

THE BIG WHEEL BLESSING



JAMIE GREENING

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by

Jamie Greening

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FOREWORD

I have deep gratitude for those who carefully read, proofed, and edited this story for me: Ken Campbell, Elisha Pile, Carol Fowler, Sue Pace, and Sara Trahan. I also want to thank Brooks Homeyer, who in many ways was the inspiration for Dakota. Anthony Horvath, Maryann Spikes, and all the technical wonders at Bard And Book make the publication of stories like this possible, and for that I am grateful. I am also deeply indebted to my wife and daughters. Their faces, words, and love are woven inside of me, then leak out of me and fall upon my every endeavor.

As to the setting, this story takes place in the Pastor Butch Gregory universe, although it is not about him. You can read about him in some of my other stories, The Haunting of Pastor Butch Gregory, The Little Girl Waits, and The Land Begins to Heal, as well as a yet to be titled or released novel due at the end of 2015.

Each generation has a sacred responsibility to teach the next one about the things that really matter. One of the ways this happens is when we allow a boy or a girl to be influenced by truth, and then appropriate it into their own life.

The Big Wheel Blessing is a work of fiction. All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental, although one would hope children playing in front yards would never be too fictional.

For the people of First Baptist Church, Hughes Springs, Texas,
who were the first to teach me that giving is better than receiving.

THE BIG WHEEL BLESSING

Dakota pedaled as fast and hard as a four year old can. He strained as the Big Wheel neared the top of the driveway. The toy tricycle crested at the sweet spot where the gray concrete met with the black pavement of the forbidden road. The gray driveway was safe, but the black road was a dangerous and forbidden land, and he knew that somehow if he dared to venture onto it, his mother would descend from the heavens, snatch him back inside the house, scold him with strong words like, ‘You know better than that,’ and ‘Are you trying to get yourself killed?’ or the worst of all, ‘I thought I could trust you,’ and there would be no more Big Wheel today, and it might be lost forever or at least he could learn to ‘Act his age.’

He pedaled the Big Wheel along the edge of the drive, surveying the boundary between the two worlds. He breathed frosted air out of his opened mouth. His cheeks were red. Snow from an unusually strong winter storm was piled high, higher than the Big Wheel, forming a wall along the two sides of the drive all the way to the sidewalk that ran in front of the garage. Cruising the border with the pavement, he neared the snow wall of the driveway’s lateral edge. Just before he collided with the snowbank, Dakota gave the Big Wheel a hard kick in the pedals, then with the expertise of a

NASCAR professional he turned hard to the left, thrusting down the driveway toward the garage door as fast as he could.

His face was the picture of concentration, like an airline pilot landing a plane in sketchy weather. It was a dangerous ploy, but danger is what made it fun. He'd made this run many times since Christmas morning. After the snow of two nights ago, he'd perfected his technique. Halfway down, on this side of the driveway, was a small ice patch. When the Big Wheel hit that patch, it slid, out of control—this way and that way—until Dakota brought the red, yellow and blue plastic beast under control again. Then, just as he was nearing a certain fatal crash into the garage door, he turned hard to the left again and steered straight for the snowbank where he crashed right into it.

“That was awesome!” he shouted to himself. This time he and his bike were so far into the snowbank that he had to get off of it and pull it out before he could start the climb again up the driveway to do it all over again.

This routine went on all morning, just as it had every day for two weeks, since Christmas morning when he opened the giant package that had the magical gift with one large wheel in front, two tiny wheels in back, motorcycle-styled steering handles, and a tiny seat. For a four-year-old boy it was just about the greatest gift ever. The Big Wheel had already accumulated a few nicks and dings. The worst was on the front wheel where he crashed it into the bench on the back porch. It was after that when his mother told him the only place he could ride it unsupervised was the driveway.

Dakota was coming down the gentle slope of the driveway on one of his joyous sprees when the garage door hummed, clanked, and then opened. He knew what that meant, but continued with his sortie anyway. His father stepped out of the garage, smiling, and

said, “Hey buddy, it’s time to get cleaned up for church. You can ride some more this afternoon.”

“Do I have to go? Why can’t we just stay home today?”

“You know the answer to that. Church is not something we have to go to, it is something we want to go to. We want to go to church. Right? We don’t have to go to church, ever. It is not about having to go. Instead, we want to go to church.”

As Dakota listened to his father’s sermon, he formulated a plan. “But I don’t want to go, so do I have to go?”

“Nice try. Come on,” his father pulled the Big Wheel out of the snowbank, then he lifted Dakota up and put him back on the seat and pointed into the garage. Dakota pedaled his machine into the garage and parked it right beside the Buick.

Forty five minutes later Dakota’s mother walked him to his pre-school room at Sydney Community Church. She ran a comb through his dark curly hair before she opened the door, then she kissed him on the cheek. He kissed her back and walked into the classroom. Even though it wasn’t Big Wheel fun, Dakota enjoyed his class and felt at ease. There were six other children in his class, all of whom he knew for as long as he could remember. His teacher, Mrs. Sophie, was a friend of his parents and he’d been in her home more than once.

Dakota joined with the other boys, Dez, Brady, and Veejay. Dez had also gotten a Big Wheel for Christmas, but his was a Green Machine while Dakota had gotten the original. As boys often want to do, they each took turns at trying to assert who, indeed, had the best and dominant piece of equipment while they played with the various Lego blocks, cars, trucks, and assorted toys in the room. Brady and Veejay neither one got such a glorious present. Veejay received a

box of gear toys while Brady's big gift was a desk for his bedroom. To say that Brady was not thrilled about his parents' choice of gifts was an understatement.

After several minutes of play, Mrs. Sophie turned off the music that had been playing in the background and called the children together around the tables. She guided the conversation, as best a conversation amongst preschoolers can be guided, around their Christmas experiences. Tonia said that she got movies, an Elsa doll and an Elsa Fathead. Mrs. Sophie did not know what that was and needed them to explain it to her. Mrs. Sophie abruptly moved the conversation along when Tonia began singing "Let It Go."

Another little girl named Caroline talked about how her grandmother came all the way from Florida to visit them at Christmas and how she had to give up her bed and sleep on the couch, but she was happy her grandma came because she gave her a lot of cash for Christmas.

The boys, of course, spoke of nothing but Big Wheels. Caroline announced to the class that she was planned to buy the bestest Big Wheel with her Christmas cash. Some of the boys snickered at that. Brady, the unfortunate desk receiver, said with confidence, "Girls get dolls and stuff, only boys get Big Wheels." Mrs. Sophie corrected Brady and the boys by saying, "Don't be ridiculous. Toys are toys, and if Caroline wants a Big Wheel, and it is okay with her parents, then she can." Mrs. Sophie gave a kind of humph sound as she finished, and then said under her breath, "Women are better drivers anyway."

There was a moment or two of more chatter about Star Wars toys and smelly relatives before the lesson began. Mrs. Sophie told the students about a Bible verse where Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." She told them that the word blessed meant

many things, but one of the things it meant was the good feeling we get when we help others. She also told them that it meant God was pleased, so those who give things to others please God more than those who receive things.

Veejay's hand shot up.

Miss Sophie called on him.

"So, I was just wondering, then, Mrs. Sophie, if, um, well, does that kinda sorta mean that we should, you know, never ever never get things?" Veejay asked.

"No, of course not. That is not what it means. It is okay to receive gifts, or to get help when we need it. However, sometimes we love things so much that all we want is more and more, and we forget that we should sometimes give. If you love a thing more than you love a person, if you care for a thing more than you care about a person, then you are not pleasing God. And, for what it's worth, you'll be miserable too."

Brady raised his hand, "Well, if it is so good to give, can I just give my desk back to my parents? That would make us both all of us really blest-ted."

Mrs. Sophie patted Brady on the head, "No, it doesn't quite work like that. A real gift has to cost something. It might be time, money, feelings, but something has to be paid. That is why Jesus is the one we look to for the example, because he gave everything for us. He left heaven to come be with us. That is giving quite a bit."

Brady didn't really understand what Mrs. Sophie was saying, but he said, "Oh, okay." He turned to Veejay. "I guess I'm stuck with the desk."

Then Mrs. Sophie looked right at Dakota. "So, Dakota, you said

you got a Big Wheel for Christmas, is that right?”

“An Original Big Wheel,” he looked at Dez.

“I see. So who gave you that?”

“Daddy mostly, I think. I’m pretty sure he got me the Big Wheel and Mommy got me the giant package of underwear.”

“Why do you think your daddy got you the Big Wheel?”

“Because he loves me.”

“Yes, but why that particular gift?”

The question stumped Dakota. He’d never once thought about it. His preschool brain fired with activity, but an answer was as hard to grasp as Mr. Swirly going down the bathtub drain.

“Don’t know why. But, why” Dakota stammered a bit as he worked his mouth around the thought, “do you think he gave it to me Mrs. Sophie?”

“I think it probably is because when he sees you ride it, having a good time, it brings him joy. It also might be that it helps him remember when he was a kid on a Big Wheel. It makes him happy to see you play like he used to play.”

That was a lot for a four-year-old boy to think about. Dakota had never thought of his father ever being a child before.

It was a lot for all of them to think about. Mrs. Sophie knew this, so she handed out some paper and crayons and asked the children to draw their favorite gift that they received.

It wasn’t too much longer before class was over. Dakota had drawn an amazing, life-like replica of his Big Wheel, which he pre-

sented to his mother and asked, “Can we put this on the fridgerator?”

After a quick trip to the bathroom, Dakota and his mother joined his father in the sanctuary for worship service. Worship services were always hard for Dakota. He either went to sleep, which got him in trouble, or he squirmed too much, which got him in trouble, or he tried to talk to his mother, which also brought him trouble. Unlike Mrs. Sophie’s classroom, which was safe, the worship service was a minefield of distractions and dangers. Today was no different. The Christmas decorations were still up, which confused Dakota. He kept asking his mother why they were up, and every time she started to tell him, Pastor Butch would start to pray, read a Bible verse, or there would be a moment of silence or some kind of song would have to be sung, and Dakota’s father would then look at his son and say, “Shhhh.”

Eventually the worship service settled down, and Pastor Butch started his sermon, but within two minutes the preacher’s boring monotone found Dakota’s head on the seat with his eyes shut. Dakota dreamed while the congregants worshiped.

He dreamed about his Big Wheel. He dreamed about pedaling it up a large hill, the largest hill he’d ever seen before, and then turning it down the hill. In his dream he swerved around flagged obstacles like snow skiers do on television. He also jumped ramps accompanied by aerial stunts. Somehow, in his dream, a large audience had gathered to watch him ride his epic Big Wheel down the big hill.

At the end of his dream, his Big Wheel disappeared, and he was left crying at the foot of the hill. Mrs. Sophie walked up to him and said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

Dakota awoke from his weekly liturgical nap a bit grumpy. His father picked him up and carried him back to the Buick. There was

a bit of a struggle as the grown man worked to strap his son into the child safety seat. By the time they were home, Dakota was in a better mood. He ate his peanut butter and jelly sandwich, carrot sticks, and drank his milk. After bundling up in warm clothes, he went outside to ride his beloved Big Wheel.

The afternoon was warmer than it had been in the morning, so the ice patch in the driveway was gone. The wall of snow was still there, but it was slushy and shorter. The missing thrill of the ice only slightly minimized his enjoyment. It wasn't long, however, before Dakota revised his routine. His dream at church inspired him to take some of the snow from the snow wall to make piles in the driveway. He made about four of these piles with his tiny gloved hands and a small plastic yellow bucket he'd gotten at the beach back in July. Then he started at the top of the driveway and rode down, slaloming around the piles on his way down, zigzagging in and out.

Dakota drove this course several times before he realized he was being watched. Two blue eyes peeped out from a wool hat and scarf.

Dakota pedaled the Big Wheel to the very edge of the driveway and looked at the boy on the other side of the street. "Whatchadoin, Sam?" he asked.

"Nothin," Sam said.

Dakota dismounted from his sweet ride. The two four-year-old boys looked at each other across the chasm of the neighborhood road. Sam lived in the house directly across from Dakota's home. Sam had just moved into the house when his father relocated to Sydney, but Sam's father was gone, and had been gone ever since they moved in because of his job on the submarine.

"Yawanna ride with me?" Dakota's question to Sam was not a

simple, ‘Do you want to play with me?’ like one might expect from two boys on a Sunday afternoon. Instead, it was more akin to being asked to ride with the most elite gang in the world, like being asked to ride with Pancho Villa or Hell’s Angels. It was an invitation to belong. Sam, although barely four and younger than Dakota, picked up on that verbal cue, and sensed the desire inside of Dakota to have a partner in his exploits, someone to daydream with, to build obstacles with, and eventually, to overcome obstacles with.

“Yeah, but, I don’t got one.” It broke Sam’s heart to utter those words. It was an admission of want, of toy poverty, and a lack of prestige.

“Well,” Dakota thought for a moment. “You wanna ride mine?” The words shocked Dakota as they came out of his mouth, and he qualified them with all due haste, “I mean, for a little while, not for long, just a little while.”

“Sure.” Sam was hesitant. Deep inside he wanted nothing more than to saddle up on that yellow, blue, and red beauty, but at the same time fear and performance anxiety gave him caution. “I need to go check with my mama first to make sure I can come over.”

Sam ran to his front porch. He disappeared behind the oaken door. In his absence, Dakota worried. He really did want someone to play with. At no point in his young life had there ever been another boy in his neighborhood. Dez and Veejay lived next to each other and played together all the time, which always made Dakota jealous that he was alone. Yet, his Big Wheel was the most wonderful thing in his life. To share it with someone as unproven and unknown as this boy from across the street who came from a far-away place called Virginia was not a good idea either.

Dakota decided to savor his thoughts and his time with one last

circuit through the obstacle course. He drove the course with a determined reckless abandon at speeds he'd heretofore never dared. It bothered him greatly that he'd soon no longer be the only person to ever sit upon his Big Wheel. This knowledge encouraged him to push the machine's limits further and further.

When he reached the bottom of the driveway he expected Sam to be standing at the top. He wasn't. Dakota pedaled to the crest of the driveway. There was no sign of Sam. So again, he charged down the course and again no sign of Sam. Two more turns through and Dakota was beginning to think Sam's mom told him no, or that he'd changed his mind. He'd understand if Sam did. His Big Wheel was an intimidating piece of equipment; it was not safe for just any boy.

His next circuit was one best characterized by relief. He was home free now. He'd been the good kid who offered, but he was off the hook. Maybe someday in the future he'd have to share his Big Wheel, and maybe he and Sam could be good friends in the future. Today, however, this glorious Sunday afternoon, was his and his alone.

Then, from the bottom of the driveway, Dakota saw Sam standing at the top. Without saying a word he pedaled as slow as he could and pulled up right beside Sam.

"My mama had to call your mama to make sure it was okay. She said it was okay."

"Wait," Dakota hesitated. "Your mom called Mommy?" That his mother could be on such familiar terms with Sam's mother worried Dakota. That meant she knew. He wondered what else his mother might know.

"Yeah. They talked for a while about some stuff, and then your mama said I could come over no problem."

“Great,” Dakota said with a tone that didn’t betray whether he was excited or disappointed. Then, while still sitting on the tricycle, Dakota outlined the rules for riding his Big Wheel.

First, Sam was not allowed to crash into anything.

Second, he couldn’t go very fast because that might mess it up.

Third, he wasn’t allowed to run into the snow wall.

Fourth, he had to keep his hands on the handlebars at all times.

Fifth, he had to stop if Dakota told him to.

Sixth, anything Dakota told him to do he had to do.

Seventh, it was very important that Sam pay attention.

Eighth, Sam was not allowed to spit around the Big Wheel, because some might accidentally get on it.

Ninth, and this was the most important one, he couldn’t tell anyone that he’d let Sam ride his Big Wheel, especially Dez.

“Who is Dez?” Sam asked.

“Nevermind. Just don’t tell him,” was all Dakota said in response.

Once the terms of the contract were spelled out, Sam agreed. However, before Dakota would let Sam ride, he had to show him how it was done. Dakota decided to show him three times. The first time he rode the driveway slow. The second time he rode it fast, and then he immediately told Sam that the way he’d just driven was too fast for him to take it, on account of the fact that Sam had never ridden a Big Wheel before. The third time he rode it a moderate speed and pronounced, “That speed should be just about right for you.”

When he finished telling Sam how to do it, Dakota took one more turn, just for good measure. Then another.

Then he handed the plastic keys over to Sam. The keys were not necessary to operate the Big Wheel, but his dad had put the large plastic keys on a plastic keychain as a joke. Dakota always clipped them to the zipper on his coat whenever he went riding. Sam received the keys with a somber nod, as a knight might receive the Holy Grail, then clipped them onto the pull string around the neck of his coat.

Seconds later, he was off.

A child does not need to be taught how to ride a Big Wheel. There is something ergonomically intuitive about the device that is inbred within the male of the human species. The hands go on the handlebars, the feet go on the pedals, the right foot kicks out and then the left, push the handlebars in the direction you want it to go. This automatic response proves the genius of the Big Wheel, the greatest of all toys.

Like all those who had gone before him, Sam took to the machine like a bird to flight. His first circuit was slow, just like Dakota had told him, but his second was not. It was a dazzling display of speed. Several Big Wheel world records fell in that driveway as Sam raced around the obstacles. With each sharp turn he let out a squeal of delight, a giggle of nervous energy, or a shout of triumph. Sam was a natural.

Eventually, Sam and Dakota began taking turns on the obstacle circuit. That morphed into one boy riding the Big Wheel while the other ran alongside, which then evolved into a game of chicken where the rider would drive as fast as he could down the driveway toward the other boy who would see how close the Big Wheel would

get before he darted away. Only once did Sam get run over accidentally; every time after that it was on purpose.

The boys were having such a wonderful time that they didn't notice the winter shadows lengthen, the redness of their noses and cheeks, or the cold creeping into their feet and hands. It is a parent's job to notice these things.

The garage door clicked and ascended. The jostling startled Sam. Dakota reassured him, "It's okay. Just my parents."

"Sorry buddy," Dakota's father said, "Time to come in and get cleaned up. Mommy made clam chowder, and I'm sure Sam's mom is expecting him back soon." The grown man looked down at Sam and said, "Did you have a good time?"

Sam sniffed his runny nose and said, "Yeah, real good."

"I'm glad. Now come on Dakota. Why don't you let Sam ride the Big Wheel up the driveway and across the street to his house?"

"The street?" Dakota didn't mean to question his dad, but it sounded like such a foreign concept that he couldn't believe his dad had actually said it. "You're going to let Sam ride my Big Wheel in the street?"

"Sure. I'm here with you to watch for cars. Come on."

"Does Mommy know?"

"It's okay Dakota, I'm here."

The three of them went up the driveway and onto the black pavement. He knew his mother would never have approved of them being in the road. A thrill coursed through Dakota's nerves as he stepped off his driveway, it was a different thrill from riding the Big

Wheel over the ice patch. It was the thrill of adventure and of doing something naughty, like he was getting away with something he shouldn't be doing. It felt great.

Far too soon they arrived at Sam's yard and he drove the Big Wheel right up the sidewalk to the front steps. The Big Wheel bumped into the front step, causing Dakota to gasp a bit.

Sam's mom was waiting at the door. She and Dakota's dad talked grown-up talk up on the porch. The two boys stood beside the Big Wheel and stared at each other. They had both had so much fun, the day had been so perfect, and they didn't want it to end. Words would have only stolen some of the glory.

After what felt like forever the adults finally finished. Sam said, "See ya tomorrow," and then ran inside before Dakota could reply.

Dakota rode the Big Wheel back across the street with his father and then pulled it into its spot beside the Buick. He was on his way into the warm house when his father called out to him, "Not so fast. We have to move these little snow piles you built. I don't want ice problems backing out of the driveway tomorrow when I go to work."

Dakota grabbed his plastic pail and shovel while his father got the snow shovel and the two began to work.

"Daddy, why doesn't Sam have a Big Wheel, or even a regular-old tricycle?"

"Well, there might be lots of reasons, but I suspect it has to do with their move out here. Christmas was hard on Sam's family. It is expensive to move, and they had some other stuff come up."

"Well, I feel bad that he don't have one."

“Yeah, but it was nice of you to share with him today. That makes me and Mommy very proud of you.”

Dakota’s father could see that underneath the tiny knit hat, the boy’s brain was working hard. It was hard to not direct his thoughts; it was better to remain silent and allow the boy to work it out for himself. The way his son worked it out surprised him.

“Daddy, I think I’m supposed to give him my Big Wheel.”

“What? Did you say you want to give him your tricycle?”

“It’s not a tricycle Daddy, it’s a Big Wheel.”

“Whatever. What makes you think you should give it to him?”

“Because it is the right thing to do.”

“Well, when do you want to?”

“Right now, before I change my mind.”

Without asking permission or saying anything, Dakota clipped the keys back onto his zipper, mounted the Big Wheel for the last time, and pedaled it up the driveway. He looked back to his father, who granted approval with the nod of his head. Dakota pedaled into the street. The same thrill he’d felt earlier returned, but this time it was accompanied by something new. It was the feeling of pleasure.

Dakota pedaled right up to the steps, dismounted, climbed up the stairs to the door and rang the doorbell. Sam’s mom came to the door.

“Dakota, is everything okay?”

“Yeah. I came to bring these to Sam.” He unclipped the keys and handed them to Sam’s mom. “I’m giving him my Big Wheel. Tell

him to take care of it.”

Without saying anything else, Dakota turned and walked away.

Nothing else was said in his home about it. Sam’s mom called and talked to Dakota’s mom, but Dakota was unaware of this. He solemnly ate his meatloaf dinner, but by bath time he was in better spirits. The Big Wheel was still on his mind but he felt good about what he’d done. It was something he couldn’t explain.

The day’s fun wore him out so much that Dakota was asleep before eight o’clock. His slumber was such that he didn’t hear the garage door open two more times that night.

His father was already gone for work when Dakota woke up, but there was a note, which his mother read to him.

Dakota,

You know your mother and I love you, and are always proud of you. We have never been more proud of you than yesterday when you gave your Big Wheel to Sam. Our hope is that you are always like that, and that we all are. Have great adventures today. See you tonight.

Dakota didn’t understand the letter until his mom said, “Your daddy left you something.” Then she pulled out of her pocket a set of plastic keys. Dakota knew instantly what it meant. Still in his pajamas, he ran into the garage. Sitting there where his old Big Wheel sat was a brand new one. It was pristine with no dings or scratches. It didn’t stay that way for long, because before the sun set on that Monday, he and Sam experienced all the blessings of the Big Wheel.

Thanks for reading my Christmas short story. You can find all of my written works at my Amazon page or www.jamiegreening.com.

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