

Bought or Given or Meant for Us by God

by Kimberly Landry

I ain't never even kissed a girl and I don't want to die before I do. But I can't say that to Buddy 'cause he'll just laugh at me some more, so I tell him that I got one of my migraines instead, and ain't nobody can do what he's daring when they can't even see straight. But then he calls me something real nasty and I can't tell him to shut it 'cause that'll only make him shout it louder, so I just hurry up and agree before mama hears him saying those words.

He came in through the back door this morning with no shirt on and I looked at him real quick, jealous of the muscles underneath his tight skin. I'm two years younger and got no muscles, not yet, but mama says I got to have more appetite for food if I ever want to grow any. Mama says I'm tall for my age though, and I believe her 'cause Buddy and I are nearly the same height even though he's got a lot more meat on him than I do. Buddy's usually eating something when he comes over. Last weekend it was blackberries that he had shoved into his pocket on the way, so by the time he got here they were half smashed and runny and he had to eat them one by one, picking the lint off. Today he had a peach with a big chunk missing, the juice leaking all the way to his elbow.

"I got one for you. In honor of Fourth of July," he said to me, taking a bite out of that peach like it was the last one he could ever have. "There's this place my brother told me about. This creek in the woods. A tree fell over the water like a bridge, and there's this hole in the middle big enough to fit though. You gonna shoot bottle rockets through it while jumping in the water. Like one of them stunts in the movies."

He knows I can't swim. Nobody ever taught me. But it's his turn and that's what he chose and there ain't no point in arguing with Buddy when he says what's what. He and I got this game, see, where we dare each other to do stuff on the days when his mama has him and we can see each other. We take turns. Two weeks ago, in the middle of the night, I woke up to use the bathroom and I got this idea, and I was so excited about it I could hardly get back to sleep. So that weekend it was my turn, and when Buddy came in through the back door, I couldn't even wait until mama left for work to dare him what I thought of. I whispered it in his ear and his eyes got real big and he smiled so that his bottom lip curled back over his brown skin like slugs you roll in the dirt and I could see that he thought it was a good idea too.

What I dared him was to climb to the roof of Mr. Perriloux's General Store and take off his pants and flash all the ladies that walk in and see how long 'til he gets caught. So we get there and he climbs up, and then I do too 'cause I want to be near the action, and he does it right quick, and three ladies walk in one after the other, and no one even sees him. And we both looked at each other surprised 'cause we thought this one would be pretty quick and we'd get run outta there and spend the rest of the day sucking sugarcane stalks in the field by my house. But then he flashed two more ladies, and when they didn't see, we realized that the roof curved up a little, like a China house, and we could see them but they couldn't see us 'cause of how far back we were standing. So then we start laughing and Buddy starts doing it to everybody, dancing and moving like a chicken, and even clucking like one too, and we laughed all day at them old ladies who didn't even know what we were doing to them, the whole time Buddy shaking his nappy hair like it was the spiked comb on top of a rooster.

But now Buddy's over here trying to get me to do stuff he knows I can't do, like swim. Buddy sees that I still ain't moved from my chair even though I already said yes to his dare, so

he kicks my foot with his shoe and I snap out of it, and then I'm in the back getting dressed. I pull on my jeans and Buddy's outside finishing his peach, waiting for me, and I see through the window that his pants got holes in them like all his other pairs. One time I had offered him some of mine to wear 'cause his were nearly torn apart. My clothes would have fit him just fine, but when I offered, he got all mad like I was trying to take something from him instead of give it, so I just said never mind and I never tried again.

I finish dressing and run through the kitchen to kiss mama goodbye and she grabs me like she always does and says, Don't let that boy intimidate you. Don't let him think you're a fool. Mama thinks Buddy's too tough for me, that his head's all full of saw grass 'cause his stepdaddy beat all the sense out of him, and he just runs around doing crazy things for the fun of it.

"I'll see ya later," I say 'cause I'm sick of this speech, and I yank myself out from mama's arms.

"Did you hear me, boy?"

"Yes ma'am," I say, and I stop and turn around so she knows I mean it, but as I'm running out the door to where Buddy's waiting in the gravel, I say to myself, I can keep up. And I can.

We're walking the back way through the thistles, and Buddy's not watching out for the thorns, so they're catching him in all kinds of places, and he's cursing a little and I'm trying to pay attention 'cause he's using all them words right as far as I can tell. Then I realize something and say, Hold on. He turns around to look at me, and his face is all twisted and sweaty and I can tell he's mad, so I almost don't want to say nothing at all, but I can't help myself.

"How we gonna get the firecrackers?" I started the question off kind of feeble though 'cause I already knew the answer, so soft I thought he was gonna make me say it again. But he

heard it all right 'cause he just looks at me with those dark eyes of his like it was the dumbest question in the world.

“ We’re gonna steal them, stupid.” He says that last word like I really was and then he spits on the ground and turns away from me and I feel like digging a hole and shrinking up into it.

I know this ain’t like the other dares. We just cut up mostly with the other stuff. Never any real trouble. And I ain’t never stolen nothing before. So I’m still walking behind him, slower now, and he’s still up there and he’s whacking at all the thorns with a stick like they’re really dangerous or something, and I’m thinking about what we got to do and about church on Sunday and about how mama said we can’t never take the stuff that’s not bought or given or meant for us by God. Stealing’s a sin ‘cause it means we want more than what we got, and what we got, mama says, that’s supposed to be enough.

We keep walking and I’m thinking of this and I see the firework stand’s white tent real little in the distance, and I can’t stand it anymore and I say, Buddy, real low. Either he doesn’t hear me or he doesn’t care, so I say it again a little louder and finally he turns around and walks up real close to me so that I can see just how aggravated he is. I look down ‘cause I’m embarrassed and I dig my foot in the dirt and I say that I don’t know about this. That can’t we do something else where we don’t got to do nothing so bad?

“Why you so scared of everything, Charlie?” He yells this at me and although there ain’t nobody around I feel like everybody heard.

“I ain’t scared,” I say, a little loud too, so hopefully someone that heard him can hear me too. “I ain’t scared. I just don’t see no point in stealing something. There’s a million other things we could do. Dare me something else. I’ll do it. Just something else.”

“No,” he says. “This is what I want you to do and it’s my turn so this is what you’ll do, all right. Just walk over there and hide somewhere. I’ll do something to distract him. Then you’ll just grab the bottle rockets and run.”

“You gonna do it with me?”

“I ain’t doing it with you. I just got to help you out. You sure as hell can’t do it by yourself, shaking like that.” Then he starts going towards the place again and says, Come on, over his shoulder like he knows I ain’t moved.

I don’t know what happens, but my body starts walking and I just keep putting one foot in front of the other and then we’re at the tent and there’s two other people there and they’re looking at some sparklers. I stare at them, and I can feel my stomach tighten and my heart jump like there was a person inside knocking things around for how dumb I was to not even think other people could be there. But then Buddy’s up in front of me and jerks his head to the side which means something like, *hurry up*, and I walk up to the stand and I look around all frantic, and I don’t know what to do first. The tent’s bigger than I thought it would be, and there’s tables everywhere underneath it, and there’s piles of firecrackers I ain’t ever heard of all over the place.

I just start picking up and putting down everything. I don’t know when to take stuff or where even to find it, but then I look for Buddy, and he’s at this small table by the cashier, see, who’s this older guy with hair that looks like dirty steel wool, and he’s just sitting there, watching him. And then Buddy’s leaning real far across the table like he’s trying to reach straight across it, and then all of a sudden he knocks the table over, right in front of this old man cashier, and he kind of falls on top of it too, and then old man’s standing over him, cursing. I hurry up and grab a bunch of what’s right in front of me, and they just so happen to be bottle rockets. The two other people there are looking at the mess Buddy just made, and I walk away

slowly at first, out of the tent and back towards the woods on the other side, and I can hear the cashier shouting over Buddy to pick up every last one, and Buddy saying, Yes sir. Sorry sir.

I'm out of the tent a little ways, walking real slow and steady, until I get close enough to the brush and then I just start running. I'm holding the firecrackers tight to my chest, but I can feel my heart beating so hard like it's trying to pound the stuff right out of my hands. I run deep into the woods until I think I've gone too far and Buddy won't be able to find me, when I turn around and I see him running through the trees and tall grass at me, and he's laughing and stumbling over the tree roots. I'm nervous 'cause I think someone's following him, but no one is, and I look and I see that I'm still holding the bottle rockets and we got away, and then I'm laughing too. Buddy grabs some of the firecrackers from me and then throws them in the air, and I fall on the ground and hold my stomach I'm laughing so hard, and Buddy's jumping around and screaming like some kind of crazed coyote.

We both can't believe we did it, and we laugh and holler and pass the fireworks back and forth until we're both too tired of laughing and we're lying on the ground on top of pine needles and pinecones, and they're poking into our backs and heads, but we don't care. Then Buddy looks at me and says, Okay, let's go, and we get up and start walking deeper into the woods, and I'm just following 'cause I ain't never been this way before.

We're going like this for a long time, and Buddy starts talking all this stuff he's going to be when he grows up. He's always talking about that kind of stuff, saying he's going to move away to New Orleans, like his brother, and go to college to be something real special. He said his brother's at college to be an architect so he can build houses, and he wants to do the same thing. Says he's gonna build himself the biggest house with a balcony and tons of windows, and he's gonna buy a leather sofa and sit in it in that big old house and drink lemonade and wait for

people to come over. He says he can build me one too, if I want, but only if I pay the price. I ask him how much is it, and he says a million dollars, and I tell him that maybe I can just come over to his house sometimes instead. I didn't think I said anything funny, but he laughs, so I do too, and pretty soon we're joking and laughing and picking up sticks and throwing them, and I'm thinking it's a pretty good day.

We're walking far back into the woods, and I know I can probably make my way back, but not by myself. We just keep walking and walking, and pretty soon I can tell we're going in circles, and I'm following Buddy like always and he's just moving on. We've stopped talking now. At first it was just kind of 'cause the both of us were tired of it, but then I try to say something to him, and when he doesn't answer, I know we're lost. And I know he's mad.

So I keep quiet and I follow him until we can't even see the sun through the trees anymore, but we know it's setting, and we know we shouldn't be this far from home so late, mostly 'cause Buddy's stepdaddy's gonna be mad. The last time he got mad at Buddy, he didn't let him see me for three weeks, and when he could finally come over again, he was limping like his left leg had forgotten how to walk, and mama made us play cards with her all day instead of going outside like we usually do.

I don't like when I think about that though, so I start kicking leaves up and burying my feet in the thick patches every couple of steps until I hear something that sounds like crying somewhere in the distance. I stop, and Buddy must have heard it too 'cause he stops and turns to look at me, and I can see his face is wet with tears. But it wasn't him that made that noise. It's somewhere sort of close, and when it does it again, it sounds more like a squeal, but tired and horse. We look for it silently together, like the hunters on T.V. We walk underneath tall pines

that keep growing closer and closer together until I think that God must have dropped a bunch of seeds by accident when he was planting them, there was no other way.

And then we see a small pig with speckles underneath this tangled dead bush with thorns and thistles growing all around. It's no bigger than my foot, but it's stuck in the bush, or underneath it, crying and whining and digging with its little feet at the ground, like that's gonna help him out. He had made a hole and was making it bigger all the time with all the squirming he had done. It's like its back leg's broken or something, the way it's carrying on, and when it sees us, it starts crying even louder like it knows what we are.

We both just kind of stare at it at first 'cause we don't know what to do.

"It's dying," Buddy says, squinting his eyes like he's trying to get a better look. Like he wasn't really sure.

"He just looks stuck to me," I say. "What we gonna do?"

"He ain't stuck, stupid. He's sick or somethin'. Look at the way he's moving. He ain't gonna last another night out here. Let's go."

I ain't never seen nothing die before, and when Buddy said that, it makes me want to look away from the thing, but I'm scared Buddy's gonna say something, so I just look at the ground instead. "I think we could probably save it. Or we could try to help." I know I'm right, so I get brave. "We got to do the right thing. We got to try." I look right into his eyes when I say that, and he looks away like I embarrassed him or something. Just for thinking the way I did.

He watches the thing jerk around like a broken worm, and finally he looks back at me. "You want to do what's right all the time. You such a mama's boy. Can't never think for yourself. You want to do what's right? I'm changing the dare. Kill it."

"What?"

“I said kill it. I told you it was good as dead anyway, out here stuck like this. My stepdaddy shot a dog once ‘cause it was sick in the head. ‘Put it out of its misery,’ he said. That’s what you gonna do now. I dare you to kill it.” Buddy’s eyes looked different now. Wild-looking, like he was that crazy dog his stepdaddy had shot.

I take two steps away from Buddy and the squealing pig that’s louder now like it knows what Buddy had said. I try to say something, but then I realize nothing will come out ‘cause of how hard I’m crying. I didn’t know I had even started, but now I can’t hardly see ‘cause of all the tears in my eyes, and when they go down my cheeks, they’re hot like cooking water.

“Why you always such a crybaby,” says Buddy. “Don’t you want to do the right thing?” He says this with a smile on his face, a mean one.

I want to tell him no or run away or yell or something, but I know I can’t find my way out of these woods without him, especially ‘cause it’ll be night soon. I look around and I know the sun is setting, and it’s like the whole world’s turning gray and moldy, like the inside of Buddy’s house, on the ceiling where the water leaks. I know he ain’t gonna stop staring at me until I do something, do what he wants, but I just stand there hoping he’ll change his mind, that he’ll remember the firecrackers and the creek and the swimming that I can’t do. I would do that a hundred times before I do this dare, but I know I can’t get out of it. It’s his turn and these are his woods, and I can’t go home without doing what he wants.

I look around for something to use, like a rock or something ‘cause I don’t want to touch it. There’s this long branch underneath a pine tree, and I wipe my eyes on my sleeve before I drag it over. When I get to the spot I was standing before, I pick up the stick and I just kind of let it fall on the pig, not really using any of my weight at all. I stop for a minute and stare at it, and I take off my shirt ‘cause I think about the blood, and that makes me cry some more. And then

Buddy's screaming something at me and poking me in the back with a knuckle or something, and then I'm not even thinking, and I close my eyes and I'm screaming too, and I'm lifting the stick up and down, and I can feel it hitting something that isn't the ground, and I do it and I do it until I know it's dead.

Then I'm just standing for I don't know how long, and I don't want to open my eyes and I don't want to look at Buddy. But when I finally do, he's backed away a little and he's watching me and eyes are big and round, and even though it's dark, I can see the white in them like headlights. He says something low that I can't hear, but I don't ask him to say it again. I drop the stick and I don't even look back 'cause I don't want to see what I'd done, and Buddy turns away from me and starts walking back the way we'd come, and I follow him, watching my feet the whole time like they're gonna run away somewhere if I don't make them walk straight. I can't hardly see it's so black outside, so I stay close to Buddy. So close that I can hear his breath that's heavy and uneven. And I know he doesn't know where he's going. He doesn't know how to get back home, but neither do I.