Watermelon Thieves

Jane walked with her friend Cassie from Star School to the iron bridge. Then they went in opposite directions.

"I wish we had more time to visit," said Jane. "Maybe you could spend the night on the weekend."

"See you tomorrow," called Jane as they parted.

Jane had to gather the eggs and put them in the cool cellar, but that was just the beginning of the chores. The animals needed food and the cows had to be milked.

She hurried into the house to her bedroom. Galahad rubbed against Jane's leg and meowed a greeting.

"Can't play with you now Galahad. Henry will be unhappy because I'm late."

"Meow," he answered and he hopped back up on the bed to continue his nap.

Jane changed into her old jeans and hurried to meet Henry. He was sitting on the back porch pulling on his work boots, but thankfully he was in a good mood and had other things on his mind.

"Hey Sis, let's finish our chores and go to the watermelon patch. We can find a ripe watermelon. Mama and Daddy won't care. Everybody else eats our watermelons at night."

"We don't have many left in the patch." Jane grabbed a bucket to gather the eggs. "I'd like to find out who sneaks in at night and breaks those melons open. People aren't supposed to steal your stuff."

"They just take the heart from the center of the melon because it has no seeds." said Henry. "Daddy says it's a crying shame to be so wasteful."

"I like the part with seeds. Especially if we could have a seed spitting contest." I'd like to sneak down and hide in our cotton to see who the robbers are, but if we did that, Mama would tan our britches."

"She won't if we don't tell," replied Henry.

Jane giggled as the idea that had popped into her head, but her stomach flip-flopped in surprise at words that came out of her mouth.
Henry looked over his shoulder at the screen door. He didn’t want Mama to hear either. He was the oldest, and he knew he might get blamed if things went wrong. It was such a good idea he quickly decided to encourage Jane by making a suggestion.

“We just have to sneak off our front porch after Mama and Daddy are asleep tonight, crawl under the barbed wire fence, keep low, and wait for them to show up.”

“Mama would tan our britches if we did,” said Jane.

“Not if we don’t get caught,” he added.

Henry and Jane both knew how to keep a secret.

Jane finished feeding the chickens, gathering the eggs, and wiping them clean. She put them in the egg case used for storage until it was time to carry them to town to sell.

She made a b-line toward the barn to put feed in the milking stalls. As she hurried to the next job, Henry saw her coming out of the barn and began to give her orders.

“Jane, you have to start pumping water for the cows because I have to feed the pigs.”

“Yes boss!” she muttered under her breath.

Jane knew arguing would be a waste of time. Afternoon chores included making sure the stock tank was full of water. She started her turn pumping and wondered what Henry had been doing when she was gathering eggs. If the wind blew, its power turned the windmill and the stock tank filled like magic. If it was a still day, it took muscle power to fill the tank.

“God, can’t you just pucker up and blow us a breeze. It’s your responsibility,” Jane muttered as she felt the muscles in her arm complain about pumping. This was the part of afternoon chores she dreaded the most. There was no answer to her demand for wind so Jane kept pumping water as fast as she could. When the cows come in from the pasture the tank had to be full because they had no water source in the pasture, and they would be very thirsty. Her responsibility
was to pump until the tank was half full then it was Henry’s turn. By the time
Henry finished feeding the pigs, she had thought of a sneaky plan of her own.

“Hey, it’s your turn Henry. This tank is more than half full. I did my part.”
“I’ll believe it when I see it,” Henry replied in a skeptical tone. He was in
slow motion as he finished feeding the pigs.

“Older brothers think they are in charge or that they should always be first,”
Jane mumbled. She called over her shoulder, “I’m going up to the haystack to see
if I can find a hen’s nest. Mama said some hens might be laying eggs there.”

It was just a little white lie so that she could execute her secret plan. Mama
had told her about the haystack, but she hadn’t told Jane to look there for eggs. She
really wanted to be first to find their favorite cow. Blondie had a nice soft back and
was gentle as a kitten. Henry and Jane both loved to ride on her back on the way
back to the barn.

As soon as the haystack blocked the view between Henry and Jane, she
started running up the hill behind the barn. Henry always reached Blondie first, but
she was determined to be first today and finally get a full turn riding Blondie back
to the barn.

Jane was out of breath from running, but she knew she could rest when she
got over the big terrace on the hill. When she looked over her shoulder. Henry was
coming around the end of the haystack.

“Shoot! Now the wind is turning the windmill for him and he doesn’t have
to pump. Here he comes! I’ll have to go faster!” she mumbled to herself.

As she turned around, Jane stopped dead in her tracks. Raising its head and
hissing was a black snake, the biggest she had ever seen in her life. She wanted to
scream, but she was afraid to move.

“Hen...Hen...H-e-n-r-y! A big snake is up here in this terrace!”
Curling and hissing the snake raised its head and began to sway. Jane was
frozen in fear. Her feet would not move her to safety.

“Sic-em’ Ring!” yelled Henry as he came running to rescue Jane.
“Woof! Woof, Woof! Gr-r-r-r!”
The snake was distracted and turned toward Ring.

“That a-boy!” yelled Henry. He grabbed the snake’s tail and flung it far away
into tall weeds. "You’ll be ok. It may have been protecting its young. It was just an old black racer, not a rattler."

"I know. I’m ok. Thanks for getting rid of that snake."

Jane pushed her hands into her jean pocket so Henry wouldn’t see how they were shaking. He liked to tease her and say girls were sissies.

"Look, the cows are coming to meet us up on top of the hill," yelled Henry. "I hear Bessie’s cowbell. She thinks she’s Queen of Milk Cows. That’s why she tries to be first in line.

"Henry, I bet you could ride Bossy if you tried."

Jane tried to make it sound like a challenge. She ignored Bossy and ran for Blondie who was at the back of the herd, but Jane was no match for Henry. He sped past, threw his leg over Blondie’s back, and settled in for a soft ride.

"You just get to ride half way and then it’s my turn. Just because you’re faster doesn’t mean you always have to be first. I help bring in the cows, too."

Henry laughed and called over his shoulder, "If you get there first, you get a full ride. Besides I saved you from a snake today."

"Big brothers think they rule the world," Jane mumbled. She pouted and didn’t talk anymore. Henry didn’t share, and she knew arguing would be a waste of her time.

"These cows are really thirsty," said Henry.

"It’s a good thing the wind started blowing and finished filling your share of the pumping or they would not have enough water," Jane observed.

Henry ignored her. "It’s too bad the cows don’t have a pond at the hill pasture," he replied.

As cows moved into the coolness of the barn Henry asked, "Did you put sweet feed in each trough?"

"Of course, I know what my chores are."

As cows marched into milking stalls, Jane whispered to Blondie, "Big bossy brothers like to remind you of everything."

After Jane and Henry fastened the stanchions to keep cows from backing out of the milking stalls, they began to eat. Sounds of low moos of satisfaction and rhythm of tails switching flies filled the quietness of the barn. Staccato sounds of
milk hitting an empty pail became a deep slush as Henry milked. The rhythm was like a true barn symphony.

A barn cat brigade gathered in anticipation begging for a little milk with quiet “meows.” Such pitiful begging inspired Henry.

“Bet I can hit a cat’s mouth before you can,” Henry bragged.

Jane reached down to pet the cats. Sitting down on a milking stool and placing a bucket between her knees, she thought about squirting milk that distance. The cats were looking with anticipation at Henry, the squirting expert. Jane knew she was lucky to hit a bucket when she was milking and so did the cats.

“Hey Henry, your audience is waiting. Do you really have a trick shot?”

He took quick aim sending four streams of milk sailing across the barn.

“Did you see?” bragged Henry. “I got three out of four cats.”

“My brother is a barn cat’s dream.” Jane admired Henry’s skill.

Chores seemed to last forever, but as soon as they were finished Jane had gotten over her feelings of defeat and felt lucky enough to issue a challenge to Henry. She was determined to beat Henry at something. Just because he was three years older, he thought he deserved to be first. Chores had erased most of her irritation. As they finished and closed the cow lot gate, Jane felt lucky.

“Want to race to the house?”

Challenging words were barely out of her mouth when Henry ran as if shot from a cannon. He won, but just by a step or two.

“I’ll beat you next time!”

“In your dreams,” he laughed.

“Jane, right after supper you need to get your shower so Henry can take his before dark, and don’t forget to feed Galahad.” said Mama as she put food on the table.”

Supper was just leftovers, but there was always dessert.

“Mama, you make the best chocolate cake in the whole world,” said Jane as she licked chocolate off her fork, grabbed her towel and pajamas, and headed for her shower.

Each summer Daddy built a private shower room behind the washhouse. He set poles in the ground, built a floor with a drain that sent the used water into a
nearby flowerbed. Sides of the shower were made of canvas for privacy. An overhead shelf held four ten-gallon milk cans, one for each family member. Every morning Henry and Jane had to fill the cans with water from the well. Sunlight heated water during the day.

Jane loved showers, but she hated filling cans. She dreamed of the days that an electric pump would push water through a hose. Even better was the thought of an indoor bathroom with a real tub and a shower. Modern plumbing was coming to the farm.

"Okay Jane, pump your buckets full of water and hand them up to me."

Jane wanted to tell Henry no, but Mama had told her to help.

"You just stand there and pour water in, I have to pump twenty buckets full, carry it to you, and lift it up."

"You’re too short to pour water into these cans," said Henry.

Jane plugged her showerhead into her can and turned on the spray. When water rolled over her body, she knew her work was worth it. First she let warm water cover her from head to toe. She turned off the water and soaped herself up, shampooed her hair, and finished with a good spray rinse.

"Put another nickel in, in the nickelodeon, all I want is loving you and music, music, music," Jane sang because nothing felt better than clean. Soon her family would have electricity just like people who lived in cities and towns.

"Henry, your turn in the shower," said Jane as she plopped down with her library book.

Daddy was listening to the family’s battery-powered radio and Mama was working on a quilt by light of an Aladdin lamp.

"I’ll sure be glad when those co-op workers get all the electrical lines strung and the power is turned on out here in the country. Then I can see my stitches much better when I sew in the evening," said Mama.

"I imagine it will be spring or early next summer before we see power turned on," said Daddy. "By then I’ll be finished with my electrical course and have our house wired."

Henry and Jane tried to settle into reading their library books, but they had their minds on becoming watermelon patch spies.
“I’m really tired,” said Henry as he did a believable fake yawn.

“Me too,” Jane chimed in, rubbing her eyes and stretching.

“It is almost nine o’clock,” said Daddy, “you kids better hit the hay.”

By ten o’clock their farmhouse house was quiet. Jane listened at her end of the long closet between her room and her parent’s closet door. Jane could hear her parents talking at night. She felt safe knowing they were so near. Best of all, she heard lots of interesting conversations. At first she couldn’t tell if Mama and Daddy were asleep. Then she heard them talking.

“Goodnight William.”

“Goodnight dear, I hope you rest well,” said Daddy

In summer, Henry slept on an old army cot on the front porch because it was cooler during summer weather. He also liked outdoor sounds at night. Jane’s bedroom window opened onto the front porch.

“P-s-s-s-t, are you awake Henry?” Jane quietly pushed open the screen.

“Mama and Daddy are in bed.”

“Sure am, I already have my shoes on,” he whispered.

Jane slipped under the screen and onto the porch.

“I heard someone talking down in the field just a few minutes ago,” Henry reported. “They must wait for our lights to go out before moving in and stealing our watermelons.”

“They’ll be sorry for coming tonight because we’ll see their faces with this bright moonlight. We’ll know who the thieves are.” Jane felt like a real detective.

They jumped off the porch, ran to the edge of the yard, and crawled through a barbed wire fence into the cotton patch. Tall rows of cotton were a perfect camouflage for two spies.

Henry signaled to stop. As their eyes adjusted to pale moonlight, communication was easier and they moved forward.

“Hey, here’s another gym dandy,” a voice called in a loud whisper. “Listen to this sound when I thump it.”

“It sure sounds ripe. Pop it open and let’s have some,” said a second voice.

Henry and Jane were just about to identify those thieves when a cloud
moved over the moon. Suddenly, a door slammed behind the farmhouse. Henry and Jane both hit the dirt just before a shot rang out splitting open the silence of the dark night.

"Holy cow! Old man Warren has a shotgun!" shouted a robber.

"Let's get out of here before he shoots again!" called robber number two.

That commotion was a mixture of swishing cotton, stumbles, grumbles, and laughter by those robbers as they made it to the road and ran toward the iron bridge just north of the patch.

Henry and Jane crawled back toward the house as fast as their knees could take them. They couldn't risk standing up to run for the house because they would be found out. Mama was still talking to Daddy in the backyard and they would be caught for sure.

"William, you made enough noise to wake the dead by shooting off that gun."

"Now Nellie, I just shot it up into the air. At least they won't be back for awhile," laughed Daddy, "Besides, I need to have a little fun too."

The back screen door thumped shut. Henry and Jane jumped up and made a bee-line for the front porch. Henry jumped on his cot, Jane crawled through her bedroom window.

She kicked off her shoes and crawled under the sheets. She had barely settled when Mama pushed open the bedroom door, stepped into the room, and patted Jane gently on her back. Jane held her breath because she was still breathing hard from the run and excitement.

"Please God, don't let Mama touch my forehead like she does when she thinks I'm sick," Jane prayed silently. Sweat was running down her face. She squeezed her eyes shut and said a silent second prayer of thanks that Mama and Daddy hadn't caught two watermelon spies.

After Mama left the room, Jane closed her closet door and crept back to the open window.

"All clear," whispered Jane.

"It's a good thing you didn't get us caught by thinking up such a dumb idea," said Henry in an accusing tone.
“So much for brotherly love,” mumbled Jane as she buried her head in her pillow. “I can just imagine what he would have said if my idea had worked.”