Short Takes
15 Contemporary Stories

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Two Fathers

by Charis W. Conn
(First appeared in The North American Review)

Here is a poignant story of a boy who receives the perfect gift from a most unexpected source. Through the boy's disbelief of this gift, and his father's nonchalance about it, the reader gets a gift, too: a shimmering portrait of a father and son.

About the Author

CHARIS W. CONN is an associate editor of Harper's Magazine. Her fiction has appeared in New Letters, The North American Review, and Harper's. Her novel, THROUGH THE GREEN Fuse, will be published soon by Pantheon. "Two Fathers" was her first published story, and it came to her through memories of her grandparents' house and her own father's tales of growing up there.
S
till trembling, back from military school, a hint
of slimness lurking beneath abused baby fat,
Norman stands on the sunny Southern lawn,
blinking. A head taller, his father stands beside him,
rich-bellied, smoking a cigar, and smelling of the store—of
Orange Crush and iodine and beer. He lifts his hand in a
great gesture; an arc which takes in the sycamores, the
twittering birds, the sun porch, and ends, triumphantly, at
the space once empty beside the driveway. There, an
apparition has been conjured from nowhere while Norman
wept amidst soaked sheets and catcalls far off in Richmond:
a gleaming white shack, the paint so shiny it seems still wet,
with two windows and a little pitched roof with shingles that
match the big house thirty feet away.
He cannot imagine what it is, though he senses that his
father expects him to. It is a constant problem: his father
gesturing, glancing, holding his cigar and his fat lips just so,
and Norman failing to understand, to hop to, to jump to the
appropriate conclusion. The year in military school was
supposed to remedy this failure of his to grasp the world’s
rough indications and act on them.
In the sun, his father is pronouncing some incantation for
which he should be grateful. Part of Norman’s problem, he’s
been told, is that he does not listen. And talks too much.
“Boy,” his father’s profile regularly intones, each evening,
from his cigar-scented, squeaking green leather chair. “Boy,
you musta been inoculated with a phonograph needle.”

So now he concentrates on listening, happy, after all, that
it is Daddy’s voice he is hearing rather than those steely
strangers at the military school with their hard, up-country
accents. He has never felt quite at home with the rolling,
Southern drawl of his family; his stuttering, his inability to
say what he means always renders his speech staccato, shrill,
somewhat hysterical. He can never speak slowly enough to
suit his family. And their lazy tongues, the outlandish time
they take to say nothing usually fills him with an impatience
so great he feels terrified and ashamed. But now, his own
home bright and near again at last, he basks in his father’s
molasses delivery.

"Nomun," he says, looking at the sky, a plume of smoke
escaping with the syllables. "You had a tough yea’, we all
know that. You made a helluva lotta mistakes, but at least
you had to fix ’em up yo’self. Yo’ mamma and me are proud
of you—even if you didn’t zactly shine up there in Richmond."

His father smiles at his own little joke and takes a
fortifying puff.

"An’ in spite of all the expense, Ah think it was wuth it.
And NOW . . . "

He draws it out. Here it comes, thinks Norman. He cannot
tell if it is good or bad, but this little building before him
must have something to do with it.

"An’ now, we think we understand yo’ limitations a little
bettuh. I ain’t sayin’ we gonna make it easy fo’ you. Just
sayin’ we think we know what you CAN and CANNOT
do."

Norman is beginning to sweat in his itchy homecoming
suit. He is thinking of Celia making their lunch in the
kitchen, with a cold Pepsi Cola waiting for him. Celia usually
only comes mornings, but today, his father told him in the
car, she waited special just to see him come home. "Without
pay," his father said.

His ears return to his father’s voice and he hears:

"Mr. Ferris up to school tells me you’re pretty good in
that wood working shop they got up there. Says you make a
pretty good carpenter some day. Pay’s not bad. It’s good
honest work for a white boy."
He gets it. At least he thinks he does. And the shack begins to shine like an enormous, angelic cloud set feather-light on the damp grass. He can work in it! Be alone in it! He cannot believe his father would allow him such a luxury. Last summer, when he tried to knock together some two-by-fours in the backyard, his father pulled up in the car, got out, gave him a long look, and said, “You smash yo’ finguh, I ain’t takin’ you to no hospital.”

He doesn’t hear any of the rest of his father’s speech. His toes, caught like animals in the cruel traps of his polished shoes, inch him perceptibly forward towards the small white door. It even has a keyhole! But he’s certain there’s no key. His room is the only one in the house without a latch because, his mother told him, “Daddy don’t want you burnin’ yo’self up in there. We don’t want no trouble gettin’ to you if we have to.”

Finally, his back soaked, his eyes tearing from the sun, he finds himself following his father’s bulging figure towards the shack. His father stands beside the door and says with a smile, “Now don’t go wreckin’ the place. It cost me a bundle,” and departs, loping across the lawn and driveway, his legs unaccustomed to uneven ground and large spaces.

Norman stands before the door, real tears in his eyes. This thing, whatever it is, is his. There has been no mention made of Arnie, his older brother. But he can imagine that there will be fights over it. And the baby. Will his mother expect him to let the baby play here? He almost cannot bear to open the door, for fear it will contain—what? The local bully, ready to pounce on him? Or for fear that he has once again totally misunderstood his father, has made up the words about the wood shop and Mr. Ferris.

He opens the door a crack, not looking in. The smell of new wood and paint fills his body as if he were lying inside a gigantic flower whose overwhelming exotic scent was
created just for him, matched exactly to his own physical chemistry. He glances back at the house. No one is watching him.

He opens the door and emits a high-pitched sound he hardly recognizes as his own.

The room is larger than he expected it to be, and immaculately white. Tables of heavy one-inch wood stand against each wall, seamlessly connecting to form a square U with the door at the open end. The walls on the right and left each hold a painted peg board stocked neatly with tools; beautiful gleaming metal and polished wood. On one table sits a flat type tray filled with screws and nails and bolts and nuts of every description. And on the furthest table lies a pile of sweet-smelling new lumber: two-by-twos, two-by-fours, planks and even dowels.

Without thinking, he finds that he has slammed the door behind him and now stands leaning against it, his feet wide apart. In the sealed, silent room, he can hear his heart. For an instant the thought flits through his mind that his father does not know what the shack contains; that it is some miracle that has duped his father into inadvertently setting him free.

He sits on the little bench before one of the tables. The air is stifling, intoxicatingly hot. His mind expands dreamily in the heat. In slow, deliberate motions he later cannot remember, he stands, removes his fountain pen from his breast pocket, and begins to meticulously trace the outlines of all the tools as they hang on the white peg board, carefully avoiding the holes. To keep it steady, he holds each tool firmly with one hand, longing to remove it from its hook, caress it, see what it will do, but restricting himself to his purpose. His lines are even and deep and blue-black, the sharp nib of the pen making a satisfying dent in the paint. When he is done, and has blown them dry, he can close his
eyes, run his fingers over the lines he has made, and actually feel the delicate incision.

Without thinking, he walks to the back, lifts a blonde plank from the pile of new wood, carries it to the bench and lays it down. Without searching, his fingers find the hand saw and the heavy right angle. Bending his back and neck over the wood until it hurts, he carefully draws a blue-black line across the center of the plank. Again, that delicate sinking of the nib into the clean, virgin surface. He presses his knee to the wood and drags the blade across it, a hair’s breadth to the right of the line he has drawn. When the wood clatters to the floor, he puts the spare piece back on the pile and sets his newly-cut square of wood on the table.

Hunched forward on the bench, his tongue between his lips, his eyebrows already full of sawdust, he measures out his message and scrapes the words into the wood, ever so lightly, with the tip of a tiny nail. With an infinite patience he has preserved for this moment, he hammers small nail holes along the lines he has scraped until the words KEEP OUT are emblazoned across the top of the plank. Below them, in lines of nail holes, a skull and crossbones glares fiercely.

Still in his sweat-soaked suit jacket, he takes the sign to the door and with the finality of a coffin maker, he beats the longest nail he can find through the plank and into the clean white of the newly painted wood.

"Two Fathers" Discussion

1. If you read only the first paragraph of this story, what would you know of Norman’s life?

2. Through her use of “telling” detail, what does the author tell us about Norman’s father?

3. How has Norman fallen short of his father’s expectations?
4. How has Norman's father fallen short of the boy's expectations?

5. How does Norman feel about his family?

6. Why has Norman's father presented Norman with a workshop? What does this tell us about the father that we would not otherwise know from the story?

7. What is the significance of Norman's final act, nailing the sign to his workshop door?

8. What is the significance of the line "'With an infinite patience he has preserved for this moment . . . '"?

9. How might Norman's life change now that he has a workshop? Think of both positive and negative possibilities.

10. Why do you think the description of the inside of the workshop is so detailed and precise?

Suggestion for Writing

The point of view of this story is Third Person Limited, which means the story is in the third person ("he") yet filtered through the thoughts and experience of one character, in this case Norman. Try rewriting the story from the father's point of view. How does the story change?