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Three Men and a Store
by S. Ray Granade
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Most accurately, we should probably call this “two men, a boy, and a store.” It features three generations of males from the same family—the father, his only son, and his first-born grandson. The store, Arkadelphia’s first “big box” discount store, Howard Brothers (colloquially known as Howard’s), sat atop the last northward hill on Tenth Street (aka US Highway 67 / AR Highway 7) and looked eastward and northeastward across its parking lot over the Caddo River and Ouachita River floodplains. The occasion arose when the father and his wife drove from Montgomery, Alabama over the course of about a dozen hours and mostly over two-lane roads to visit their son and daughter-in-law and their almost two-year-old son that summer of 1974.

Howard’s attracted customers not only because of its a-bit-lower prices on most goods, but also because of its breadth of shopping opportunities. Though it offered no groceries, one could find almost everything else one might want or need. And whenever “the parents” came, “the men” always needed somethings! Death and taxes might be inevitable, but so was at least one trip to Howard’s when “the parents” came. No trip to Howard’s was complete without some perusal time; one could not just go and pick up an item and return. So it would be with this foray into consumerism.

The father suggested taking his car, since its position in the driveway blocked the other option. He suggested that the son drive, since he best knew destination and possible routes—and knew that his son loved to drive. From the time that he had gotten a learner’s permit, the son had driven whenever the two (alone or with others) went anywhere together. The father further suggested that the grandson join the “expedition,” that would give the women some relief from the active child’s requirement for constant attention. The boy’s car seat, a small booster chair with a steering wheel attached, moved easily to the visitors’ vehicle since no straps were involved. No law required child restraint of any kind. So the three blithely headed for Howard’s.

Once there, the grandson went into the child seat in a shopping cart. He had been slow to walk and talk, with both arriving at about the same time. The delay had been deceptive, for his talking arrived all at once, skipping one-word sentences for complete sentences and even paragraphs. So too his walking came as almost running, careening hither and yon on his way, constantly on the move. Shopping cart travel became the accepted mode of movement in stores—initially. His proclivity for bending over and gnawing on the handle had quickly established a pattern of his starting there but being moved into the basket to stand—and try to climb out. Once that started, his feet went onto the floor and the cart was abandoned unless truly needed for purchases. The pattern developed so that son and grandson walked holding hands through store aisles. In lieu of gnawing a cart handle, the grandson begged for and received the car keys to provide oral stimulation.

The trio visited the sporting goods section for pork rind to use with a Snagless Sally just in case they had a chance to wet a hook. As father and son discussed colors and styles, the son dropped the grandson’s hand to pick up and examine various options. The grandson stood uncharacteristically quietly and obediently next to them. When it was time to move, the son again grasped his child’s hand and the longer pairs of legs strolled to match the toddler’s pace. Next they stopped by hardware for a packet of bolts and some washers and nuts, the trip’s original impetus. Again the son dropped his child’s hand; again the child remained unmoving; again they linked hands to move on. Two more stops later, stops that eventually had the group cover all parts of the store including the toy section, they headed, treasures in hand, for checkout.

When they reached the exit-guarding cash registers that allowed shoppers to view the floodplains through the glass front, the son dropped his child’s hand and extracted his billfold, ready to pay for their few items. The clerk rang them up, then asked about the toy the child clutched. The son immediately realized that his child had dropped the car keys somewhere in the store in order to clutch something else. The question, of course, was where!

The son quickly completed the transaction, gave the sack to his father, hoisted his child into his arms, and started backtracking. The toy was small and easily clutched; would the child have traded the keys for it there? They went to the toy’s point of origin and looked first for the keys and then, finding none, for what might be out of place. Taking that item, they went to its home department. Again, no keys, but this time a blister pack of screws. Back to hardware, where they found no keys, but a large bright red-and-white plastic cork just the size to fill a small fist. Back to sporting goods and bobbers. No keys in sight, but digging a bit in the bobber bin produced a familiar set of Chevrolet keys.

Disconsolate at sequentially regaining and losing his treasures, the child began to “tune up” as the son took the keys. “I’ll take those,” the father sternly said, holding out his hand. The son relinquished them hesitantly, then swung his child up on his shoulders. Delighted at his preferred view from higher ground, the child urged the group forward into the open air as the successful hunter-gatherers regained the auto and returned home, their mission completed and the son determined to watch his child more diligently, even when accompanied.