

The Wedding Ring

by

Don Benish

Charley sat on his bed, trying to think of a present for his Mom for her birthday tomorrow. He dug into his pocket and pulled out some change. All he had was seventeen cents, not enough to buy her anything. Besides, he knew what she really wanted. When he got sick last month, she had pawned her gold wedding ring to pay for his medicine. He was better now, but he knew how much she missed that ring. If there was just any way to get her another one.

He picked up a dictionary and looked through the book that his Dad called the font of all knowledge. It should give him an idea. *There is a funny word*, he thought. *Alchemy*. The dictionary said that long ago people tried to make gold out of lead. *I can do that! There are some lead scraps in the junk pile out back.*

Charley rushed out to the pile and fished around for bits and pieces that he could use. Here was an old piece of wheelweight, and there was an old bolt about as big around as his Mom's finger. He took them to the garage where his Dad kept some old tools. He found a hammer and a piece of railroad rail to pound on. He flattened the lead out into a thin strip. Using the bolt, he bent the lead into a circle and beat it into shape with the hammer.

It looked rough and ugly, with some sharp edges, but he knew what to do about that. He took a knife and carefully shaved the lead ring smooth. Cutting away the outer part of the lead left the inner part shiny. He hoped the ring would stay as shiny when he turned it into gold.

Using the point of the knife, he carved his Mom's initials onto the outside of the ring. Her old ring had her whole name carved in the inside but he didn't think he could do that.

Then he had a problem. The ring wouldn't come off the bolt. He spit on the bolt to make it slippery and using the knife, managed to pry the ring off.

Now I have to turn it into gold, he thought. *Eggs yolks are gold, sort of. If I soak it in an egg yolk, that should turn it to gold.* He went out to the henhouse where an old hen was

sitting on a nest clucking. She stood up and he heard a 'clunk.' He reached under her and pulled out the fresh egg.

He broke the egg into a cup and poured out the whites until all that was left was the brilliant golden yolk. He dropped the ring into the cup and stirred it around until it was completely covered with the golden goo. He then hid the cup in the garage where nothing could get at it.

He went to bed that night dreaming of his Mom's face when she saw her new golden ring. The next morning, he was up bright and early, raced to the garage and found the precious cup. He poured it out on the ground, picked up the ring and wiped it off with his handkerchief. He looked at it and his heart sank. It hadn't turned to gold at all. It was just a plain lead ring.

He wrapped it in his handkerchief, put it in his pocket and trudged back to the house. His family was just sitting down at the kitchen table.

"Happy birthday, Mom," said his brother Tommy. He handed her a package which she ripped open. It was a pair of gloves. "Your old ones were getting kind of ragged."

"They're lovely," she said. "Thank you, Tommy."

"Happy birthday, Marge." Her husband handed her an envelope.

She tore it open and took out a small piece of paper. "It's a pawn ticket!" she exclaimed in surprise.

"I made a deal with the guy at the pawnshop. I paid him three hundred dollars and after four more payments, we'll have your ring back by Christmas."

Oh no! thought Charley. *She won't even want my ring now.*

"Charley, what did you get for Mom?" asked Tommy. "I heard you hammering on something yesterday."

"Oh, it's nothing," he said miserably.

"Let's see it, dear. I'm sure I'll love it," said his Mom.

"It's just this." He pulled his handkerchief out and the ring fell to the floor. "You don't even need it now. I'm sorry it didn't turn to gold like it was supposed to."

She picked up his present. "Why, it's a lovely ring." She slipped it on her little finger. "It fits too. It smells a little funny though."

He explained about trying to turn it into gold. His Dad and Tommy burst out laughing, but his Mom just smiled. "Well, I just love it. I can wear it until I get my old one back, then I'll put it on a chain around my neck." She stooped and hugged him.

He couldn't believe it. She liked his present, an ugly old homemade ring that smelled like an egg. Maybe it wasn't still lead after all. The alchemists had it all wrong. Love is what turns things to gold.

The End

Chickens Eat The Darndest Things

By

Don Benish

Mothers often say that when somebody picks at their food and eats only a very little bit, that person 'eats like a bird.' Parakeets may eat that way, but chickens surely don't. Eating like a chicken might better describe the boy or girl who shovels everything in as fast as they can and then accidentally swallows the butter dish.

Chickens eat like they are afraid that if they don't gobble their food all up right away something else will come along and steal it. This may actually be the real reason. Millions of years ago, when chickens were evolving from other birds that came before them, they stopped flying everywhere and spent most of the time running around on the ground. If they found something to eat, another animal might just come along and take the food away from *them*. Or, even worse, try to eat them.

Chickens had to develop a way to eat a lot of food really fast. They developed a special bag in their necks to store the excess food. This bag is called the chicken's crop. If you've ever visited a farm, you may have noticed a big bulge in a chicken's long neck. That bulge is their crop. The chicken probably just finished eating a lot of grain or maybe it swallowed several large grasshoppers.

After the chicken has filled its crop, it goes off to a safe place to rest. Little by little, the food from its crop is sent down to the gizzard where it is ground up. Then it is passed to the guts where it is digested. The gizzard needs hard stuff like sand and pebbles to grind up the food because chickens don't have teeth to chew with. They must eat enough of these hard things along with their food in order to live.

In fact, a chicken will eat almost anything it can swallow. In the old days when chickens were still wild animals living in the forest, this was okay. Anything a chicken could find and swallow was probably either food or pebbles. Today, however, is different. Chickens in a farmer's yard often find and swallow things that were never meant to be eaten by anything. Many times when the farmer butchers his chickens, he will find things in the crop such as nails, paper clips, rifle casings, buttons and rubber bands. Many times these things will pass through the chicken without harming it, but

sometimes they won't. A nail might poke a hole in the crop or get stuck in the gizzard. Then the chicken will get sick and die. Or maybe the chicken will swallow a large rubber band that gets tangled up in the crop and blocks the opening to the gizzard. The chicken might starve to death with a full crop.

Chickens aren't smart enough to know that swallowing nails and rubber bands can hurt them. They go about their lives assuming anything they can put in their mouths and swallow is good to eat. Most people aren't that stupid. They know that just because you can swallow it doesn't make it good for you. The next time someone dares you to eat something that isn't food, ask yourself this: Are you really as dumb as a chicken?

The End

Ducks

By

Don Benish

The boy watched the big car pull up to the curb and park. Every day now for a month, he had seen the same old man arrive at three o'clock and sit on the park bench to watch the ducks. About five, the man would get up, get in his car and leave. He wore nice clothes and must be very rich to own such a car. Why did he come down to such a ratty part of town just to watch the ducks?

The boy noticed this because he lived in a brownstone across from the park. He lived with his aunt and uncle, but they never paid him much attention. Most of the time, he hung out with his friends, but the old man had excited his curiosity. Today he thought he'd go down to the park and get a better look at the stranger.

He tried not to look directly at the man as he walked by the bench but the man looked at him anyway and spoke, "Why don't you sit down and talk?"

The boy looked at him and replied, "Are you talkin' to me?"

"Yes. Now sit down." It seemed odd for the man to order him around so, but he sat down.

"Do you know me?" the boy asked.

"You live in the brownstone across the street. I've noticed you spying on me."

The boy looked at the sharp-eyed man warily. "So?"

"You thinking about maybe robbing me?" the man asked with an amused smile.

"Maybe." The boy's shoulders tensed up.

"I would advise against it. I'm a lot tougher than I look."

The boy scowled at the man. "Just what do you want? You going to send me to jail or something like that." He thought of something and smirked. "Maybe you're going to give me all your money so I'll grow up and be rich like you?"

"No." The man shot a piercing glance at him. "I have my own kids and grandkids and they're all good ones. They deserve everything I got. I'm not going to give you a thing or send you anywhere."

"Then what are you doing here?"

The man didn't answer. Instead, he asked, "Do you go to school?"

"I got no reason to go to school. They got no use for me and I got no use for them."

I already got everything out of school I'll ever need."

"What do your parents think of that?"

The boy scowled. "They don't care. My dad run off when I was little and my Mom's drunk most of the time. I live with my aunt and uncle and they don't care what I do either."

"So you just hang around with your friends and knock over trash cans for fun."

"Yeah, mostly." The boy felt a lecture coming on and was getting irritated by the man's questions.

"Can you read and do arithmetic?"

"Sure, I ain't stupid."

"Multiply forty-six and twenty-three."

The boy thought for a minute and gave an answer.

"Right. You're a smart kid. Not many people can do that trick. You ever think about what you want to become?"

"Why should I? No one else cares."

The man turned his head and looked sternly at the boy. "It doesn't matter whether anyone else cares. The only person who has to care is you. So long as you care about what you become, then you will succeed."

The boy nervously scooted away from the man. "What do you know about it? And who asked you anyway?"

The old man's face relaxed. "Because we're not that different. I grew up in hard times too. My old man was a drunk and my mother didn't care much about me either. One day I decided that it didn't matter. I realized that I was smart and despite what anyone else said, I could be whatever I wanted. Everything that I did from then on was because I knew I could be the best. I went to college because I wanted to. I graduated with honors because I wanted to. I became a successful businessman because I wanted to. No one had to tell me what I could and couldn't do because I knew I was good. I think you can be whatever you want to be, also. All you have to do is want to. If you want to be a bum, you'll be a bum. If you want to be a hoodlum, you'll be a hoodlum. If you want to be somebody, you'll be somebody."

The boy looked at the old man in surprise. This was not what he had expected. Whenever he had gotten a lecture before, it was to tell him how bad he was. "Do you really think I can be somebody? No one ever told me that before."

"You can be whatever you want to if you only want to badly enough. And the only one who has to believe that you can do it, is you." The old man looked at his watch. "Well, it's time to go. Nice talking with you."

"You coming back tomorrow? We could talk again. Maybe you could really help me become somebody."

The old man smiled a funny smile. "No, I don't think so. I've been wasting too much time here anyway. You don't need me to tell you that you already are somebody. You know it just as well as I do. Just keep reminding yourself of that." The old man stood up. "Besides, I don't even like ducks." He got in his car and drove off without another word.

When the boy got back home, his aunt and uncle were watching some stupid show on television.

His aunt yelled, "You going out tonight?"

"No, I don't think so. I gotta get up tomorrow and go to school."

His uncle looked up in surprise. "That's funny. You haven't been to school in months. Why the sudden change?"

The boy thought about what the old man had said. "Because I want to."

The End

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Breaking the Bad Habit of a Pie-Stealing Rabbit

by

Don Benish

"That horrible boy!" yelled Mama Rabbit. "That's the fourth pie he has stolen this week!"

Raymond and Regina Rabbit peered out from behind the door at their mother's angry face. Mama was Horace Hare's favorite victim because she made the best pies. "Ever since Mr. Hare lost that race, his family has become a bunch of no-good thieving bums. I have half a mind to go right over there now and give them a piece of my mind."

Raymond started laughing because he knew that was the best way to console Mama. Laughter had always been popular in the Rabbit family, especially with their famous Uncle, the movie star. Soon everyone was laughing and Mama got over being mad. But Raymond knew that Horace had to be taught a lesson. "Mama, make one more pie tomorrow and let Horace steal it, then I promise that will be the last one he steals."

Now, Raymond was an exceptionally bright boy and had been studying with Professor Longhair for nearly two years. If anyone could break Horace of his bad habit it was him.

That night Raymond and his mouse friend Mortimer stayed up way late working with Raymond's chemistry set. They wouldn't tell anyone what they were doing but Raymond promised Mama that they wouldn't hurt Horace.

The next day, Mama baked another pie and before she put it on the window sill to cool Raymond poured something from a bottle all over it. Right on schedule, Horace hopped by and stole the pie.

"Now we wait." said Raymond.

They didn't wait long. A loud scream brought everyone to their feet. Out the door and down the trail they went to the Hares' house. Soon they met their neighbors coming to investigate the scream. Mr. and Mrs. Cottontail and Carlos and Consuela Conejo were there as was Mr. Bunny, the famous TV star, chewing on a carrot as usual. They all met Professor Longhair at the gate to the Hares' yard.

"Que va?" asked Carlos, running along in his floppy sombrero and his serape.

"Yeah. Like he said, what's up, Doc?" added Mr. Bunny, magically producing another carrot from thin air.

"I don't know, but it sounded terrible." replied the Professor.

They all jerked to a stop in front of the Hares' house. Mrs. Hare was crying a river and the frightened Horace was trembling terribly. He was ALL GREEN! From the tips of his ears to the bottoms of his feet he was green as grass.

"Oh Professor, thank goodness you're here! Look what has happened to my boy. He's all green!" which was obvious to everyone. "Can you save him."

The Professor stopped to scratch his chin. "Hmm! Well now, has he eaten anything unusual lately?"

Regina piped up, "He has stolen and eaten five of Mama's pies in the past week."

Mrs. Hare turned to Horace. "Is that true? Did you steal and eat Mrs. Rabbit's pies?"

Horace nodded miserably.

The Professor smelled a rat or more appropriately, a Raymond, and he heartily approved. "Well now, I would say that your son is allergic to pies. I believe that I can cure him but he must promise never, ever to steal another pie."

"Oh, I promise, I promise!" squeaked the frightened little boy. "I'll never eat another piece of pie as long as I live."

"Well now, Master Rabbit, let's see if you've been paying attention to your lessons. We talked about allergies just last week. How long would you say that young Master Hare will stay green if he does not eat any more pie." The Professor was being crafty here because he didn't know exactly what Raymond had fed to the thief.

Raymond walked forward and scratched his chin just like the Professor had. "Well now, he should recover and be his normal color within a week. But if he breaks his promise and eats anymore pie, his insides will turn green and who knows what might happen then."

The problem solved, everyone went home. As he walked to his house, a curious sentence came to the Professor. It went like this: Breaking the bad habit of a pie-stealing rabbit. Then another thought came to him, this would make a good title for a story...

..And so it was.

The End

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A Place for My Stuff

by

Don Benish

When I was a kid, my favorite place in the whole world was a wooden shack that my grandmother used to use as a brooder house to raise baby chickens. My Dad later used it to store grain and it was briefly used to house some tame ducks that we had.

When I took it over, the wooden floor had tin can lids nailed over the places where rats had gnawed holes. It smelled of creosote and old oil, poured around to keep the wood from rotting. Mud-dauber wasps would fly in and out around the rickety wooden door. They wouldn't bother you if you didn't bother them.

I called it my shop. I had inherited a huge wooden box that my great-grandfather had made for a tool chest. In it, I stored all my precious worldly goods. It contained comic books and old pocketknives and other things that boys find necessary for life. My shop was my haven. I could have what I wanted and do what I wanted. I even had a deadbolt on the door to keep out my nosy little brother.

I was a packrat and collected things not because I needed them but because I might someday. My Mom never told me to clean it up or to throw away my useless junk. If I found stuff like old whiskey bottles in a road ditch, I could keep them there and no one objected.

I could sit out there by myself and dream about being a pirate or a cowboy or an astronaut. My only company were the wasps. They were kind of creepy because if you sat real still, they would fly right by your face like you weren't even there. I liked them because they killed spiders. If you broke open one of their mud nests, you found them crammed with dead spiders used to feed their babies.

In the winter, when there was snow on the ground, I could go out to my shop and the wasps would all be asleep. It would be very quiet and I could sit there and think all kinds of wonderful thoughts. Quiet places are really great when you want to think. I could have all kinds of adventures in my head and nothing would come by to bother me. I believe every kid needs a quiet place to think. Somewhere where Dad won't tell you to take out the trash and Mom won't bug you about your homework. Adventures in your mind are better than anything on television,

because they are all yours and no one else can see them.

My shop was old and creaky and ugly and smelly. But it was dry. And it was all mine. It was a place for my stuff. It was a place for stuff that I could hold in my hand and a place for stuff I could hold in my head. And that is why I liked it so much.

The End

The Badger

By

Don Benish

Back when I was a little kid I once did battle with a badger. Of course when I was ten, I didn't consider myself a little kid. I was a grown man, wasn't I.

Anyway, I lived on a farm with my parents and a hated little brother. I mean, littler brother, he was only eight. Due to a giant error committed by my now absent older brothers it had become a rule that the kids had to wash the dishes every night. Mom and Dad went for a drive, purportedly to see the wheat, and the two of us were left to finish the dishes. Probably the real reason was they couldn't stand to listen to us argue about who was doing more work. Anyway, I was washing the dishes and Leonard was supposed to be drying them when our dog Corky started barking up a storm. He'd bark at anything that didn't really matter, like squirrels and rocks and cars ten miles away. Leonard went out to see what the dog was so riled about and came back to say that he had cornered a coon.

A coon! They're just little things aren't they? I had never really seen one up close and besides Daniel Boone wore one for a cap so how big can they be. I didn't have permission to take the gun out on my own, so I grabbed the hatchet we used to kill chickens when we butchered them. It worked on chickens, it ought to kill a coon. Of course, when you're ten years old nothing can hurt you anyway so I didn't consider that a coon has teeth AND claws and WILL bite you if you get too close.

Corky had the whatever it was out in Joe Popp's field across the road. With my trusty hatchet, which was a big hatchet as hatchets go, I walked out to do battle. As I got closer, it occurred to me that this coon looked awfully big. When I got there though I realized THAT AIN'T NO COON. It was a BADGER, with claws about six feet long. Corky kept circling it and barking, but he was no dummy and kept his distance. Suddenly the hatchet seemed no larger than a soup spoon.

An idea came to me, I'LL GET THE AXE. It has a longer handle and somehow feels

more like a weapon. So now, armed with a more substantial tool, I tried to figure out how to kill it. I didn't want to get too close and wasn't quite sure how to go about it. The badger didn't seem too eager to go anywhere and Corky was in a rage because he couldn't figure out what to do either. Somehow I got the critter on his back and hit him on the belly with the sharp end. The axe bounced off like hitting rubber. He might get a belly ache but who ever died of a belly ache. Then it occurred to me that the axe had a flat end. I hit him in the head with the flat end and that did the trick. A couple of more whacks and the job was done.

I carried my prize up to the house with Leonard and Corky dancing around like maniacs. It couldn't have been any better if it had been a grizzly bear. Mom and Dad were sure surprised when they got home.

A coon indeed! It was a badger you dumb little brother. And I could've gotten killed.

The End