

GOOD GRIEF

By Ray Bradbury, from *Dandelion Wine*

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THE FACTS about John Huff, aged twelve, are simple and soon stated. He could pathfind more trails than any Choctaw or Cherokee since time began, could leap from the sky like a chimpanzee from a vine, could live underwater two minutes and slide fifty yards downstream from where you last saw him. The baseballs you pitched him he hit in the apple trees, knocking down harvests. He could jump six-foot orchard walls, swing up branches faster and come down, fat with peaches, quicker than anyone else in the gang. He ran laughing. He sat easy. He was not a bully. He was kind. His hair was dark and curly and his teeth were white as cream. He remembered the words to all the cowboy songs and would teach you if you asked. He knew the names of all the wild flowers and when the moon would rise and set and when the tides came in or out. He was, in fact, the only god living in the whole of Green Town, Illinois, during the twentieth century that Douglas Spaulding knew of.

And right now he and Douglas were hiking out beyond town on another warm and marble-round day, the sky blue blown-glass reaching high, the creeks bright with mirror waters fanning over white stones. It was a day as perfect as the flame of a candle.

Douglas walked through it thinking it would go on this way forever. The perfection, the roundness, the grass smell traveled on out ahead as far and fast as the speed of light. The sound of a good friend whistling like an oriole, pegging the softball, as you horse-danced, key-jingled the dusty paths, all of it was complete, everything could be touched; things stayed near, things were at hand and would remain.

It was such a fine day and then suddenly a cloud crossed the sky, covered the sun, and did not move again.

John Huff had been speaking quietly for several minutes. Now Douglas stopped on the path and looked over at him.

“John, say that again.”

“You heard me the first time, Doug.”

“Did you say you were—going away?”

“Got my train ticket here in my pocket. Whoo-who, clang! Shush-shush-shush-shush. Whoooooooooooo . . . “

His voice faded.

John took the yellow and green train ticket solemnly from his pocket and they both looked at it.

“Tonight!” said Douglas. “My gosh! Tonight we were going to play Red Light, Green Light and Statues! How come, all of a sudden? You been here in Green Town all my life. You just don’t pick up and leave!”

“It’s my father,” said John. “He’s got a job in Milwaukee. We weren’t sure until today . . .”

“My gosh, here it is with the Baptist picnic next week and the big carnival Labor Day and Halloween—can’t your dad wait till then?”

John shook his head.

“Good grief!” said Douglas. “Let me sit down!”

They sat under an old oak tree on the side of the hill looking back at town, and the sun made large trembling shadows around them; it was cool as a cave in under the tree. Out beyond, in sunlight, the town was painted with heat, the windows all gaping. Douglas wanted to run back in there where the town, by its very weight, its houses, their bulk, might enclose and prevent John’s ever getting up and running off.

“But we’re friends,” Douglas said helplessly.

“We always will be,” said John.

“You’ll come back to visit every *week* or so, won’t you?”

“Dad says only once or twice a year. It’s eighty miles.”

“Eighty miles ain’t far!” shouted Douglas.

“No, it’s not far at all,” said John.

“My grandma’s got a phone. I’ll call you. Or maybe we’ll all visit up your way, too. That’d be great!”

John said nothing for a long while.

“Well,” said Douglas, “let’s talk about something.”

“What?”

“My gosh, if you’re going away, we got a million things to talk about! All the things we would’ve talked about next month, the month after! Praying mantises, zeppelins, acrobats, sword swallows! Go on like you was back there, grasshoppers spitting tobacco!”

“Funny thing is I don’t feel like talking about grasshoppers.”

“You always did!”

“Sure.” John looked steadily at the town. “But I guess this just ain’t the time.”

“John, what’s wrong? You look funny . . .”

John had closed his eyes and screwed up his face. “Doug, the Terle house, upstairs, you know?”

“Sure.”

“The colored windowpanes on the little round windows, have they *always* been there?”

“Sure.”

“You *positive*?”

“Darned old windows been there since before we were born. Why?”

“I never saw them before today,” said John. “On the way walking through town I looked up and there they were. Doug, what was I *doing* all these years I didn’t see them?”

“You had other things to do.”

“Did I?” John turned and looked in a kind of panic at Douglas. “Gosh, Doug, why should those darn windows scare me? I mean, that’s nothing to be scared of, is it? It’s just . . .” He floundered. “It’s just, if I didn’t see those windows until today, what else *did* I miss? And what about all the things I did see here in town? Will I be able to remember them when I go away?”

“Anything you want to remember, you remember. I went to camp two summers ago. Up there I remembered.”

“No, you didn’t! You told me. You woke nights and couldn’t remember your mother’s face.”

“No!”

“Some nights it happens to me in my own house; scares heck out of me. I got to go in my folks’ room and look at their faces while they sleep, to be sure! And I go back

to my room and lose it again. Gosh, Doug, oh gosh!” He held onto his knees tight. “Promise me just one thing, Doug. Promise you’ll remember me, promise you’ll remember my face and everything. Will you promise?”

“Easy as pie. Got a motion-picture machine in my head. Lying in bed nights I can just turn on a light in my head and out it comes on the wall, clear as heck, and there you’ll be, yelling and waving at me.”

“Shut your eyes, Doug. Now, tell me, what color eyes I got? Don’t peek. What color eyes I got?”

Douglas began to sweat. His eyelids twitched nervously. “Aw heck, John, that’s not fair.”

“Tell me!”

“Brown!”

John turned away. “No, sir.” \

“What you mean, no?”

“You’re not even close!” John closed his eyes.

“Turn around here,” said Douglas. “Open up, let me see.”

“It’s no use,” said John. “You forgot already. Just the way I said.”

“Turn around here!” Douglas grabbed him by the hair and turned him slowly.

“Okay, Doug.”

John opened his eyes.

“Green.” Douglas, dismayed, let his hand drop. “Your eyes are green . . . Well, that’s close to brown. Almost hazel!”

“Doug, don’t lie to me.”

“All right,” said Doug quietly. “I won’t.”

They sat there listening to the other boys running up the hill, shrieking and yelling at them.

They raced along the railroad tracks, opened their lunch in brown-paper sacks, and sniffed deeply of the wax-wrapped deviled-ham sandwiches and green-sea pickles and colored peppermints. They ran and ran again and Douglas bent to scorch his ear on the hot steel rails, hearing trains so far away they were unseen voyagings in other lands,

sending Morse-code messages to him here under the killing sun. Douglas stood up, stunned.

“John!”

For John was running, and this was terrible. Because if you ran, time ran. You yelled and screamed and raced and rolled and tumbled and all of a sudden the sun was gone and the whistle was blowing and you were on your long way home to supper. When you weren’t looking, the sun got around behind you! The only way to keep things slow was to watch everything and do nothing! You could stretch a day to three days, sure, just by watching!

“John!”

There was no way to get him to help now, save by a trick. “John, ditch, ditch the others!”

Yelling, Douglas and John sprinted off, kiting the wind downhill, letting gravity work for them, over meadows, around barns until at last the sound of the pursuers faded.

John and Douglas climbed into a haystack which was like a great bonfire crisping under them.

“Let’s not do anything,” said John.

“Just what I was going to say,” said Douglas.

They sat quietly, getting their breath.

There was a small sound like an insect in the hay.

They both heard it, but they didn’t look at the sound. When Douglas moved his wrist the sound ticked in another part of the haystack. When he brought his arm around on his lap the sound ticked in his lap. He let his eyes fall in a brief flicker. The watch said three o’clock.

Douglas moved his right hand stealthily to the ticking, pulled out the watch stem. He set the hands back.

Now they had all the time they would ever need to look long and close at the world, feel the sun move like a fiery wind over the sky.

But at last John must have felt the bodiless weight of their shadows shift and lean, and he spoke.

“Doug, what time is it?”

“Two-thirty.”

John looked at the sky.

Don't! thought Douglas.

“Looks more like three-thirty, four,” said John. “Boy Scout. You learn them things.”

Douglas sighed and slowly turned the watch ahead.

John watched him do this, silently. Douglas looked up. John punched him, not hard at all, in the arm.

With a swift stroke, a plunge, a train came and went so quickly the boys all leapt aside, yelling, shaking their fists after it, Douglas and John with them. The train roared down the track, two hundred people in it, gone. The dust followed it a little way toward the south, then settled in the golden silence among the blue rails.

The boys were walking home.

“I'm going to Cincinnati when I'm seventeen and be a railroad fireman,” said Charlie Woodman.

“I got an uncle in New York,” said Jim. “I'll go there and be a printer.”

Doug did not ask the others. Already the trains were chanting and he saw their faces drifting off on back observation platforms, or pressed to windows. One by one they slid away. And then the empty track and the summer sky and himself on another train run in another direction.

Douglas felt the earth move under his feet and saw their shadows move off the grass and color the air.

He swallowed hard, then gave a screaming yell, pulled back his fist, shot the indoor ball whistling in the sky. “Last one home's a rhino's behind!”

They pounded down the tracks, laughing, flailing the air.

There went John Huff, not touching the ground at all. And here came Douglas, touching it all the time.

It was seven o'clock, supper over, and the boys gathering one by one from the sound of their house doors slammed and their parents crying to them not to slam the doors. Douglas and Tom and Charlie and John stood among half a dozen others and it was time for hide-and-seek and Statues.

“Just one game,” said John. “Then I got to go home. The train leaves at nine. Who’s going to be ‘it?’”

“Me,” said Douglas.

“That’s the first time I ever heard of anybody volunteering to be ‘it,’” said Tom.

Douglas looked at John for a long moment. “Start running,” he said.

The boys scattered, yelling. John backed away, then turned and began to lope. Douglas counted slowly. He let them run far, spread out, separate each to his own small world. When they had got their momentum up and were almost out of sight, he took a deep breath.

“Statues!”

Everyone froze.

Very quietly Douglas moved across the lawn to where John Huff stood like an iron deer in the twilight.

Far away, the other boys stood hands up, faces grimaced, eyes bright as stuffed squirrels.

But here was John, alone and motionless and no one rushing or making a great outcry to spoil this moment.

Douglas walked around the statue one way, walked around the statue the other way. The statue did not move. It did not speak. It looked at the horizon, its mouth half smiling.

It was like that time years ago in Chicago when they had visited a big place where the carved marble figures were, and his walking around among them in the silence. So here was John Huff with grass stains on his knees and the seat of his pants, and cuts on his fingers and scabs on his elbows. Here was John Huff with the quiet tennis shoes, his feet sheathed in silence. There was the mouth that had chewed many an apricot pie come summer, and said many a quiet thing or two about life and the lay of the land. And there were the eyes, not blind like statues’ eyes, but filled with molten green-gold. And there the dark hair blowing now north now south or any direction in the little breeze there was. And there the hands with all the town on them, dirt from roads and bark-slivers from trees, the fingers that smelled of hemp and vine and green apple, old coins or pickle-green frogs. There were the ears with the sunlight shining through them like bright warm peach wax and here, invisible, his spearmint-breath upon the air.

“John, now,” said Douglas, “don’t you move so much as an eyelash. I absolutely command you to stay here and not move at all for the next three hours!”

“Doug . . .”

John’s lips moved.

“Freeze!” said Douglas.

John went back to looking at the sky, but he was not smiling now.

“I got to go,” he whispered.

“Not a muscle, it’s the game!”

“I just got to get home now,” said John.

Now the statue moved, took its hands down out of the air and turned its head to look at Douglas. They stood looking at each other. The other kids were putting their arms down, too.

“We’ll play one more round,” said John, “except this time, I’m ‘it.’ Run!”

The boys ran.

“Freeze!”

The boys froze, Douglas with them.

“Not a muscle!” shouted John. “Not a hair!”

He came and stood by Douglas.

“Boy, this is the only way to do it,” he said. Douglas looked off at the twilight sky.

“Frozen statues, every single one of you, the next three minutes!” said John.

Douglas felt John walking around him even as he had walked around John a moment ago. He felt John sock him on the arm once, not too hard. “So long,” he said.

Then there was a rushing sound and he knew without looking that there was nobody behind him now.

Far away, a train whistle sounded.

Douglas stood that way for a full minute, waiting for the sound of the running to fade, but it did not stop. He’s still running away, but he doesn’t sound any farther off, thought Douglas. Why doesn’t he stop running?

And then he realized it was only the sound of his heart in his body.

Stop! He jerked his hand to his chest. Stop running! I don’t *like* that sound!

And then he felt himself walking across the lawns among all the other statues now, and whether they, too, were coming to life he did not know. They did not seem to be

moving at all. For that matter he himself was only moving from the knees down. The rest of him was cold stone, and very heavy.

Going up the front porch of his house, he turned suddenly to look at the lawns behind him.

The lawns were empty.

A series of rifle shots. Screen doors banged one after the other, a sunset volley, along the street.

Statues are best, he thought. They're the only things you can keep on your lawn. Don't ever let them move. Once you do, you can't do a thing with them.

Suddenly his fist shot out like a piston from his side and it shook itself hard at the lawns and the street and the gathering dusk. His face was choked with blood, his eyes were blazing.

"John!" he cried. "You, John! John, you're my enemy, you hear? You're no friend of mine! Don't come back now, ever! Get away, you! Enemy, you hear? That's what you are! It's all off between us, you're dirt, that's all, dirt! John, you hear me, John!"

As if a wick had been turned a little lower in a great clear lamp beyond the town, the sky darkened still more. He stood on the porch, his mouth gasping and working. His fist still thrust straight out at that house across the street and down the way. He looked at the fist and it dissolved, the world dissolved beyond it.

Going upstairs, in the dark, where he could only feel his face but see nothing of himself, not even his fists, he told himself over and over, I'm mad, I'm angry, I hate him, I'm mad, I'm angry, I hate him!

Ten minutes later, slowly he reached the top of the stairs, in the dark . . .