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THE BROTHERS

by *Ken Robertson*

James was surprised when Caleb grabbed his shoulder roughly and said, "I want to wrestle you," as they were leaving the Oakview Community School bus on a windy morning in March. The bus carried students for all twelve grades of the two-story brown-brick school and its adjacent WPA-built auditorium.

Caleb spoke with a guttural voice that carried a lingering speech defect. James remembered Caleb from grade school as a dour-faced kid who became a crybaby when the older boys teased him.

Caleb's father was a tenant farmer who drove a rusty Ford truck that squeaked and rattled about the neighborhood at harvest time hauling grain from the threshing machines and combines to granaries and to the Co-op elevator at the Frisco track on the west edge of town. During the past Christmas holiday, Caleb's family had moved to an unpainted house on a marginal farm covered with sandhills and scrub oaks about a mile from James' home.

James couldn't recall any disagreement with Caleb, who was a year younger and three grades behind him in school, but half a head taller and twenty pounds heavier. James didn't like to fight. He had been in two fights back in grade school. He had lost the

first one, and the defeat had reduced him to a crying, exhausted lump he didn't like to remember. The next time, he won by his determination and by aiming his fists at the soft parts of the other boy's head that were backed by solid bone. He learned that it's better to have skinned knuckles than a split lip and better to have bruised forearms from warding off blows than a bloody nose from receiving them.

James didn't like losing, and he knew that he would be a sure loser if he wrestled Caleb. "Why do you want to wrestle?" he would ask Caleb. "I want to wrestle you" was the only response.

He tried to ignore the challenge, but Caleb persisted with daily reminders that he wanted to wrestle him. At the end of the week, knowing Caleb would brand him as a coward if he didn't fight, James reluctantly offered to box with him instead; Caleb agreed.

James had always been small for his age and small-boned as well. He guessed that Caleb saw him as a short, skinny opponent and not much of a threat at wrestling or boxing either. He concluded that Caleb expected to gain an easy victory that he would brag about to his classmates.

James' congenial demeanor and quick wit made him popular among his circle of friends, but he knew that out-

siders like Caleb sometimes saw him as a smart aleck.

When friends came to visit, James often sparred with them, using the sixteen-ounce gloves his two older brothers had ordered by mail from Montgomery Ward in Kansas City. The gloves provided more padding and protection than bare fists. The sparring matches usually led to each person hitting a little harder until the punches were no longer friendly. And a hard blow hurt, despite the thick padding.

The boxing gloves set the place for the match at James' house. His brothers were men now, and their treatment of him had become like that of their stern and autocratic father before them. They were like second fathers, he concluded, and one father in a household was enough. He tried to allay their orders by avoiding them whenever he could.

On Friday afternoon when he and Caleb stepped off the school bus for their boxing match, James found his brothers relaxing in the front room reading the ENID MORNING NEWS and listening to WKY radio. He asked them to tie the strings of their boxing gloves. They seemed to like the idea of delaying the start of their evening chores in the cattle barn to watch the fight and to call time for the rounds.

James' confidence was at low tide as he pulled on the gloves. He shadow-boxed a few steps and tried to grin

confidently to conceal his anxiety. But his facial muscles were so tight from his fear of losing that only a thin-lipped smirk emerged.

James used the big padded gloves to protect himself from Caleb's furious onslaught of blows aimed at his face and upper body. He retreated in a wide circle that crossed a grassy mound in the dirt driveway. The mound gave him a momentary height advantage. At that point in his circle, he would make a stand, punching for Caleb's nose—or if the nose was covered, Caleb's ears.

At first, he was too busy protecting himself, circling, feeling for the mound with his feet, and directing his punches, to notice that his brothers had begun to cheer for him when he delivered a good blow and when he thwarted a thrust from Caleb.

The unexpected support filled James with a new spurt of determination. His forearms and chest hurt from Caleb's relentless pounding. His mouth felt as dry as the dusty driveway underneath his feet. His nose and lips throbbed with pain. His lungs ached from the exertion, and his arms and legs were nearing exhaustion; but he continued to strike at Caleb's nose until blood began to flow.

When Caleb, chastened by the hostile cheering, saw the blood on his gloves, he stopped fighting. James noticed that Caleb was breathing hard and that his ears were swollen and had

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turned a purplish color. Using his teeth to untie the knots, Caleb slid his hands out of the gloves and retreated down the driveway toward home snuffling and wiping his bloody nose on the sleeve of his faded blue shirt.



Illustration by Jeromie Tate

James felt the joyous relief of victory. His body hurt, and he had a thick lip filled with pain; but his honor was intact and the aggressor had withdrawn. The memory of the unexpected cheers from his brothers glowed inside him, and he wanted to tell them of his gratitude; but he couldn't. He resisted an urge to inspect his swollen lip in the mirror above the wash basin in the kitchen and decided to delay starting

his own chores to help his brothers with theirs.

He held the door open while they herded the six milk cows and two heifers due to freshen soon into the milking shed. Expecting to be fed, the animals quickly arranged themselves in the stanchions in their butting order with the heifers at the far end. James helped mix and distribute the ground milo and cottonseed meal to the impatient cattle and stayed to listen to his brothers' man-talk while the streams of warm milk coursed from their hands into the tinned buckets. ■

KEN ROBERTSON was reared in Western Oklahoma, attended rural schools in Blaine County, and graduated from Fay High School. He now resides in Decatur, Illinois. His recent writing has appeared in *OUR TOWN* magazine, the Decatur *HERALD AND REVIEW*, *IMAGES VII*, and *HARD ROW TO HOE*.