George's Jars
by B. Guild, 2001

George Hartley never blinked. His deep-set, fierce blue eyes could outstare anyone. My brother Don, with his doe-like brown eyes, couldn't resist the challenge.

The best place for an eight-year-old boy to take on George was from the top of our back steps. Don had a high vantage point there. He had 20 paces and a white picket fence between himself and George in the back alley. Don could slip quickly to safety into the house should George step menacingly toward the gate.

Mom couldn't see Don from the kitchen window when he was on the landing, blocked by the jut of the back porch. That she could see George fixed intently on something near the back door was either far from Don's thoughts or a chance he took. Whatever was on his mind, it was seldom the obvious.

Don's record stare before George won or Mom shrieked at him to stop was many minutes – Don guessed something like three. None of his friends came half that close. They trusted each other to report honestly.

I tried it once and lasted several long seconds. George's eyes glittered too wildly under bushy eyebrows. The point of the exercise was, to my thinking, too invasive and obscure.

Staring contests couldn't be planned. They depended on George's many randomly timed trips up and down the alley and whether or not he noticed any challenging boys and rose to the dare.

George pulled a wooden wagon – the kind for kids, a big old worn one – for special collecting expeditions, when he'd found more desirable garbage than he could carry. He wheeled home things like large glass jars from restaurants' trash, the kind that held mayonnaise, relish, and ketchup by the gallon. They would clink noisily as the wagon bumped over the dirt lane, announcing his homeward approach.

He trudged in scavenged work boots and tattered, dirt-caked pants. His favourite cable-knit sweater hung loosely from tall, lanky frame and hunched back. Years of grease obscured the yarn's colour. The front was always buttoned at least one hole out of line. Stringy, matted grey-black hair fell from the brim of his railway engineer's cap, a filthy, frayed garbage find. Grubby hands smeared brow, cheek, and grizzled jaw to match.

To catch George heading home from a jar-collecting mission was especially interesting. Straggles of children followed behind him. The braver boys might get within a few paces. George would stop to glare and grunt his displeasure. None would press a staring contest while so close to this black beetle of a man and his treasures. We would scatter, then coalesce farther back to track him at what we considered a more discreet distance.

Two doors west of my house, he turned right into the unfenced entry to his scruffy backyard. He kept the broad dirt driveway cleared of all but the lowest, most stubborn weeds. Ratty fences to either side held in former garden areas turned to jungles of grass and brambles.

From across the alley and behind shrubs, we watched him remove the lids, blast the jars clean with an old hose, then put the lids back on. He then carried them, one jar per big dirty hand, into the rockwork cellar under his back porch, a former coal bin. He

bent deep through the low doorway to get in and out.

At age six or seven, I could easily walk upright into this den. I did once, on a whim, while walking by myself past George's place, on my way home from visiting friends. He had just cycled out of the yard on his old black bike, so I lingered until he disappeared beyond the far end of the alley. Heart pounding, I raced to his little dungeon. What if he'd forgotten something and returned, or somehow divined my treachery?

Cool air hit my brow. The stench of cat droppings and drippings stung my nose and eyes. Spiders spun a labyrinth around dozens of jars stacked many deep. I ran out, pulling their sticky gauze from my face and arms. Full tilt, I made it safely home, little the wiser but scot-free.

Above the old cellar rose a huge barn of a log house, untended for decades. Ever-more parts sagged, slipped, crumbled, and fell off. George boarded up filthy windows that had broken, some with the help of teenage boys pitching rocks. Tourists would think the place haunted. Locals knew that George was too lively for that, and doubtless too frightening to ghosts.

As we watched George clean and store his new jars, our eight-year-old next-door neighbour, Jimmy, said to my brother, "I dare you to steal one."

Don snorted, "When he's out? That'd be easy."

"No, when he's in, dummy. Steal one of his jars when he's in his house."

Oo-oo-ooh, a collective shudder ran through the band of would-be thieves. "No way, not today," we concurred. George would be on high alert until our bedtime, looking and listening for the least sign of our lurking. One foot over the property line might be fatal – not that George had ever touched anyone, but then, he'd never caught anyone

either, so who-knew what he'd do if a grubby paw snared a jacket or arm.

The stealing of a jar required careful planning. Teamwork, too, if not to do it, then to verify that it had been done, that the jar was a genuine George jar from the cellar, not just any dupe passed off as such.

A rainy day would be best. Rain hitting George's tin patches on the rotting shingle roof would distract his keen hearing. A head-on approach from the lane would be too exposed. Better to slip through the fenced area to the west, slither under the rusty-hinged old gate, scoot close to the house and around it to the cellar. Then, with jar in hand, run like hell straight to the lane.

The plan unfolded perfectly. Half a dozen boys witnessed the deed. I wasn't invited, but I heard all the details after. So did Mom, Dad, and the whole town.

The run-like-hell part turned a secret triumph into the day's gossip. My brother tripped and flew, as did the jar, smashing and crashing to pieces. He scrambled through the broken glass, cutting his hands and knees.

George heard and bolted from his house just as Don cleared the lot line. The old troll started after the scattering boys, but quickly returned to his cellar to defend his precious collection.

As for punishment and retribution, the broken jar could easily be replaced. Trespassing, however, was a serious offence.

"Stay away from George, damn you!" Dad roared.

"How many times do we have to tell you?" Mom wailed.

"What the hell's the matter with you? You know better! Babies know … !"

"The jar was cold," Don said quietly. Huh? Dad stopped mid-yell. Don had an

uncanny ability to fly in from left field. This was a shining moment.

"What on earth did you expect?" Mom asked.

"Even when it broke, the air inside was cold."

"You thought it would be warm? Hot like July?"

They suddenly understood why Don wanted to steal a jar. The dare was only part of it. The more important part was that he wanted to check out the temperature of George's jars. He suffered the cuts, humiliation, and punishment to get to the truth. Now he knew.

Many of us had watched George's annual summer ritual. On the hottest morning of the year, he took all his jars from storage – 100, at least, and set them out in his big backyard in tidy rows. He blasted them clean with his garden hose, then let them dry in the sun for a couple of hours. He removed the lids, placing each one close to its respective jar.

At the exact moment George deemed the sun to be highest in the sky, he ran frantically from jar to jar screwing on the lids. He could bottle dozens of jars of sunshine in minutes. As quickly as he could, he hurried them into the cellar, his winter supply of heat ensured.

If only Don had asked Mom and Dad about how much heat a jar of sunshine could provide on a deep-freeze January night. They could have told him, from personal experience.

They had rented a suit in George's house when I was newborn and Don was 18-months old. No other housing was available in town that fall and winter. George's mother, who lived in the back of her china shop on the main street of town, charged a

usurious 90-dollars a month. Dad was making 90-cents an hour as a carpenter's helper. Even she didn't want to share the big old family home, built by her long-deceased husband, with George. Mom, Dad, toddler, and baby made do in the creaky, leaky old mansion, seven years less dilapitated then, for six months before another, more civilized place came available.

The crude three-room suite, counting the toilet room, had no stove and no heat. George forbade a space heater to save electricity, which was included in the rent, and to prevent a fire in his tinderbox house. He had a kerosene heater that he used, keeping his own upstairs room toasty, but he refused to acknowledge it or share its heat.

George, as an early pioneer in solar energy, used nature's own supply to warm his shivering tenants. When the temperature dipped to well below zero, Mom and Dad turned on their little electric heater. Before it could begin to take the chill from air, George burst into their suit without warning and shouted at them to turn it off, or else. He'd warm them up. He grudgingly went to his cellar, returned with a jar of sunshine, removed the lid, and tossed all of it summer heat into the room. Not enough? Well damn them, he'd get another, but not a third. He couldn't waste that much at once, not with a long winter to come.

We'd never heard the story, since George continually provided something newer to talk about.

"Did it help?" Don asked.

Dad rolled his eyes.

"What do you think?" Mom asked.

Don shook his head slowly. "It doesn't work. The jar was cold."

"Of course, the jar was cold," Dad said exasperatedly. "You didn't think that …?"

"I wasn't sure."

"Oh God, you could have tried it at home and found out – no, don't do that. That would be as nutty as he is. Just leave him alone, you hear?"

"*After* you've written him a note of apology and given him another jar. We don't want him to go short this winter."

Dad laughed. "Then don't have anything to do with him … ever! Promise?"

Don nodded solemnly.

For a long time after, George hankered for a staring contest with Don. Whenever George passed our place as he walked down the lane, he'd look through the white picket fence for Don in the backyard. If he was anywhere but safe atop the steps leading to the back door, he'd ignore George. If, however, he was just a step or two from disappearing into the house, he'd dare to lock onto George's deep-set, fierce blue eyes.

Mom hollered nearly every time, "Don, for God's sake, stop it!"

Once, George held Don's gaze for more than a minute … two minutes … more. They never made it to the old record, however. Don had lost the first time, and he was bound to lose every time.

George, of course, never blinked.

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