sam fills by poring over the instruction booklet to find out as much as he can about the formation of these rudimentary patterns. Sam loves this line he finds in the instructions, Please to avoid rude accelerations, and we laugh and laugh, and cannot figure it out for the life of us.

Finally it's ready, and Sam gently removes the garden from the solution and sets it on its base. It may take, according to the fine print, as nearly tall as two durable hours

for full floweration. Sam's got an idea. He puts on a CD, The Beatles "Let It Be," his new favorite, then he grabs two storm candles from the kitchen, lights them and sets them on the kitchen table, and turns off all the lights. It's lovely. I turn up the heater a notch.

The Magic Crystal Garden begins to grow. On the black plastic branches of the artificial trees, feathery shafts of matter begin to appear. Sam explains that it's magnetism of a sort, the crystal molecules aligning with one another, and in that alignment, parallel now, they accrue—he actually uses that word—and make new shapes where there'd been nothing before. Mom, he says, it's simple, they push each other up.

The leaves of the tree are pink, the branches yellow, and the tiny flowers in the garden—not pictured on the box—are red and green. Mt. Fuji is the best, though. In the dim light of the storm candles it does seem far away, seems like a real mountain that's hazy and impossible to get to. You can almost see the unbroken trail of pilgrims winding up the mountainside, the ones who every day make their way to the top, for what? Is it heaven, they expect, nirvana? The Magic Crystal Garden, I'm pretending, is my very own garden, and I love the view from here, the view of that distant mountain.