

## Digging

by Daniel Trask

At times he thought the waiting would kill him (pass out and stop breathing). Sometimes he'd allow himself to wonder for a brief moment about what would happen if it never happened (passing out, breathing stopping).

The boy had known about the gold buried under the old peach tree for as long as he could remember—since before his first memory, the nightmare he'd had at four years old, sleeping over his grandmother's house for the first time. He hardly remembered the house she lived in, and he hardly remembered her because she died shortly thereafter, but he remembered the dream, and it had always bothered him that his first memory was a nightmare. To the boy it seemed a foreboding omen of things to come; it was as if he'd woken up in a place he didn't belong and had been stuck there ever since. And the fact that the dream was about the disappearance of his mother (goblins ate her) bothered him even more. The qualification that he was only four at the time made the occurrence no less unmanly to him. The one and only good thing about his first memory was that he woke up to be almost instantly comforted, not by the arms of his grandmother (flabby and hot), but by the thought of the gold buried under that peach tree.

The boy no longer remembered the first time he'd been told the story, but he remembered remembering the story in the midst of his first memory—and this meant a lot to him; it was almost heroic somehow, and he associated his intense longing for the gold with the urge to protect his family from people and things that were not his family. It was a story he loved to hear and one his father loved to tell, a piece of their family

history and a tantalizing—sometimes nearly irresistible—temptation; an immediate escape from the current situation if anything unforeseen and terrible should ever arise.

With the knowledge and lure of the gold, however, came a certain heavy responsibility that, like the lust to see and touch the gold under that tree (touching a sleeping wild animal), had been in the back of the boy's mind for as long as he could remember, a burden of thought that could never be put down for a moment's rest (something heavy being carried by an ant across the Nevada sand—always an undersized red ant). He was aware, as was his father, that the only way to relieve the stress of the burden was to get the gold, to cut down the tree and free the gold from its resting place of over fifty years (!).

He knew where the axe was, and he'd chopped down many other, more formidable trees with it. His father didn't think he was old enough to use the chainsaw yet, but the boy was eager to help and his father wanted the boy to grow up strong, so they compromised on the axe. The trees the boy had felled sometimes flashed in his mind as he went to sleep, a catalogue of achievements organized from smallest to largest. And always the catalogue ended with the peach tree on its own page, a tree he hadn't yet cut down, but hoped to be able to cut down someday. (But what would father say?) His mind outlined its shape and traced its branches (small and young but tough and well-worked hands caressing the base of the tree, communicating with the moist flesh underneath when no one's looking or listening).

If it happened before his father died (secretly hoping for a reason), he knew exactly how he'd do it. The act would have to be done at night, of course. After his mother and father fell asleep in their big bedroom at the top of the farmhouse, he'd slip

out through his bedroom window, hang down as far as possible, and when the timing was right, he'd let go of the sill and try to land as softly and quietly as he could in the rose bushes (too grown up to worry about thorns).

If it happened after his father died (secretly hoping to be the man of the family, to save the family, to wear a brave face while everyone else panicked, to be the hero at the end, to utilize the money that was formerly under the peach tree, the money that would save the family and bring it into the prosperity it's always deserved—a great story which would be told for *another* fifty years), he'd do it with a chainsaw.

The tree was in the middle of the largest of their alfalfa fields, with no other trees nearby, and there'd be room enough for hundreds of people (they'd hear the sound of metal against wood for fifty miles!) to crowd around and have a good view when he brought the box up high in the air and opened it to reveal the gold contents reflecting the early morning light. He didn't want more than a few hundred people, though. A thousand people would be too many. He wanted to hear each and every one of their gasps as he revealed the family secret that only he, his father, and his grandfather knew. Even his mother would gasp. For reasons that the boy could understand but not yet put into words, his mother had never been trusted with the secret. Of course she'd stupidly insist on digging it up right away, but it was more than her impatience that made her unreliable (father always says women buy things they don't need), it was a sort of understanding that she lacked, something that only fathers and sons feel. His mother didn't even know where the axe was (the look on her face when she sees her son expertly swinging the axe to sever the peach tree from the earth).

But then (desperate boredom and wanting to skip this part), there was the part of the story the boy tried not to think about, the beginning of the story, the part about his grandfather (a tall man, smiling on the wall, dead for fifteen years, since before he got to meet his grandson outside of the womb).

When telling the story, his father trudged through the opening. There was an evident pride associated with the beginning, but still, his father told it quickly, quietly, without emphasizing much, as though it was an unfortunate necessity one must toil through before getting to the good part, *the gold*, only half a mile away, lying in the middle of a 1,500-acre farm of alfalfa bound for the bellies of livestock, under their peach tree. His grandfather had taken the secret of the actual amount of gold with him to the grave, but both the boy and his father knew it to be a great sum, enough to bail out an entire family, allow them to travel anywhere and set down new roots should it be necessary for them to flee their humble, but large, old farmhouse in the middle of the southern half of Nevada, enough to feed and house their family's descendants for *generations* (how many?). His grandfather was famous among the neighbors (one guy nearly fifteen miles away) for being a cautious, almost paranoid old man. He was a hard worker, he was good at what he did, and since beginning work for the factory (what kind of factory?) in the Russian section of Brooklyn, he'd known how to work hard, save valuable things, and how to protect his family from the things outside of his family.

The boy would begrudgingly imagine his grandfather, from the age of fourteen on through the age of thirty, working in a dreary, archaic factory where gold leaf or gold plates or something like these (it doesn't matter) were utilized in an esoteric process that made some now-long-forgotten part of BIG American industry possible. He'd been told

countless times how his grandfather collected the gold scraps over fifteen years of working in that factory. There were these scraps—small scraps of gold so small and worthless (the hairs of metal that form when one drills holes in metal brackets) that even the bosses and owners didn't care if workers pocketed them. But his grandfather was smart enough to know that a little bit of gold, collected every day, over fifteen years, can add up to a fortune. In fact, it *had* added up to a fortune, and made him, as he was known for claiming, richer than any man he'd ever worked for. The boy would imagine how his grandfather had rapidly made a place for himself in Brooklyn though he never learned to consider the city his home (he grew up on a very poor farm back in Europe somewhere, not quite Russia). And he'd imagine, against his own will, the absolute worst and most uninteresting part of the story, the part where his grandfather courted his grandmother, a woman whom, though he'd met her, the little boy had very little interest in.

Over a nearly fifteen-year period, they'd worked in the same factory (of course she wasn't smart enough to save her own gold filings), and it had taken him nearly that long to seduce her, to convince her to be his wife and move away with him, away from her job and her home, where she had no living family (neither did he, so what), to the country, to the western part of the United States, where a little money and a loving family were all a man needed to get a good new start, to make a piece of land his own. The boy knew by heart the words his father used to tell the story, how his grandfather had, "little by little, day by day, made progress with the woman of his dreams, the woman with whom he'd eventually marry and have one child. He'd collected little bits of her, day by day, just as he did with the gold filings."

At this point the story always skips ahead to when his grandfather (now in his early thirties) had finally “earned” enough money to buy some land out west. He chose Nevada (the stupidest state), brought his new wife with him, and started a farm, trusting his intellect and innate talents to guide him through the cultivation of an unknown, at least to him, crop on a piece of land that was nearly worthless because of the incredible aridity of the climate there. It was possible to get a crop going in this part of Nevada, at least that’s what the realtor had told him, but it was going to be very difficult, and it was going to take a special kind of man. As it turned out, his grandfather *was* a special kind of man, and through endless hard work and after three initial years of crop failures, he was able to turn his first small profit.

What he never told his wife, and what he didn’t tell his son until he’d turned ten (all the boys in the family learn when they’re ten), is that he didn’t use a single ounce of the gold he’d collected to pay for the farm. In addition to pocketing the “worthless” scraps and filings, he’d been leading an austere life and saving his paychecks until he was able to buy a large piece of land entirely with paper money earned through a 55-hour-a-week factory job. All of the gold remained in the family, and it was the most important thing in the world to him, because it meant safety for the few people he loved (can count them on one hand).

His grandfather put all the gold scraps he’d collected in a great metal box, buried this box in the very center of the farm, and planted a peach tree on top (a peach tree growing outside of its natural habitat is good luck). His grandfather cared for the tree every morning before tending to the farm because he believed that the first thing you do in the morning should be representative of that which is most important to you. So he

cared for his tree, his family, and his gold, first thing every morning, before even attempting to think about anything else.

At the end of every telling, just as his grandfather had done, his father would tell the boy that he should never dig up that box and look inside. Its power as a symbol of faith in their family was far greater than its power as a source of wealth. His grandfather had never turned to the wealth inside the box in his first few years on the farm, years when the banks had nearly foreclosed more than once. His grandfather had simply cared for that tree and all it was representative of, and let his faith in family and hard work carry him through the difficult times. The boy should never (the heavy part) open the box. At this point, at the end of the original story, his father would add, “But, of course, if it came down to it, we’d open that box. But we should be careful not to hope for that day, we should be careful to always work hard and rely on our land and ourselves to provide for our family, just like your grandfather. And if the day should come when this farm fails and we need to open that box, well, then, we’ll know it’s the right thing to do, and we’ll open it, and wherever he is, your grandfather will surely approve.”

And then one day, in the boy’s sixteenth year, a miracle happened. It started raining, and it kept on raining for ten days. It rained so much that the entire year’s alfalfa crop was ruined, rendered completely unsalvageable. What had been highly cultivated, structured, and correctly irrigated farmland, turned into muck where nothing could grow or lay roots. Aside from the peach tree, everything on their 1,500 acres died. And although the peach tree managed to survive, one of its three main branches died shortly after the rains stopped. The branch browned and its leaves fell off along with all its peaches (sour, dry Nevada peaches anyway).

Nighttime arguments began. The boy could hear his parents, through his ceiling, arguing about money, about what to do, about whether their farm (and marriage) would survive this devastating year. So much of their investment had been lost. And the lean five years leading up to this disaster didn't help matters. They'd stretched their credit and exhausted every possible source of aid just to get this year's failed crop *planted*.

On the third night after the rains had stopped, when the fighting reached a pitch the boy could no longer stand, he decided to do it. He'd retrieve the gold and end all of this once and for all—no more farm, no more caring for the damn peach tree every morning, no more home “schooling” (thank god, no more afternoons with mom), no more Nevada.

Just as he'd planned for so many years, he waited until after they were asleep and dropped out of the window into the rosebushes. The drop was a little more than he'd expected, but aside from a sore ankle and very slight limp, he was fine. He grabbed the axe (although old enough for the chainsaw now) from where it'd been lying inside the shed since the last time he'd used it, when he tore up the old, towering bushes in front of the house.

He jogged (would've run if not for the ankle) out to where the tree stood in the middle of nothing but soggy, worthless, dead alfalfa, still clinging to its wrinkled, worthless peaches. He stared at the tree standing defiantly despite the muck. With the half-moon in the background, for the first time in his life, the boy almost respected the old peach tree. But he quickly dismissed the thought as feminine nostalgia and began chopping, slowly at first while catching his breath, relishing the feeling of the metal penetrating wood.

Only minutes later, a large gap was widening. He was a strong young man and knew how to wield an axe well (ignoring the worsening ankle pain).

As he chopped, the tree began to bend, sag in the direction opposite the chopping. And as he chopped, he became aware that his father was watching him (he heard the chopping). Afraid that his father would be angry, he continued chopping (didn't know what else to do).

Finally, tired, and surprised at the resilience of the old tree's flesh, the boy stopped for a moment to gather his strength. He rested the axe head on the ground, leaned the handle of the axe against his waist, and rubbed his sore hands together. Suddenly his father was there, upon him, and the boy flinched, expecting a fist to come down upon him; but instead, his father grabbed the axe and picked up where his son had stopped. He chopped with a speed and force his son would've thought him incapable of. He grunted with each stroke, smiling in the half-moon light, gasping for air as he chopped seemingly endlessly, seemingly without fatigue, axe head gleaming with every upward stroke.

The gap opened like a great set of jaws and the tree tipped all the way to the ground. Its tenuous connection to the base of the trunk was severed with a loud SNAP!

His father stood there silently looking at it lying there on the ground. The boy noticed for the first time that there were no crowds. Not even his mother had come out to witness his salvation of their family, and for a brief but easily discarded moment, the discontinuity of reality with his recurring daydream gave him a discomforting feeling (there was really only that one neighbor anyway).

And then, simultaneously, it occurred to both father and son that they were no closer to the gold. The gold lay *under* the tree. They wondered why they'd felt the need (yes, both felt it) to cut down the tree at all. The tree had never been the obstacle. It was the roots, *they* were the obstacle. The great and gnarled and numerous roots of the old tree, and the earth that these roots sequestered, these were the barriers between father and son and what they sought.

Without an exchange of words, his father ran back to the barn (nearly slipping in the mud several times), where his tractor was. He grabbed a length of thick chain, started the tractor and headed back out through the slop to where his son waited by the felled tree.

Without getting off the tractor, his father handed the chain to his son. The son attached one end to the tractor, and brought the other end over to the tree trunk where he'd already used the axe to dig and cut a tunnel (thinking the same thoughts now) wide enough to make room for the chain to be placed under the stump. The boy pushed the chain under the trunk and looped it back onto itself via the large hook at its end. The boy gave his father the thumbs up and his father put the tractor into forward gear and stomped down on the diesel. Without much resistance, because the earth around it was still soggy, the stump, along with a great mass of roots and clumped earth, were dragged from where they had rested since the first week the boy's grandfather (father's father) had owned the land.

Without shutting off the tractor, his father jumped off and ran to where the trunk had been, where his son was already stooped, peering down at the hole left there.

In the center of the hole was a small mound of dry, undisturbed earth. All the roots had been radial to the tree, and nothing resembling a taproot had sunk directly down into the earth. Beneath the tree, protected by the trunk, had lain this dry patch of earth, untouched by man or root for over fifty years.

Father nodded at his son and the son began digging away at this strange lump of dry earth at the center of the hole. His hands struck something hard, metal, and small. He pulled the metal box out of the earth. It was a rusty army artillery box with all the green paint long worn off.

The son tentatively looked at his father (it was so small, so much smaller than in the story), and handed the artillery box to him. His father smiled knowingly. The family story had long ago become a part of him, and he wasn't so easily discouraged as his son. He had faith in this box, in *his* father, in his family.

With a deep breath, he slowly opened the box, and the son watched his father's smile disappear as he looked down and in upon its contents.

His father stuck his hand deep inside, and withdrew it, holding something wrapped in white tissue paper. He dropped the metal box back into the hole, unwrapped something white and glossy, and showed what he'd retrieved to his son (a photograph of grandfather and pregnant grandmother at Grand Central Station, holding luggage, ready to leave for their new lives, away from the people and things that were not their family).

The two men looked back to the hole in the earth, where the tree had been, at the exact spot where the metal box that was supposed to support their family for *generations* had lain, and realized that there'd been no need to drag the tree away, and there'd certainly been no need to cut it down.

They could've simply dug around the roots, dug up the treasure, leaving the tree and its remaining branches and peaches intact, and they wondered why they'd always dreamed of cutting it down.

(The tree fell, and the gold was held up for all those cheering to see, with no in-between . . . that's always the way it went.)

The End