

THE GIFT

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Dainty make-believe tea parties with dressed up baby dolls, and silly girls stumbling about in their mothers' too-big high-heeled shoes did not interest me one bit.

I was an independent, curious, red-headed tom-boy. Lincoln Logs, dump trucks, tree climbing, boy-stuff-action games -- that's what excited my nine-year-old mind.

My brother Wilson, nearly eleven, was my favorite playmate and his friends, Joey, Billy, and the two Raymonds, were my pals too. If you could "keep up," by not whining, screeching at the sight of a mouse, and scramble up to the highest branch of the tallest Maple... well, then gender was not a major obstacle.

Mysterious missions were undertaken and successfully completed. In an enchanted childhood world we played Flash Gordon without benefit of a real rocket. We launched into space from a long, slippery playground slide that worked fine. Tom Mix or Hopalong Cassidy without horses wasn't a problem either. Canvas saddle bags slung over the rear fender and a running jump onto our bicycle seats was a good substitute for trusty steeds, and a lot easier to care for.

There was a moment of panic that did occur that summer when a recently acquired step-aunt visited from Michigan and brought me a frilly-frocked real-hair doll! I didn't care if it was specially selected for me. I coveted the gift Aunt Carolyn presented to Wilson: a beautiful, long-barreled, ivory-handled, cap-shooting pirate pistol. However, having been well instructed in

proper behavior, I managed, with fingers crossed behind my back, to utter a thank you before placing the unwanted doll, still boxed, on my bedroom closet shelf.

A wise and knowing Aunt Carolyn suggested we go downtown first thing in the morning. We lived in a small Western Pennsylvania town with a Wagman's 5 & 10 cent store, a couple of clothing and shoe shops, Miss Gilmore's Jewelry Box, a Western Auto and two drug stores, one with an ice cream fountain ... so I knew it wouldn't be an all day shopping spree. We browsed all the toy counters available in less than an hour. None stocked anything close to Wilson's gift. We were sipping chocolate sodas when my aunt said she realized she had made a terrible mistake by assuming, without really knowing anything about me, that I would be thrilled to have a new doll. She tactfully suggested two ways of handling this unfortunate situation. She could take the doll back to Detroit and exchange it for a pistol exactly like Wilson's, or we could go back to Wagman's and purchase the double leather holstered set of "6 shooters" that I had expressed a mild interest in. Her offers made me feel she was going to be an O.K. aunt.

I made the decision to wait out the first transaction. I never was a cry baby, but I came close when my best bud, Wilson, put his arm around my shoulder and promised, even though he desperately wanted to show off his new prized pirate pistol, to keep it under wraps until the postman delivered one for me.