

It Just Don't Pay

by James Lynn Smith

Paw and me lived in a shack over the bluff. Every day he hitched up Old Toxie and took the wagon down to town where he drank whiskey and told lies. At one place, the narrow road cuts into the side of the bluff, and, sideways, it slants down toward the drop-off. So you have to lean away from the drop-off on the bench-like seat to keep balanced. The seat once had sides and a back with metal braces, but they rusted out and Paw couldn't get nobody to fix it 'cause they didn't trust he would pay.

*

Paw had a fearsome temper. Ever since I can remember, I was worried he was going to beat me. I think he blamed me for my maw's death. I never knowed her.

It's like a few days ago when he comes at me and says, "Tarnation, boy, some days it just don't pay to get up. I told you to put some shingles on that roof edge, and you ain't done it."

"But Paw," I says, "you was gonna bring a ladder from town, and I can't reach up there without it. Maybe you forgot."

"Don't tell me I forgot, you useless, ugly, little lard-ass. You should've made a ladder with stuff in the shed."

"There ain't no lumber out there, Paw."

"What am I'm gonna do with you, boy? I sure ain't gonna put up with that back talk." He proceeds to take a hoe handle and whack me across the face. I covered it with my hands as blood trickled through my fingers. He looked all

satisfied then, and he went into the house and took himself a nap.

That's my paw. I was always afraid to talk to him and afraid not to. I was *so* tired of it.

*

The following day he left for town and came back with the wheels on the wagon squeaking bad. He staggered up, looked at me and said, "Get the axel grease from the crib and use it on this wagon."

"I think it's in the shed, Paw."

"I'll swear, some days it just don't pay to get up. Don't sass me, boy. I showed you where the good book says to honor your parents. Hellfire and damnation is what you get if you don't. But that's after *I* finish with you."

He had a slew of ways to scare me, even if he was too drunk to stand up.

*

The next day, Paw hitched up Old Toxie and took off in the wagon. I watched as it got to the place in the bluff where the road slanted. As the wagon tilted to the side, Paw leaned the other way, as usual. But then he started slipping across the seat towards the drop-off. He slid clean off the seat and over the side of the 100 foot bluff. With no tension on the reins, Old Toxie kept going.

I ran to the edge and looked down. It was awful; Paw's body was a twisted up mess. I turned my eyes up to the sky and said, "Lord, I did what he said and used the axel grease. He just didn't tell me *where all* to *put* it."

I looked down again, and smiled. "Paw, some days it just don't pay to get up."
