

Bone Canyon

They saw the child who was hitting pebbles into the air was using a bone for a bat. The four men in dark suits and silver hard hats were surveying the southeast quadrant of holes gouged out of the earth when they noticed the little boy with the red plastic pail, sitting atop the opposite side of the deep, jagged crater, reaching again and again into the pail for another pebble to hit skyward.

"Jesus Christ, don't tell me ... " gasped the man in the navy blue suit, as all four momentarily froze. The child, now aware that the men were staring at him, stood up, picked up his pail, matching shovel, and bone bat and started to walk away.

"Hey, kid--wait a minute!" yelled the man in charcoal grey, holding up both palms as if a magic beam of light could emanate from his hands across the expanse of nothingness and stop the boy in his tracks. Then all four men ran around the perimeter, and the boy stood still and watched as they approached.

"Here, kid, lemme see that bat you're using," ordered the man in charcoal grey, arriving first and making a grab for the bone. The boy whisked both arms behind his back and took a few steps backward. Then the others arrived.

"Hold it," said the man in brown corduroy to charcoal grey, "you're scaring our little buddy here. He stepped in front to allay the boy's fear and, smiling, extended his right hand in a gesture of friendship. "How 'bout a friendly handshake, pal?"

The boy looked into brown corduroy's eyes, blue like his own mother's,

felt no more threat, and dropped the bat to shake hands.

"What's your name, champ?" asked brown corduroy, squatting to be at eye level.

"Davey," replied the boy, as the man in black pinstripe walked over and picked up the bone.

"Looks like you got a little dirty from all that digging, right?"

Davey nodded and looked down at his soiled orange T-shirt and blue jeans. Then his face brightened. "I'm looking for colors. See?" he said, reaching into the pail and removing three pieces of dirt-smearred glass. "This one's red, this one's blue, and this one's yellow." He looked to corduroy for approval but saw the man had stood up and joined charcoal and navy, who were studying the bone from every angle. Pinstripe was inside their car, making a phone call.

"Chrissake," said charcoal, "maybe it's a dinosaur!"

"I think it's a femur," offered corduroy.

"What the hell kind of animal is that?" asked charcoal.

"No," snapped navy, "it's a thigh bone--from a person. This kid's been hitting fungoes with someone's leg."

"Terrific," moaned charcoal, "that's all we need--Regency Mall over some happy hunting ground."

Davey watched as pinstripe rejoined the group and all four huddled together as though it were third down and eighteen yards to go. Then corduroy walked back over to him.

"Look, pal, the police are coming, and they're gonna need your help, O.K.? Can you wait around a couple of minutes?"

Davey slowly nodded affirmatively. He saw that corduroy wasn't looking directly into his eyes, the way real pals do.

In less than a couple of minutes three wailing, silver-blue police cars, flashing red like pulsating blood, skidded up to within inches of where Davey and the four bone holders stood. Six blue-uniformed officers leaped from the vehicles, and a hubbub of activity ensued. While five busily began to cordon off the crater, the sixth, a huge man with a protruding belly, talked briefly to the men in dark suits, and then he walked over to where Davey stood. The boy slipped his pail and shovel behind his back again.

"Now, now, son, no one's gonna hurt you," he said, looming over the boy. "But I've gotta see if there's anything important in that pail you're holding, O.K.?"

Davey looked away from the big blue man as more police cars, other vehicles, and a crowd of people were converging on the crater. Big, silver-eyed cameras were flashing along with the pulsating red of the police cars. Davey saw corduroy drop the bone into a yellow plastic bag and hand it over to a man in a black suit, who then got into a black station wagon and sped away. Suddenly he felt frightened. He looked up at big blue and saw no daddy smile with brown eyes, but instead, straight lips on a face of white, then pink, then red, then white again. He gave big blue the red pail and fought back the tears welling in his eyes.

"That's a good boy. Now don't worry--I'll get your bucket right back to you." He walked over to another officer, spoke a few words, then handed him the pail. Davey watched his morning's treasure hunt go crashing to the ground in a sparkling heap. The officer quickly brushed his fingers through the colorful array, found nothing worth keeping, and went back over to Davey to return the pail.

"Here you go, Danny," he said, smiling, "thanks for being a good

sport. But I think you'd better run on home now."

Davey didn't return the smile. The officer had quickly turned away and was headed over to where a woman with a camera behind her was interviewing corduroy and big blue. Instead, the boy started skipping across the field, away from the flashing, and toward his mother whom he saw had come looking for him.

"Honey, look at you! How did you get so dirty?" She kneeled down to hug him. He gazed into her smiling blue eyes and felt like talking again.

"I was looking for colors, "he said," and they took my bat away." He pointed back to the crater.

"Well, you shouldn't be playing with something that belongs to somebody else. Besides, didn't I tell you not to go into those big holes?"

"But I didn't," Davey protested, "I was just hitting stones on top."

His mother took him by the hand, and they started walking home, Davey swinging the pail to and fro. "Then where did you get that bat, pumpkin?"

Davey looked up into his mother's blue, love eyes. He wanted to tell her everything. "From my secret place," he confided, "That's where the colors are. Nice ones like red and blue and yellow. And white bats, lots of them -- big ones, little ones."

"And what other colors are you learning?" she asked with pride.

"Green," he continued, "a big pile of green paper in a silver box."

"What an imagination!" his mother squealed and hoisted Davey up to kiss him on his forehead. "You're going to make a lot of money one day with your stories!"

And she kissed the giggling raconteur the rest of the way home.