The Long Way Home

 In the spring of 1955, four twelve-year-old boys were getting ready for their long walk up Chipman Street in Waterbury, Connecticut. The sounds of steam engines and train cars coupling and uncoupling echoed from the rail yard into the valley below.

John left school for the day and stood with his friends, staring at the steep incline. His oversized red cap slipped down over his eyes as he bent down and buckled the end of his father’s belt around his textbooks. They trudged up the mile-long hill, books dangling from their hands. Why was his school built at the bottom? John hated these half days. “What’ll we do all afternoon?”

“Right now, I want to get to the top of this hill,” said Dwight, the largest of the group. He had had a slight limp for as long as John had known him.

Jimmy picked up a small stone from the gutter and threw it. Then hollered, “Do you remember when we slid down this hill on our sleds last winter? The snow was so high that the street was like an ice tunnel with no top. We went as fast as an airplane.” Jimmy ran in circles around his friends, his arms outstretched. “Man, that was fun; I wish it were still winter so we could do that again.”

“Yeah,” said Dwight

“Yeah,” Bobby agreed, “Until that car went by and almost hit you. Good thing we had lookouts. Remember? I was on Wilson,” Bobby pointed down the hill. “Jimmy was halfway up Chipman. We signaled each other with our secret signal of all clear.” Bobby bent his elbow and extended his hand, fist overhead. “Then we changed places so that everyone could get a turn.”

A funeral procession passed by. Little black flags from the hearse's fenders made snapping sounds. Five cars with flashing lights followed.

 Bobby ran ahead and walked next to John. “Sorry about your Grandma. My mom told me she died. Was that why you didn’t go to school last Wednesday?”

“Yeah, my family had to go to the funeral.” John gazed at the dull gray sky and wished the sun was shining. It was like this when his grandma died.

Just below the crest of the hill, Jimmy spread out his arms like a crossing guard, halting them. “Stop! Will ya look at this?”

A moving truck was parked on Chipman Street in front of a three-family house. No one was outside. Beside the driveway stood an empty cardboard packing barrel, four feet tall and two feet wide, with a metal rim and a sturdy cover secured with clamps that hung open.

The boys gaped. Then they all started talking at once. A plan was hatched, and John was elected to take the first ride.

 Two boys ran down the hill to the same places as last winter. Jimmy ran down to the midpoint, and Bobby ran down to the corner of the cross street.

 John and Dwight toppled the barrel over and rolled it up to the highest point of Chipman Street. John crawled in, and Dwight secured the clamps with a loud snap. The lookouts were in place, and they exchanged all-clear signals.

“All clear! Here we go,” yelled Dwight at the barrel, giving it a mighty push. It sped down the street, picking up speed as it approached the bottom of the hill. Bobby, the lookout on Wilson Street, spotted a car coming. It was a slow car—no big deal. With his attention diverted for a moment, Bobby turned back and watched in horror as it struck the curb on the other side of Wilson Street and flew like a cannonball. The barrel was airborne for a long time before hitting the ground with a thud, then skidded a few feet. It crashed into a metal fence that lined a twenty-foot drop-off. The boys ran and found the barrel cracked and smashed. The cover was still secured in place. Dwight undid the clamps, and the three boys pulled John out. He lay motionless in the grass, his face covered with the red cap.

“Wake up! Wake up, wake up,” cried Jimmy, and he removed his friend’s cap.

John remembered climbing into the barrel, hearing the clamps close, and the next moment, he was floating, suspended over... himself. How can that be? Why am I on the ground? Why aren’t I moving? Gosh, my friends are freaking out!

He floated and attempted to swim. “This is neat.” He turned a somersault. Up ahead and above him, a warm light enveloped two silver doors. The door of the rocket ship slid open from the middle, and rays of golden light streamed out.

“John, get over here!”

He saw his grandma, who died last week. She wore a white robe with golden ropes, and her hair was fluffy.

 “Grandma, is that you? It looks like you… sort of. What’s going on?”

“Hurry up!” she signaled with her hands, and thin rays of light flew from her fingertips.

John swam breaststroke through the water-like air. This was fun. He and his grandma slipped into a spaceship. The doors shut. Grandma’s sleeves rolled up her arms as she worked the console. John noticed a large, white-faced watch on her wrist, secured by a thick leather strap that glowed. “Is that your old watch, Grandma? It looks new now.”

“Yes, this is Grampa’s Railroad Watch. I couldn’t part with it, and now it has magic powers.”

“What kind of powers?

“You’ll see.”

She said into her watch. “Systems ready.”

 Then they heard, “Go for launch.”

Grandma pressed a red button on the console. He gripped a gold safety bar above his head, like in a subway, and ascended like a rocket. The front doors turned transparent as they gained speed. They passed through pink and purple clouds while *Earth Angel* by the Penguins played inside.

When the rocket stopped, the doors opened. Beautiful trees and flowers greeted him. Grandma stepped out and opened her arms wide. She turned with her hand outstretched.

“Welcome, John. How about a tour? You’re going to love this place.”

He held her hand as they soared over vast amusement parks illuminated by vibrant lights. The sound of carousel organ music came in waves from below.

He was curious about small bright illuminations that glowed and danced around rides. “Grandma, can we go there?”

“Not now, maybe later; I’ll go with you then.” An alarm screeched from Grandma’s watch. “Oops, we gotta go.”

 “What was that noise?”

“That was the magic watch I told you about. It sends me messages. You gotta go now.”

 “Is that what the watch said?”

“Yes, off you go.”

“No…” he held his grandmother’s hand. He didn’t want to return but found himself floating toward the doors. He flipped over and did the backstroke, but it didn’t work. The doors opened, and he floated inside. Grandma remained outside. “Aren’t you coming?”

“No, not this time,” she replied. “You have to go alone. Don’t worry; I will always watch over you. But wait, I have another message on my watch.” The door almost closed. Grandma shouted from outside, “You will discover a cure. Be prepared.” The doors shut, and Ain’t That a Shame by Fats Domino played on.

“A cure for what? I’m only twelve.”

John woke up on the grass next to the wreck of the cardboard barrel. He opened his eyes and sat up. He felt a bit dizzy, but nothing hurt too badly. “Help me up, guys.”

His friends pulled him to his feet. They threw the crushed packing container over the fence and into the ditch.

Dwight rubbed the area beneath his eyes with the back of his hand and, in a muffled voice, said, “We thought you were dead. You looked dead!” He turned away.

“Just glad you aren’t dead,” said Jimmy

John rubbed the top of his head, causing dust and dirt to fall off, and exclaimed, “Did you guys see the rocket ship? I did, and I rode in it.” He put his palms together and shot one hand off. “Zoom, right through the clouds!” He continued, “It was nice up there. I saw my Grandma.”

Jimmy snorted through his nose and said, “What? You rode in a rocket ship and saw your Grandma? You’re crazy.”

“It happened. Why won’t you believe me?” said John

“We are just looking out for you, buddy,” said Jimmy. “Don’t tell anybody else about this. Do you hear me?”

John looked down at his shoes and mumbled, “Yeah, I guess. It was so nice there, you know?”

 The boys gathered their books. John walked home with his friends, bringing up the rear in line.

In the grass by the sidewalk lay an oversized, white-faced wristwatch. He picked it up. Inscribed on the back was: "To John, may you always be on TIME." He put it on, and it fit perfectly.

Gee, my Grandpa’s name was John.