

COASTER WAGONS

Where I was born and lived the earliest years of my life – on Circle Street in the town of Alexander Mills – building and racing coaster wagons was a way of life for the boys of the neighborhood. Almost every house on the street had some sort of a wagon in the backyard, either under construction or being repaired. In either case, their owners were getting them ready for the race on Saturday – mid-morning on Saturday, after The Little Rascals Club but before Shock Theater. I had one, of course. JC helped me build it. It was one of the best in the neighborhood. Of course it was; JC helped me build it. It seemed like JC could build just about anything and do it better than just about anyone. Years later I learned the truth about that – he really could. JC built, while I watched and learned and ran for nails and handed him his hammer. I lived and breathed coaster wagons, and I couldn't wait to get into the backyard with my Dad to work on mine.

Now for goodness sake don't get an image of sleek, white Soap Box Derby racers. These were mill hill coaster wagons – poor boys' toys. For the most part, they were made of scrap lumber and whatever wheels could be scavenged at the town dump. Mine was one of the few in town with four wheels that matched. They were actually some old, badly worn pullys that JC had gotten from the mill, but they had ball bearings and were mounted on real axels, a technology that was practically unknown on Circle Street coaster wagons. Those wheels put my wagon into a class by itself, and for a while on Saturday mornings, I was the envy of the block.

I've relived those days in my mind countless times through the years. I've thought about JC and how good it was to work on things with him – of how much I learned watching him, of how fortunate I was to have had him as my Dad. It seems strange to me now that I never got around to telling him that, but something always seemed to hold me up. Nevertheless, he planted the seed exceedingly well, and the result is that I've built hundreds of coaster wagons in my head. I've measured and cut every board dozens of times. I've drilled the hole for the front end and even designed an adjustable seat so that both kids and adults could ride the same wagon. I've built coaster wagons for over forty years, but only in my mind – that is until about a year ago, when Katie was five. It just seemed like the time was right that Saturday when I slipped off to the shop and started to work. I used leftover lumber from our cabin at Pleasant Grove, and the job went quickly. I cut boards two at a time and then mounted the casters that I had bought weeks earlier onto them. I was drilling holes for the adjustable seat when Elizabeth came out to check on me. "I can't believe how quickly you've built that thing," she said. I stopped work to laugh. "I built it years ago," I replied, "I've just been putting it together today."

Katie loved it. I know that because she told me so. Well, she didn't actually tell me so, but in a way she did. You see, the kindergarten year was winding down, and the kids had been working for weeks on their journals. A date was set for an "Authors Fair" where all of the parents would come and each child would read from his or her journal. I was there, of course. Well after all, it had to do with writing, a subject that I have more than a passing interest in, and it had to do with Katie, my favorite writing subject. Besides, I thought it would be fun.

The teacher, Miss Taryn, had “interviewed” each child earlier, and she used their answers to her questions to develop a series of short introductions. A key feature of each introduction was an account of the child’s favorite activities outside of school. Katie was far down the list of presenters, so I had the opportunity to hear from many of her classmates before she took her turn. I was a bit embarrassed to hear some of the activities named by several of the other children – trips to Disney World, playing with their various pets, playing with their brothers and sisters – all things that Katie had expressed a desire to do many times, but in which she could take no part. I wondered how that made her feel. I wondered what she would say. I wondered what she had done that could compete with Disney World.

Finally Katie’s turn came, and as she prepared to read, Miss Taryn gave her introduction: “This is Katie Greene. She is five years old, and she lives just down the road. Her favorite activities are riding her coaster wagon and doing things with her Mom and Dad.” What? What did she say? I could barely believe it. I was so proud, yet humbled at the same time. I made no effort to hide the tears that streaked my face. That no one else in her class would mention riding a coaster wagon was no surprise. Katie was probably the only child in the class that had ever heard of coaster wagons. They’re toys of a different generation. But Katie was also the only child in the class who mentioned doing things with her Mom and Dad as a favorite activity, a fact that touched my heart in a profound way. I closed my eyes and said a quick prayer. “Thank you, Lord for the gift of this special child, and thank you for letting me be her Daddy. And Lord, whenever you see JC, please tell him what Katie said and make sure he knows that she spoke for both of us. A-men.”

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