

Changing a Flat

by CL Bledsoe

Dark, green grass covered the pasture like millions of tiny fingers swaying in the heat. Matthew stood in the rough circle of crushed grass his six year old legs had stamped down, and watched his father slide a jack under the front end of a red-bodied, Case-International tractor, over by the fence.

"Watch out, Shug, it might slip. Ground's not level here," his father said, and wiped the sleeve of his brown work shirt across his forehead. Matthew could hear his Uncle Shug cursing as he unhooked a plow from the back of the tractor.

"All right, I'm ready, God-dammit," Shug said.

"All right Shug, I'm lifting her up," Matthew's father called out. He worked the jack handle up and down, lifting the flat front tire. Matthew flinched as the side of the tractor leaned heavily toward him, and as the tractor jerked off the ground, Matthew reached out to steady it. Just as his hand touched the lukewarm metal of the tractor, his uncle snapped:

"Watch out, you little cock-sucker! You're going to get killed!"

Matthew jumped back. His uncle shouldered past him and turned to the boy's father, "That boy ain't got a lick of sense. What in hell," he twisted towards Matthew; "what in hell do you think you're doing, boy? You're going to kill somebody. Going to get yourself killed is what you're going to do." His uncle snorted.

"All right, all right now Shug," Matthew's father said in a tired voice. He twisted around to the boy, "Just stay back, son, you're getting in the way." He patted Matthew's head and turned back to the tractor.

Matthew stared at his father's back, then tucked his hands in his pockets and walked back to the truck. Two tire tracks led from the back of the old blue Dodge truck through the grass in a lazy semi circle back to the gate which led out of the pasture. Uncle Shug was still complaining behind him. Matthew focused his eyes on the tire paths, pretending he didn't hear. The crushed grass was

grayer than the untouched grass, and bits of cardboard-brown mud from the truck's tires littered the path. Matthew kicked at the mud still caked on the bottom of the truck, and dislodged a large clump.

"Make yourself useful, boy, help me with this tire." Matthew jumped as his father's hand clapped down on his shoulder. "Get up behind it and push it out."

Matthew climbed up the bumper of the truck quickly. The tire was sitting in the driver's side corner of the truck bed. Matthew grabbed the rim, and struggled to slide the tire inch by inch until it was close enough for his father to grab. Then his father snatched it out of the truck like he was picking up an arrowhead from a gravel road. His father set it on the ground and rolled it to the tractor.

Matthew glanced at his hands. They were dirty and black. He started to wipe them on his jeans, but saved himself a whipping and jumped down and wiped his hands on the grass.

When Matthew looked up, they were lowering the jack. Behind them, he could see a rusty barbed wire fence with tufts of cow hair twinned around some of the barbs; left by cows scratching themselves. The cows were in a different part of the pasture today. Beyond the fence the wind blew through a field of milo that faded into the distance. The milo looked like corn, but shorter. All he could see beyond that was the grayish-green sky, with no clouds. His father lowered the tractor to the ground and Shug climbed up inside and started it. His father hefted the jack around Matthew, into the back of the truck. Matthew ran to the passenger side door and jumped in. Inside the truck, he could smell the mud and sweat on his father.

"Sorry I got in the way," Matthew said. "I was only trying to help."

"That's all right. You just have got to be more careful. Might've dented the tractor if it fell over on your hard head." He grinned at Matthew.

The tractor jerked to life. Matthew's father did a U-turn and plowed through the grass behind Shug. They stopped at the gate, and Matthew jumped out and pushed the creaky aluminum

rectangles out of the way, letting his uncle then his father roll through. His uncle turned left, heading for the rice field. Matthew re-tied the gate and hopped back in the truck. They turned right, followed the road beside the field of milo, and then came around the side, pointed towards the highway.

"Let's get some dinner," his father said. Matthew watched blackbirds drop onto power lines by the road. His father pulled the truck slowly onto the highway, heading back towards home.

"Dad?" Matthew asked. "What's a cock-sucker?"

His father was silent. Matthew glanced at him. He was staring straight ahead with a strange look on his face. Matthew looked away and thought for a second. "Well, what's a cock?"

His father glanced at him. "It's a chicken," he said, then reached out and turned the radio on.

"A chicken?" Matthew asked, "A chicken sucker?" His father didn't answer. Slow country music filled the cab, and Matthew remembered last Halloween, when he and his sister had gone trick or treating. They'd gotten suckers from Ms. Beatrice, a spinster that rented land to his father. Matthew had gotten a grape sucker, and his sister had gotten strawberry. He'd traded his grape and a licorice stick for her strawberry. He had been very pleased with the deal. Strawberry was about his favorite flavor in the world.

His father eased the truck to a stop at a crossroads, and then he slowly executed a left turn. Matthew realized that they would be going by Aunt Mildred's store, on the way

home. The store had three aisles, one of which had a huge assortment of candy. If there was anywhere that he could find a cock-sucker, it was at Aunt Mildred's store.

He watched the fields flow by, tracking how near they were. He noticed the church on the other side of the road coming up. The store was right past the church. He tried to think of something to get his father to take him to the store. He watched the cross disappear behind them, before piping up, "Can we get a drink at Aunt Mildred's?"

His father didn't say anything. Matthew waited as they neared the store, and excitement poured over him like warm water as his father slowed and carefully turned the truck into the deserted parking lot of the run down store. The truck rolled past the rusty gas pump, and stopped under the white awning. Metal poles, most of them bent in peculiar angles, held up the awning like the spindly legs of an arthritic spider. Matthew opened his door and ran between the poles towards the store. His father followed.

The bell sounded as Matthew raced through the door, heading towards the candy aisle. His father strolled inside, walked down the aisle towards the deli area, and struck up a conversation with Aunt Mildred, who yelled a, "Hello, Matthew," as the boy dropped to his knees, searching through the candy. He could hear his father talking loudly to Aunt Mildred, who was nearly deaf.

Matthew found the expensive suckers, the ones that cost ten cents each, some as much as fifteen cents; the ones with gum in the middle, and Tootsie Rolls. He hoped it wouldn't be one of them. His father would complain about spending the money. Times were hard, Matthew knew. Rice just didn't bring what it used to. Matthew dug around in the cheaper suckers, the apple, cherry; the little ones with paper sticks that came apart in his mouth if he sucked on them too long. None of them were chicken flavored. He moved to the bigger ones, rooting like a pig in mud, but again, none of them were chicken flavored. With a lurch in his chest, he heard the cash register ring. That was it. He searched the Tootsie Pops, but again, none of them boasted a chicken flavor. He went halfheartedly through the whole aisle, in case they were in some special section he'd never noticed before. The bell rang as his father opened the door.

"Let's go, boy, I got your Coke," he said.

"But Dad, I want a cock-sucker!"

Silence spread through the store like an ice floe, huge and impassable. The door clicked closed. Matthew's father's heavy footsteps pounded around the corner. Matthew looked up as his father stepped to him quickly, and jerked him by the arm to his feet.

Anger and a sort of confused look were fighting each other on his father's face. Matthew sniffled and lowered his head. As was so often the case, he knew only that he'd done something wrong; he had no idea what. His father was silent. Then his hand came down quickly. Matthew flinched and stepped back, but the hand was aiming at the bottom shelf. His father's fingers paused at the cheap suckers, and then closed around one of the Tootsie Pops. His father stepped around him, then down the aisle. Matthew heard the register ring, and then his father stalked back up the aisle, grabbed the boy's arm and led him outside. In the truck he handed Matthew the Tootsie Pop, without saying a word, and then backed quickly out of the parking lot, managing to throw up a couple of rocks. Matthew looked at his father. The boy wiped his face on his sleeve.

"Thank you," he said. He twisted the wrapper off and stuck the sucker in his mouth and gave it a couple of tentative licks. "Tastes like a Tootsie Pop," Matthew said.

His father cleared his throat heavily. "Thing is," he said slowly; "most folks just call them Tootsie Pops. So, if you call them anything else, most folks wouldn't even know what you were talking about, and might even get mad."

"Well then why does Uncle Shug call it a cock-sucker?"

His father winced. "He's just kind of mean; stuck in his ways. He never had kids. Only was married that one time, and that gal...well, she wasn't much to speak of. He's just kind of bitter. He don't mean anything by it."

Matthew studied his father for a few seconds, and then gave up on deciphering the meaning of his words. He rolled the sucker on his tongue and stared out the window as the fields and trees raced by. It didn't taste like chicken, but it was one of the ones with a Tootsie Roll in the middle, and those were his favorite, next to strawberry.

His father spoke once more without turning his eyes from the road.

"Don't tell your mamma about this, boy. She'd get mad if she knew you had sweets before dinner."

