

The Golden Arrow

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The Golden Arrow

It was the *Golden Arrow*.

It was the dream of my little boy's life.

It was his first disappointment.

He was never an easy child after his sister was born. She simply didn't deserve an equal share of his parents' attention. She hadn't earned it.

He was always intensely emotional: his laughter was hearty and honest; his tears welled up from his stomach; his anger was inarticulate fury; his loving was complete and unrestrained.

But what I remember most was the moment of his great disappointment.

It was the era of remote control cars – the fascination of operating a motorized vehicle, however small, from a distant spot. Radio Shack – that electronics supplier of the masses – was unrelenting in its determination to exploit the dreams of our children and the wallets of their parents.

My son had just turned ten and although he had tried to put on a brave face, we could tell that he was not entirely thrilled with the sweater and desk lamp we had given him. Somehow, they were not toys, and although he was getting older, birthdays, like Christmas, were supposed to be about toys. And for reasons he could not accept, his heavy hints about the radio operated *Golden Arrow* had been disregarded. If the *Golden Arrow* was so expensive, then how come he knew people who had them?

One day in Place Belvedere, he escaped to Radio Shack while his mother was looking at fabric in Bouclair. Before she realized he was missing, he came running back, found her among the cotton-polyesters, and blurted an account of the *Golden Arrow* on sale for the incredibly low price of \$29.99!

Together they walked over to see this bargain to end all bargains and there it was – \$29.99...

—Can I buy it? Can I buy it? he pleaded.

—What with?

—Money – I’ve got money – birthday money from Granny...

—That’s only \$20.

—I’ll earn the rest. I’ll get a job.

—How? Where?

—I... Well... He was crestfallen.

—Let’s talk to your father...

We struck a deal. I would pay him fifty cents for every garbage bag full of leaves he collected. He agreed eagerly, and the next day, he rushed home from school, threw his books on the kitchen floor, ignored his snack, ran outside and started to rake. In three days, he had filled thirty bags and demanded payment.

And so it was arranged; I would pick him up after school on the following day and together, with his \$35 clutched tight in his sweaty palm, we would go to Place Belvedere, to Radio Shack, to buy the *Golden Arrow*.

My son ran on ahead, drawn uncontrollably toward the great prize. As I got to the store he was standing proudly beside it.

—I told Jono and Mike and Jamie I was going to get this, he blurted. I told them what a deal it is. They said I was so lucky.

—Let’s have a look, I said.

It was about sixteen inches long, red, with numbers on the side. The rubber wheels were large and soft with deep treads. The headlights were operational. A streak of gold split the car down the middle, the point of the arrow at the front of the hood.

I picked up the remote, flicked a button and the demonstrator moved forward. I pushed another and it reversed. I drove it around the floor and thought of the fun I was going to have with it...

I looked at the box: \$29.99...

I picked up another box with an untouched *Golden Arrow* inside. I placed it on the counter and told the man that my son would like to buy it.

—Yes sir. Would you like batteries?

—Of course, what do I need?

— Eight double D and two 9-volt.

— Good God, I broke into a sweat – a \$30 car with \$40 of batteries.

Panic flickered across my son's face. «What's wrong, Daddy?»

A quick decision: «It's okay,» I said. I took the \$35 from his fist and tossed the man my credit card. He punched figures and names and addresses into his Tandy computer and the printer spat out the bill. He handed it to me and picked up my card.

I glanced at the paper, blinked, sputtered and said, Hang on.

The bill said \$298.72. I asked if there was an error. He checked it and declared all was well. I examined it and spotted the problem. The car wasn't down as \$29.99 – it was down as \$229.99! I grabbed the box and realized that there was no \$ sign on the price tag. Where we had seen a \$ sign, there was a 2 – 229.99...

For an almost endless instant, I considered plowing ahead. I could run up the VISA bill and deal with it all later... somehow. My head throbbed hot and a voice somewhere deep inside muttered, «What will that teach him?»

I looked at my son. I looked at the salesman.

I said there was a mistake, we had misunderstood, we were sorry, we weren't buying. I took my son's hand and we walked into the mall, out of the store, away from the *Golden Arrow*.

«What happened, Daddy?» His lip was quivering, his voice fragile; his world was crumbling.

— We all made a mistake, I said. We read the price wrong. It cost \$200 more than we thought it did. There isn't enough money.

— I'll rake more leaves.

— There aren't enough leaves.

— But I told my friends. I told Jono, and Mike, and Jamie. I... His voice failed him.

— Want a donut? I asked.

He didn't answer. He just looked at me, shook his head sadly and we walked away.

I squeezed his hand. He squeezed back.