

# Father with Sons

by Clay Rooks

Kate was upstairs getting the boys into bed. Pete had broken his wrist and his arm was in a cast. There had been some arguing about the circumstances of his injury and they weren't talking to me anymore. I was sitting by myself in the family room in the dark with the TV on. My head ached; my temples throbbed. Kate was angry with me. When she gets angry, she quits speaking to me and lets me twist in withering silence. I don't let it bother me too much.

On the late news a television camera tracking across Cape Kennedy paused at the launch pad. Momentous things were happening, the anchorwoman said. NASA was sending up a space shuttle to launch a giant, orbiting telescope. An artist's conception appeared on the screen, a cylinder the size of a bus with solar panel wings. The simulation was impressive. The scientist now being interviewed was saying how this space telescope would bring the universe into focus like never before. Pictures of galaxies appeared behind him. What it would see would answer ancient questions and help us to better understand creation, he said, and better understand ourselves.

Overhead, the ceiling creaked and I heard the boys climbing into their beds. I thought I should go up and talk to them again, try to explain things better.

After school, Pete and Ben had gone bike riding and strayed into a neighborhood where they weren't supposed to go. A gang of kids had chased them out. They had gotten away, but in their haste Pete had misjudged a corner, slide sideways, and hit a parked car. His bike was wrecked and his wrist was injured.

I'd called Kate at work. When she came home, we decided to take Pete to the clinic for an X-ray because he kept saying how his wrist hurt and we could see it was swelling. That was when the squabbling started, and then we were arguing. Now there was a harsh silence.

The weather report came on and I heard Kate coming down the stairs. Sitting alone in the dark with the TV news on hadn't helped my headache much. I closed my eyes.

When I heard Kate at the bottom of the stairs, I glanced over that way. She snapped the

room lights on. The sudden brightness blinded me.

"Thanks," I mumbled. I rubbed my eyes, then I could see again. Kate was at the bookcase.

"You looking for your book?" I asked.

She didn't answer or look my way.

"I saw it on the desk yesterday," I told her.

She remained at the bookcase for several minutes longer going along one shelf of paperbacks, then she went over to the desk and found her reading. Without a word, she sat down in the arm chair furthest from me and opened her book.

The news was wrapped up with smiles and light banter between the male and female co-anchors.

"You want to watch anything now?" I asked.

She ignored me and made me feel it. Her silence hung in the air and made me grit my teeth.

"Fine," I said as I got up and turned the TV off. "I'll go up and say goodnight to the boys."

Kate glared at me, her eyes hard. "You've said enough to them for one day," she snapped.

"Then I'll just give them a kiss."

Kate held her book before her steady and deliberate, but I could see that she wasn't reading anymore. I went past her, walking slowly.

"Leave them alone, Jack," she said sternly. "I want them to go to sleep. They need it."

"I won't disturb them."

"Jack..."

I stopped at the bottom of the stairs and waited. Kate turned to look directly at me.

"Don't upset them again. They need to sleep. They have school tomorrow."

"I didn't mean to upset them before, Kate. I just tried to explain."

"No, you didn't. You yelled at them. Pete was hurt and you yelled at him." She put her book down.

"I didn't yell that much," I said. "I only scolded him."

Rooks

"You kept at it all the way to the clinic and back and afterwards. You called Pete stupid."

Her words cut at me. "I didn't call him stupid. I said what he did was stupid."

"You called him stupid. More than once. You said they didn't have any brains. You didn't let up for an hour even after we found out Pete's wrist was broken."

"Yes I did."

She kept her eyes on me now. Her gaze was level and direct.

"They shouldn't have been there," I muttered. "Then he wouldn't have gotten hurt."

"He's just a boy. His wrist was fractured, and he hit his head. He was hurt. It wasn't his fault."

"Kate, I've told them over and over that neighborhood isn't safe. You know there's crack houses and gangs. I can't protect them there. Something much worse could've happened to them. What could I've done?"

"Nothing else did happen."

"It's a dangerous neighborhood. I don't want them to forget that again."

"They won't. But you didn't need to keep at them. You don't listen to yourself. You hollered at Pete for wrecking his bike, even though he walked it home, with a broken wrist."

"Actually, Ben walked it for him," I said. "He walked Ben's."

Her eyes began to harden. I knew I'd said the wrong thing. The little technicalities didn't matter to Kate. I felt that silence coming again, heavy in the air. I was getting weary of all this. She wasn't going to back down. She was sure she was right. Maybe she was. I decided I'd better let it go.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay? I was upset, too," I said. "I'll just tell 'em goodnight. And I'll apologize."

Kate picked up her book. "Don't lecture them. They need rest. Pete was having trouble going to sleep. Maybe he'll tell you why. He wouldn't tell me."

The boys' bedroom was dark and only a little moonlight filtered in through the window.

"Watch your eyes," I told them, then turned on the desk light. The shaded lamp gave a

warm glow that illuminated the posters and pictures of wildlife, racing cars, and athletes on their walls.

"Dad..." Ben complained, pulling the sheet over his face.

Pete lay on his back, not moving, solemn, the cast on his arm held against his chest like a weight. He didn't look at me.

I sat down on the foot of his bed. He looked smaller and younger in bed with his broken arm. He was ten; Ben was almost nine. Both often seemed more grown up than I remembered being at their ages. They knew more about the world, especially certain perverse and mean things uncommon when I was young but common now, if you believed the daily news. Yet they were just boys, young kids. True, Pete was getting tall, but his hair and eyes were still soft brown, like a child's.

"So how does your wing feel now?" I asked him.

He didn't answer. He looked at his arm, his mouth pressed together in a straight line.

"Did you guys say your prayers with Mom?"

I waited, trying to think of what I should say, how I should say it. Maybe I had been too rough before. I'd been angry and I hadn't wanted to be. I hated it when they were sick or hurt.

"Don't worry about your bike," I told Pete. "I looked at it. It's not that bad...just the front wheel, mostly. I'll get you a new one tomorrow. Okay? You can go with me to the bike shop after school, if you want. I'll make it like it was."

Pete shook his head.

"Really. The front fork's not bent. It'll be fine."

Still, he was silent. He had a lot of his mother in him. Usually he would have given in by now and we would be buddies again and everything would be patched up. But he was being hard this time. I tried to keep my voice low and level.

"Well, that's okay. I'll fix it for you," I said.

I started to get up, but then I sat back down on his bed. "First, though, I want to tell you why I was angry with you before. Ben, get your head out of the covers."

Ben's head popped out. "We already know, Dad," he said with exaggerated exasperation. "It's cause Pete wrecked his bike and his arm."

"That's not the main reason," I said. "Come on, Pete, listen up. I want you guys to understand this."

I waited while they reluctantly turned their attention to me. "Okay, before I start, I want you to know I'm sorry I yelled at you earlier. Especially you, Pete. I was very upset with you both. I didn't know at first that Pete was hurt and I was angry about what you'd done."

Pete nodded. "My bike," he said, solemnly.

"No, not your bike," I said. "I'm not happy about it getting wrecked, but mostly I'm angry that you guys disobeyed us. You know you are forbidden to ride in that neighborhood. Right?"

Ben nodded.

"It's not safe. It has drugs, crack houses, gangs. It's a bad place. We've told you both this several times. Don't go there. We can't protect you there. Do you understand?"

Both boys bobbed their heads.

"It was different when I was a boy. My parents didn't have to worry. When I was your age, I lived in a small town. I could ride my bike all over town, anywhere I wanted. The only thing my mom and dad had to worry about was if I got hit by a car. And there wasn't much traffic there. I wish you boys could be growing up like that, like it was when I was a boy. It was really great. We'd ride uptown to the grocery store and buy penny candies. We didn't even have to lock up our bikes. We'd just leave them in front of the store on the sidewalk. When we came out, they'd still be there. We'd jump on and ride off. Go anywhere. I hate it that you can't. I wish..."

I caught myself and stopped. I could tell by the way they looked at me that the distance was too much for them to bridge. Sometimes it was difficult for me to span it again. Thirty years was a great distance.

"But it's not like that now, is it? You guys know about cocaine and gangs and other rotten stuff, right?"

I felt an anger welling up in me, an anger that sometimes came when I would watch the

Rooks

evening news or read the newspapers, especially when I saw things about violent crimes or the homeless or drugs. More so when children were the victims. But I worked to push the anger down.

"The point is...it's different now," I told them. "You have to be very careful. I can't protect you from all the drugs and the perverts. You can't be careless. It's too dangerous. You can get hurt very badly, much worse than a broken arm."

I tried to look into their eyes, hoping to see a glimmer of understanding. But their expressions betrayed nothing.

"Dad..."

"Yes, Ben."

"I'm tired. Can we go to sleep now?"

I started to tell him that I had more to explain to them, but suddenly I felt tired too.

"Yeah, sure," I said. "Cover up. I'll get the light. You guys go to sleep. And stay out of that neighborhood. I won't tell you again. Understand?" I turned the light off.

"Yes, Dad."

"Yes, Dad."

"Okay, go to sleep. I'll go down in a minute."

"Dad..."

"Yeah, Pete."

"I can't go to sleep."

"Why not? Your wrist hurt?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

He hesitated. "I'm afraid to." He spoke barely above a whisper.

"Afraid to sleep? Why?"

"I'm afraid I won't wake up again." His voice trembled.

"Why wouldn't you?"

He didn't answer. I thought he might be crying.

"Pete...?"

He didn't say anything.

"Why wouldn't you wake up, Pete?"

He choked back a sob.

"Ben, what's going on with Pete?"

"I can't tell, Dad. I promised I wouldn't. I swore it."

"Pete..."

He muffled a sob in his pillow.

"Okay, Ben, tell me. Now."

"Dad..." he protested.

"I'll tell," Pete said. He was trying to be calm. "I was knocked out."

"You mean when you hit the car? You were knocked unconscious?"

"Yes," he sobbed.

"Why didn't you tell the doctor at the clinic you'd been knocked out?"

"I was too afraid," he cried.

"Okay, okay. Don't get upset. How long were you out?"

"I don't know." He was trying to stop sobbing again.

"Ben, how long was Pete knocked out?"

He thought. "Hm, 'bout half a minute, I guess."

"Okay. That's not long."

"I don't remember it," Pete said.

"Well that's normal when you're knocked out. Why are you afraid to go to sleep?"

"I'm scared I won't wake up."

"Why not?"

He didn't answer.

"Are you afraid you'll die in your sleep?"

"Yes," Pete cried.

"Oh, you won't," I said. "I was knocked out three or four times when I was a kid. For longer than half a minute, too. Sliding on the ice in the winter."

"But what if I have a cussion?"

"A concussion. That just means you banged your brain. I had concussions, too. I'm still here."

"Were you afraid to go to sleep?" Ben asked.

I tried to think back. "I can't remember," I said. "I probably was. But you don't have to be afraid. A bump on the head won't kill you."

I was trying desperately to remember what the danger signs were when someone had a concussion: lethargy... eyes won't focus...what else?

"You sure it's okay, Dad?" Pete asked. He was pretty much in control of himself now.

"Do you feel dizzy or have trouble seeing or anything?"

"No. I feel okay. It just hurts a little."

"No problem then. Go to sleep. Get some rest. You'll be fine. I'll sit here to make sure. Okay?"

While I was telling them a story about one winter when I was a boy in Iowa, they went to sleep. Afterwards, I sat on the end of Pete's bed a long time in the dark and watched the moon out the window. I wondered what that giant telescope would see and what answers it would find between the stars, if any. Could it be that we would come to understand the universe before we would understand ourselves? I saw that Pete and Ben were asleep, so I kissed them each on the forehead, and I went downstairs.

The living room was dark except for the glow of the television. The news was still on. The police had busted another crack house. Somebody had been shot.

I turned the TV off and went to look for Kate. She was outside looking up at the night sky.

The next day the boys went to school, and when they came home we fixed Pete's bike. That night they went right to sleep and, except for the cast on Pete's arm, everything seemed the

same again.

\* \* \*

Copyright 1990 by Clay Rooks  
Presented on KVPT Public Radio 2003