

The Red Marble

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During the depression in a small Idaho community, I used to stop by Mr. Miller's roadside stand for farm fresh produce as the season made it available. Food and money were still extremely scarce and bartering was used extensively.

One day Mr. Miller was bagging some early potatoes for me. I noticed a small boy, delicate of bone and feature, ragged but clean, hungrily eyeing a basket of freshly picked green peas. I couldn't help overhearing the conversation between Mr. Miller and the ragged boy.

"Hello Barry, how are you today?" "H'lo, Mr. Miller. Fine, thank ya. Jus' admirin' them peas ... sure look good." "They are good, Barry. How's your Ma?" "Fine. Gittin' strongeralla' time." "Good. Anything I can help you with?" "No, Sir. Jus' admirin' them peas."

"Would you like to take some home?" "No, Sir. Got nuthin' to pay for 'em with."

"Well, what have you to trade me for some of those peas?" "All I got's my prize marble here." "Is that right? Let me see it." "Here 'tis. She's a dandy." "I can see that. Hmmmmm, only thing is this one is blue and I sort of go for red. Do you have a red one like this at home?" "Not zackley but almost." "Tell you what. Take this sack of peas home with you and next trip this way let me look at that red marble." "Sure will. Thanks Mr. Miller."

Mrs. Miller said, "There are two other boys like him in our community, all three are in very poor circumstances. Jim just loves to bargain with them for peas, apples, tomatoes, or whatever. When they come back with their red marbles, and they always do, he decides he doesn't like red after all and he sends them home with a bag of produce for a green marble or an orange one, perhaps."

Years later, Mr. Miller died. At his funeral there were three young men. One was in an army uniform and the other two wore nice haircuts, dark suits and white shirts ... all very professional looking. They approached Mrs. Miller, and each lad hugged and kissed her on the cheek, spoke briefly, then moved on to the casket.

One by one they stopped and placed a shiny red marble in the cold pale hand in the casket. All three left the mortuary awkwardly, wiping their eyes. For the final time, when Jim could not change his mind about color or size ... they came to pay their debt."