



THE TOWN

A Short Story by James Fowler

Our town is a good place to live. Everyone says so. It's a combination of things. Then again, it's nothing you can put your finger on. People mainly say it's got *a certain something*. They can agree on that.

If someone put a gun to your head and told you to give reasons, you'd probably want to start with the town's population: 10,000. That's a good number. It's not so small that you feel like you've been condemned to a life of dullness without an escape route. But it's also not so large that you could meet someone and not have any acquaintances in common. It's still a one-degree-of-separation kind of town.

At that size, the living is personal. When drivers honk, for instance, it's usually a hello, not a wake-up call a split second after the light has changed. And if a teen should forget himself and use a rude hand gesture, you can count on it getting back to the parents, who take offenses to common courtesy seriously. Letter jackets have been confiscated for less.

The town's spirit mainly rises in support of its young people. There is one high school and one junior high, each with a student body of about six hundred. So far the voters have decided it's better for the kids to share a common educational experience than be divided between several smaller campuses. The fact that both the senior and junior Wolverines are football powerhouses probably has something to do with it.

There wasn't as much reason to keep the smaller children together, so for the past twenty years two elementary schools, east and west, have produced future Wolverines and band members. The older one is actually in the middle of town, while the newer one was built for the neighborhoods that

have sprung up on the west side. Now the school board has been careful to allot each one the same amount of funding per student, but it's understandable that parents of children at Maisie Oates might envy the advantages of Daisy Oates.

The difference in amenities is due to the gap between the older and newer parts of town. Residents of the neighborhoods built in the first half of the last century are mainly retirees and those who work at the outdoor-furniture factory or the cement plant, the town's biggest employers. Homeowners on the richer west side are managers, professionals, or workers in the hi-tech industrial park. Ever since Daisy Oates Elementary was built in the early eighties, the parents have dug into their deeper pockets for extras like fancy aquariums, field trips to D.C., and the latest learning software.

What broke the Wolverine's back, however, was the playground. Concerned parents at Maisie Oates had cushioned the hard-pack dirt under the old swings and slide with a foot of crushed nutshell and added some durable plastic climbing equipment. But what first seemed a big improvement looked downright sorry next to the extravaganza designed and constructed by the parents at Daisy Oates. Done all in cedar, it could have been a Swiss Family Robinson attraction at an adventure park. When the children at Maisie Oates got wind of it, they demanded to be taken there to play after school and on weekends. We parents were reluctant, not wanting to be spotted as trespassers at the sister school. So we looked into building something like it but found that the lumber costs alone would run into the five figures. It was hard, though, trying to explain to our children, who felt cheated, why we

couldn't just move to the cool side of town.

That's when one of the parents came up with the idea of a playhouse. Not just your ordinary kind, but one that looked like Graceland. We could build it out of pine, which the lumberyard would more likely donate than cedar. It would be the sort of thing to bring a smile to people's faces, and it would be a good lesson in Americana for the kids.

The design didn't take long; between us we practically knew the place by heart. Of course, the structure would only be a shell, though we were tempted to go whole hog and turn it into a detailed scale model complete with itty-bitty gold records on the walls. We just had to keep reminding ourselves that this playhouse was for the kids.

After nailing down the last shingle and painting the last column, we stood back to get the general effect. While we weren't the sort to brag on our own work, we had to admit it was a wonder to behold. You almost had to use the word *artistry* to do it justice. A picture of it ran in the local paper, and it got favorable reviews from the men who drink coffee each morning at the downtown grill.

Town approval was nice and all, but the critics who mattered were the kids. If our children were half as pleased as we were, the project would be a success. And they did seem to like it. Boys in the know took turns standing on the front porch swiveling their hips. The girls preferred to sit inside, serving imaginary tea and Fig Newtons to less active boys. For them the miniature mansion was more like Tara than the King's house. That's the way it is with art; it takes on a life of its own.

Americans never like to stick with what they've got when there's room to expand. And ever since the other elementary school had been built and the temporary classrooms carted away, there was plenty of free space at Maisie Oates. Graceland looked kind of lonesome, like one of those big Victorian houses in the middle of nowhere on the open plains. Some of us got to thinking of a suitable partner for it. The White House was suggested, but, to tell

the truth, we didn't want to bring so imposing a reminder of the federal government on school property. Plus, sitting next to Graceland, it would put folks too much in mind of Richard Nixon and the King's latter-day excesses. The Hermitage seemed a much better idea, being another landmark of our fair state and a symbol of no-nonsense democracy. Finally, however, it got edged out by a local candidate, a perfect choice for the location. We would build a replica of the Oates mansion, currently housing the public library and county museum.

Titus Oates, the founder of the cement plant, had built the original in the early 1900s. People are fond of saying that cement made this town. No one was fond of Titus Oates, but in tribute to his money and influence the townspeople named the grade school after him when it was constructed in the thirties. His two daughters, spinsters at their deaths, were a different matter. When they inherited his house and fortune a few years after the school naming, they set about putting his money to work for the public good. Probably their biggest contribution was to have the lagoon in the center of town dredged and turned into a proper lake complete with fountain and surrounding park. Now it was good for something besides breeding bad smells and mosquitoes. The sisters did many other good deeds too, so when the second elementary school was built a couple years after they'd passed, it seemed only fitting to name the sister institutions after the sibling benefactors, Maisie and Daisy. Besides, someone had discovered that there was this English fellow in history with the same name as their father, and he had been a powerful rascal. Many were of the opinion that old man Oates himself was little better than a moneyed scoundrel, so this passing of the torch took place without much opposition.

Not wanting to impose on the lumberyard, this time we asked the outdoor-furniture factory to contribute the wood. A lot of the parents work there, and management was glad for a public-relations project that cost diddly. So the Oates place went up next to Graceland,

earning a picture and article in the local paper.

We heard from the teachers how the children were soon pretending that the families in the two houses didn't like one another and were engaged in an escalating feud. Some of the boys packed crushed nutshells in balls with Elmer's glue. These missiles splattered like crunchy snowballs on the roofs and walls of the home forts. As a result, the principal made the houses off limits until the janitor could clean up the mess.

At first we were annoyed that the children had abused their gifts, but then we saw it as a good opportunity for a civics lesson. After all, the state has twice named our town a model community of the year. In order to teach the kids about responsibility and enterprise, we would construct a general store and a bank. Local retailers and savings-and-loan associations could sponsor these play businesses. Each one would have a counter, across which service providers and customers would build strong relations.

When they were finished and open for business, we realized that we had the makings of an honest-to-gosh town. The kids got into the spirit of it when the teachers distributed Maisie dollars and explained how checking accounts work. Money was interesting. In order to make the bank more realistic, a parent offered a combination safe, which was bolted to the floor. The principal decided to use it as a time capsule. Each class would put in a few items, which would be returned just before they graduated from high school.

On their own a few of the kids livened the general store by selling actual merchandise. One of them was quick enough on a computer to print out old-fashioned labels marked *Titus Oates' Own*. These labels were stuck on name-brand candy bars, chips, and cookies, and sold at movie-theater prices. And these merchants only took greenbacks, not Maisie dollars. A craze for Titus-label goods swept the kids, who were spending most of their lunch money on these inflated items.

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